

The hidden motivations for the things we buy

the secret life of brands

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Just for fun, take a moment to answer the following questions:

When I buy mouthwash, I am buying: a) social confidence, b) oral gratification, c) a surrogate sexual experience d) fresh breath.

When I am buying a toilet I am buying: a) a household appliance, b) a decorating accessory, c) success, d) something for the dog to drink from.

When I am buying a stove I am buying: a) a cooking appliance, b) fertility, c) hominess, d) a storage space.

They're good questions to ask, because there's more at play in purchases than meets the eye, and you can't position your brand if you don't understand its secret life. And to do that, you need to be able to answer

this question: What do people buy when they buy your brand?

If people bought brands solely on the basis of quality, price, convenience, service and other rational attributes, the lives of marketers would be much simpler. But purely rational appeals are not sufficient in a competitive marketplace. At the same time, consumers can see through promises on the emotional level, such as comfort, happiness, sexiness, or youth – although they often succumb to them too.

There are many unconscious programs at work in our daily lives that strongly influence our decision-making, and are subsequently expressed as "intellectual alibis" at the rational level.

There are several sources for these unconscious programs, such as the primitive reptilian instincts. There are also the forces of the cultural unconscious through which we absorb the values of the particular part of society in which we were raised. Finally there are our own individual experiences, often composed at an early age of experiences and feelings and still largely unconscious in terms of driving our behaviour and decision-making.

We believe that people are only aware of about one tenth of what is actually going on inside them. The rest is a hidden world of motivations, reflections, forces, archetypes and genetic programming. Accessing and being able to map these requires a lot of effort. Yet this is where decisions

are made, and therefore what we seek to understand.

In understanding the secret lives of brands, one not only needs to know the rational and tangible elements of human purchasing behaviour and the emotional and intangible elements – but also the unconscious program as well.

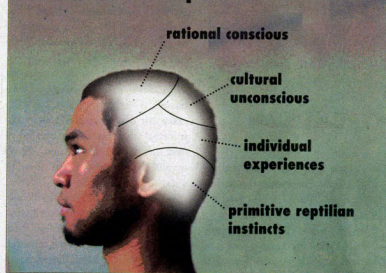
Let's take insurance for example. Our work has shown that at the tangible level, consumers are buying mitigation of risk, replacement of objects, preservation of wealth, etc. At the intangible level they are buying security, control, "I am taking care of my family" and, "It is what my father would do." But at the unconscious level they are buying something bigger – a higher power to protect them from things they can't defend themselves against; they are buying a sort of magic.

How does understanding these unconscious programs help in a marketing context?

A major U.S. brokerage firm asked us to help it create a stronger relationship between the company and its clients. It wished to create stronger loyalty to its own brand and differentiate itself from competitors. It also hoped to reduce the client attrition that invariably occurs when an individual broker moves to another firm.

We demonstrated that many investment decisions were driven by feelings of fear about the future and related feelings of helplessness. There were already many rational techniques in

What underlies purchase decisions



place for addressing these fears – diversification, asset allocation, investment strategies, technology, electronic communication etc. However, the relationship with the broker was the only way that the strong emotional needs of the clients could be addressed. Weakening the relationship with the broker in an attempt to strengthen the client's relationship and loyalty to the company brand would have only served to increase client attrition. So we designed a unique model of broker/client relationship that was subsequently successfully piloted.

If you believe that consumers are buying your product because of good, solid, rational reasons, you are missing the most important aspect of

their motivation. In order to understand consumer motivations, you have to understand the hidden, unconscious meanings of your brand or product. When these motivations are uncovered, you can connect with your customers at a deep emotional level that goes way beyond how they feel when they use your brand. When you understand what people are actually buying, then you can sell.

Mind Meld Consulting is a marketing think-tank which develops psychoanalytic models of consumer behaviour for clients in financial services, consumer products, food and marketing research industries. Thelma Beam and Hugh Oddie can be reached at hugh@oddie.com (MindMeldConsulting.com).