

## The Implicit Effect of Brand Communication

### *Measuring what remains concealed*

Abstract:

This paper highlights the importance of communication for the implicit brand perception. It will be clearly shown that consumption – like all human actions – follows a very complex implicit pattern, and largely evades being measured with explicit research. Brand communication is only promising if the contents contain implicit meanings for the human brain as internalized patterns and thus can influence future actions. Based on cognitive psychology research, a process for measuring derived reaction times will be presented because it has been proven to work in many cases for the measurement of implicit meanings of marketing measures. It can also have the advantage of being economical to implement.

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Those who are reaching for sugar and grab salt by mistake, know the phenomenon: it takes awhile before identifying the salt as such. After the initial confusion, a feeling of disgust can occur. The taste sensation is contrary to the expectation of what sugar should taste like and we respond defensively. In the history of marketing research, the Pepsi Challenge experiment impressively illustrated how the expectation of a product can influence the perception of product attributes. While Pepsi came out ahead in the blind taste tests where the brand was not known, in the tests where the brands were identified, Coca-Cola clearly outperformed Pepsi.

#### **The perception of the world through concepts**

This experiment was repeated later with neuropsychological methods. The brains of test subjects were observed through magnetic resonance imaging, which was able to verify a connection between brand and taste perception. However, even without reference to a brand, just by stimulating verbal concepts with multi-sensory components, similar effects were discovered by Elder & Krishna (2010) in a taste perception study of chips, chewing gum and popcorn: "(...) *we showed that a simple slogan could affect taste perceptions. Specifically, we showed that a multiple-sense slogan led to higher taste perceptions than a single-sense slogan.*"

People consume comprehensive concepts from products that extend far beyond the actual properties of a product, such as taste, odor, or benefits. The behavioral economist Dan Ariely has named this *Conceptual Consumption* (2009). The entire product perception and with it, all relevant components are influenced largely by brand communications. Regardless of whether the perception was direct or peripheral, the conceptual relationship between product and brand was learned virtually at random.

#### **The importance of brands from a neuropsychological perspective**

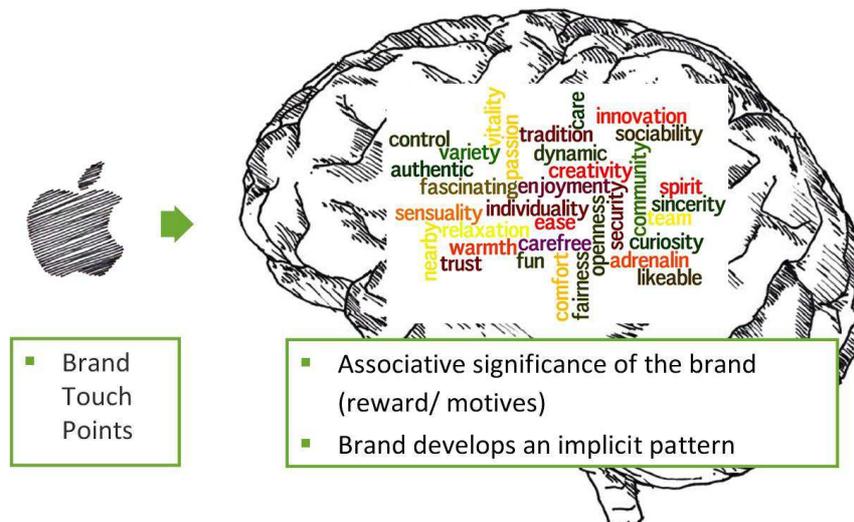
Our brains are constituted to make perceptions from numerous information patterns of information, whereby we can simplify life's more complicated tasks such as driving or shopping. Brand names are product concepts that are retrieved unconsciously and are

useful for providing a quick means of orientation, when at first glance the goods to choose from seem to have few differences.

The majority of our decisions and actions – and therefore purchasing decisions – are influenced by the *old* regions of the brain. In the history of mankind's development, these are the parts that are focused primarily on survival and reproduction. They are responsible for automatic reactions and emotions, which are predominately not consciously processed. The hippocampus in the limbic system plays a special role here. Starting at an early age, signals from the environments are checked for their significance and grouped into patterns. Generalizations are used to master the complexities of the world.

Patterns are used so that even when people find themselves in a complex situation and encounter diverse, parallel information, they are able to remain capable of taking action, without having to explicitly think about every act. While the reflective capacity of the brain is extremely limited, its implicit processing power is enormously powerful. Our implicit memory is involved in all decisions and behaves like an Autopilot.

This content which is essential for human behavior, but buried in the subconscious, is difficult to reach with standard marketing research methods. This explains why the actions and purchase decisions of individuals don't necessarily correspond with opinions and statements that they express. This phenomenon is clearly reflected by the popularity of Apple products. Certainly product features relevant for decision making (features, usability, etc.) are considered (see figure 1). However, they are not nearly enough justification for the worldwide preference of the Apple Brand. Would the iPhone have been able to achieve the same popularity if it had been introduced on the market by a Chinese vendor?



