

Low-involvement processing is the glue that holds the entire world of brands together'

We are constantly scanning our surroundings, unconsciously and automatically, to determine whether there is anything deserving of our focused attention. We do not do much else with the data, because every word and image contains more information than we are inclined to process further at this stage.

Pre-attentive processing is an essential part of day-to-day life in our busy world. When you are driving down a street, you are constantly switching your full attention to the conversation with your passenger, the time you are doing this you are also processing pre-attentive processing to monitor the traffic and to watch the pedestrians, monitoring to see if anyone steps off the curb in front of you. If they do, you instantly switch your full attention to them and either swerve to avoid them or to ask them to get on the brakes.

Pre-attentive processing is continuous and by definition subconscious. But it is also a different form of processing, which also happens all the time. Like working memory, pre-attentive processing is activated by stimuli, but unlike pre-attentive processing, it is conscious and stores information in our long-term memory.

Low-involvement processing is a form of us make the mistake of assuming that 'thinking' is an on-off process. In fact, we think at various levels of consciousness. Take the situation of the car described above. While you are driving, you are processing your conversation with your passenger at high involvement, and processing pre-attentive processing all the pedestrians at the same time. At the pre-attentive level, how are you actually driving the car? You cannot do this pre-attentively, because you need to monitor your environment consciously. If you are driving, you cannot be concentrating on anything else. For example, you cannot be concentrating on every step (monitoring how fast you are driving, what gear you are in) because you are also processing the conversation. If you were you would find it pretty difficult to have a conversation. The answer is that you are driving using low-involvement processing.

Low-involvement processing takes place at very low levels of attention, at the opposite end of the attention spectrum from high-involvement processing. It also has two other distinguishing char-

acteristics that are of crucial importance when it comes to considering how we learn about brands.

The first is that while high-involvement processing is activated by action, low-involvement processing is inactive. In a situation where consumers regard brand information as being of little importance, the tendency is going to be for them to pay very little attention: the value of low-involvement processing is that even in a low-attention mode, brand learning is still processed.

The second difference concerns the use of working memory. Low-involvement processing makes very little use of working memory. It usually collects input and stores it exactly as it comes in, without 'thinking' about it at all.

For example, when we are shopping we might note the price of an item, but not make any other judgment about it: we simply store it as the price of the item. This is an example of low-involvement processing. In contrast, if we were to process the price of the item at high involvement, we might form a whole raft of new conclusions and interpretations about it: we might think how it compares to the prices of other similar products, we might make a judgment about whether the difference is important, decide whether the product is worth it and, if we think we have enough money, to buy it.

On this basis, low-involvement processing seems to be the poor cousin of high-involvement processing. It is not. Low-involvement processing is the glue that holds the entire world of brands together. In order to demonstrate this we need to understand how we store and retrieve brand learning from short-term memory.

Storing brand learning

Daniel Schacter, professor of psychology at Harvard University, describes long-term memory as networks of con-

nections between groups of neurons, called 'engrams' (1).

'When we encode an experience, connections between active neurons become stronger, and this specific pattern of brain activity constitutes the engram.'

In our memory, each brand is therefore a mass of electrical pathways connecting everything we have learned about that brand. These also connect with other engrams, to produce a vast network of memories. When we learn something about a brand, by seeing an ad, or a pack, or reading something in the newspaper, all this information is connected to, and 'modifies', the engram we have of that brand.

In addition to being modified and expanded with new information, two other important things happen to engrams - we recall them and we forget them.

Engrams are recalled by activating a 'pathway' into the brand engram. It may be a pathway via another product in the same market, or via another product made by the same company, or via a strong need that is linked especially to this product, or via recall of advertising, or elements within the advertising, and so on. The pathways to a brand are not infinite, but when you attempt to count them they turn out to be very large in number.

What is crucially important about these pathways is that *each time you use them they become better defined, and more likely to be used in the future*. This is known as consolidation. It is rather like walking across a field of grass: the more people use a particular route, the more they wear away the grass, until eventually what was just a faint mark becomes a clearly defined path that everyone uses all the time.

As mentioned above, the other important thing that happens to engrams is that we lose the pathways into them; in other words, we forget them. No one quite agrees yet how this happens. Schacter suggests that it is the result of interference from increasing traffic.

'Consumers do not regard learning about brands as being very important'