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Market Research Trends

The Role of Emotions in Consumer Choice

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Marketers are always looking for the best way to position their product or brand so it will be chosen over the competition. But what actually drives a consumer to choose one brand over another? In market research we are always trying to discover the nature of consumer choice. And while we continually refine how we measure consumer choice, most methods employed to date typically fall short of answering all the "whys?"

Faced with more product choices than ever before, and a staggering amount of information from multiple media, how do consumers process all this information and make decisions? We believe consumers are relying more and more heavily on gut instinct and their emotions to make their decisions.

How neuroscience can help us understand decision-making

How can we understand the emotional connection to a brand and how does this translate to choice? Although it is challenging to elicit true feelings about a brand in survey research, recent developments in neuroscience shed some light on what is going on in consumer's minds when choices are made.

Professor Antonio R. Damasio is the director of the Institute for the Study of the Brain and Creativity at the University of Southern California. He has been a leader in trying to understand how the body and brain react when faced with making decisions and has shown that emotions play a central role in human decision-making. His book, Descartes' Error, explores how emotions are based on links between how the body is reacting physically to a person, place, image, or event, and the cognitive processes that are occurring at the same time. In fact, Damasio states, "...the process of emotion and feeling are indispensable for rationality. At their best, feelings point us in the proper direction, take us to the appropriate place in a decision-making space, where we may put the instruments of logic to good use."

Some behavioral theories suggest that feelings of pleasure or avoidance of displeasure/pain are the common denominators of all decision-making. Basically, we do things (or buy things) that we feel will give us the most pleasure, either in the short or in the long run. If emotions influence and regulate our perceptions and experiences with the world, then they should also help us to decide which brands to buy. By creating an emotional connection with consumers, brands can better differentiate themselves in their category and form a lasting relationship with consumers. Therefore, it is very important for brands to establish a positive emotional connection with consumers if they want to compete in today's marketplace. Some of the most successful brands are those that communicate emotional connections, from creating positive feelings to fulfilling desires, and supporting personal values.

"The idea that business is just a numbers affair has always struck me as preposterous. For one thing, I've never been particularly good at numbers, but I think I've done a reasonable job with feelings. And I'm convinced that it is feelings—and feelings alone—that account for the success of the Virgin brand in all of its myriad forms." — Richard Branson

Let's think a moment about the Harley-Davidson brand. Whether or not you've ever been on one, the brand itself means motorcycles and elicits some type of emotional reaction. Many feelings come to mind, from exhilaration, to feeling cool and a sense of freedom. Other brands, which have been successful in establishing emotional connections, are Coca-Cola, Levi's, Porsche, and even Palmolive dishwashing soap.

All these brands manage to elicit some kind of emotional response. And emotional connections can be made at any touch point, from marketing, packaging and advertising, to word-of-mouth and the actual usage that ultimately determines whether it will be successful. Certainly, it doesn't matter how great an ad campaign and messaging is if the product is bad, and if any connection is weak, it only takes one bad touch point to lose a consumer. However, if the emotional connections are strong, consumers are more forgiving.

If use/experience with a product ultimately decides its success, then it is the outcome that consumers desire, not the brand itself. Therefore, the focus of marketing initiatives should be about understanding the feeling consumers want from a product or brand rather than the image a product portrays. It is not good enough to say your brand is "cool"; consumers have to internalize the message so that they "feel cool" using the product.

How do market researchers traditionally measure feelings towards brands and the decision-making process behind consumer choice? Most of the time, just by asking a respondent to indicate why they would choose one over another, or which attributes describe Brand A vs. Brand B. While this identifies the choice being made, it does little to help understand the feelings and thought processes that are behind it.

At Cogent Research, we believe it is important to start investigating the underlying emotions behind choice, and this requires a new way of structuring both qualitative and quantitative studies. This new structure should focus on determining how consumers are feeling when they imagine using or experiencing a brand. It is through exploring consumer's imaginations that we can better understand how emotions contribute to consumer decision-making.

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