### Brands promise rewards

Consumer contact with brands through advertising messages and product usage cause the mind to form a brand image, which is learned as an implicit pattern. The preference for a brand is created when the association with the brand implicitly promises rewards. Basically a brand is perceived as rewarding if it is aligned with the individual's desires – an image that can be used to motivate. Despite different cultures across the globe, basic motivations do not vary as much as one might expect. Rather, human motivations are relatively homogenous and a universally reproducible measure. These basic human motivations which have been scientifically validated are very well suited as the basis for the implicit measuring process.

Franzen & Bauwman (2001): *“Brands are present in our memory in the form of an associative network. This consists of the totality responses connected to the brand (...) superficial characteristics (sensory representations), abstract meanings (propositions), emotions, attitudes and behavioral tendencies”.*

The brain has its own reward system that analyzes signals in the environment for their meaning and ability to reward and influences human behavior accordingly. So that brands and communication measures are perceived as rewarding, the entirety and interaction of the implicit meaning is an important factor for success. This should also be taken into consideration in the corresponding studies. For successful brand and product communication, it is therefore important in consumer research to measure and analyze both the explicit and implicit perceptions of the brand name. Such measurements should not only be based on memory tests, the measurement of recall and recognition, but also take into account indirect measures. Only in this manner, can effects of earlier advertising be detected because often they cannot be directly recalled.

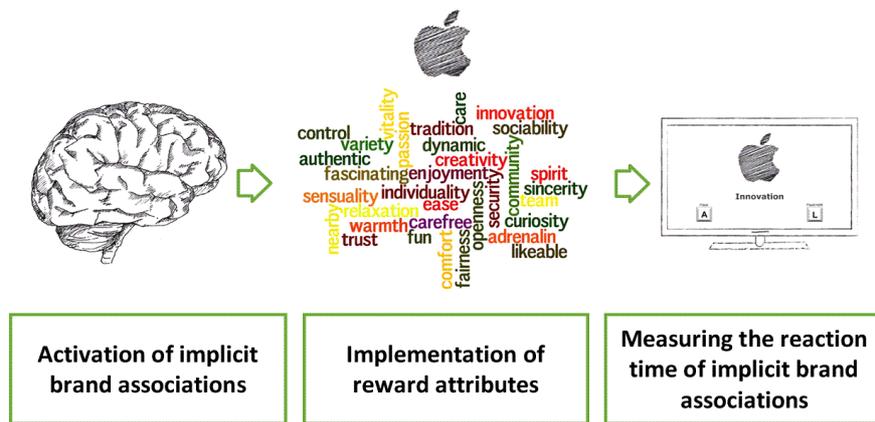
### **Measuring the implicit effects of advertising**

Among the measurement methods that have been used in recent years, reaction-time-based methods have achieved good credibility as marketing research techniques. In psychological research, they have a long withstanding tradition and thanks to their maturity in the market, they have also found commercial applications.

The logic of the reaction time based methods: Subjects are not asked what they remember or what preferences they have. Rather, their reactions are observed and the time required for them is measured. Only very quick reactions are measured, so that the time is lacking to measure the slower explicit system where more time is required for reflection, analysis or modification. This method allows the content of the implicit system to be shown quantitatively. Since these surveys can also be conducted online, a larger number of subjects can be questioned – also making it useful for international studies. As part of an online survey, the precision possible from standard computers is in the area of 30 milliseconds. As a comparative measure, a human blink lasts about 100 milliseconds.

For the subsequent analysis, only reactions which occur with a certain timeframe will be taken into consideration. This ensures that answers are not consciously thought out (upper time limit) or simply randomly clicked (lower time limit). In the center of the response time measurement is the question of how strongly an object, brand or stimulus is associated with various attributes.

When conducting a brand test, first to take place is the measurement of the implicit reaction time of a subject to a brand association. To achieve this, the test subject is shown an attribute together with a brand logo on a screen (see figure 2). The respondent's task is then to decide as quickly as possible if the attribute matches the brand or not. An advance training will be conducted to assure that the reactions occur automatically and as quickly as possible thereby diminishing the chances for invalid response data that doesn't fall within the acceptable time parameters. After the implicit association with the brand and brand communication is measured, typically an interview is conducted to determine the explicit reactions.



Thus it can be determined for a brand, which attributes are strongly or weakly implicitly associated with it (brand profile). It is also possible to find out for a particular industry which provider is most strongly connected with the central values (for example, “trust” for banking). The terms used are validated and represent how the human motivational and value systems operate. This allows precise statement about whether and to what extent appropriate rewards are implicitly associated with a brand or not.

Once this basis has been established, all communication measures in various stages of development can be analyzed in terms of their implicit brand effect. After the initial (baseline) measurement for the brand, around 50 measured points (each attribute represents a measuring point for the reaction time measurement), will be additionally included as a stimulus for a form of brand communication. Immediately after the presentation of the stimulus comes a second reaction time measurement of the brand for comparison. The stimulus serves here as priming and has the function to influence the subject’s association for the subsequent placement. An analysis of measurements shows if, and how strongly the stimulus changed the subject’s association with the brand – positively or negatively.

Reaction time measurements are well suited as a tool for controlling and guiding various forms of brand communication. Brand and product managers can quickly and easily learn this process, which shows how all of the effects of brand communication can be completely revealed and how communication can then be optimized. Whether TV spots, print ads, POS activities, events, websites or other touch points, implicit effect is inherent in all forms of brand communication. Important is to measure, understand and influence it.

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