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Neuroscience Marketing: Adding Mind Reading to Your Research Toolbox

By Nancy Pekala

Reading someone's thoughts may still lie in the realm of science fiction, but neuroscience marketing techniques such as brain wave measurement, implicit association measurement and facial coding are increasingly finding their ways into today's researchers' toolbox.

Recently, *Marketing Researchers* spoke with Barbara O'Connell, North American lead for the Global Consumer Neuroscience Practice at Millward Brown, to learn how neuroscience marketing fits in today's researchers' toolbox. O'Connell will be the featured speaker at the AMA's free virtual event, *"Marketing and Neuroscience: What Drives Customer Decisions." on May 10.*

Marketing Researchers: *The term "neuromarketing" has been bandied about for awhile now. How do you define it?*

Barbara O'Connell: Recently, I had a conversation with a former client who asked me what I was up to lately. I told her and she said "I want to do neuroscience, too." Afterward, I thought "What does she mean she wants to do neuroscience?" as if it was a unitary thing and that you could do just one thing and that would be neuroscience.

For more insights on neuroscience marketing, register today for the AMA's free virtual event, *"Marketing and Neuroscience: What Drives Customer Decisions"* on May 10 featuring Millward Brown's Barbara O'Connell.

There are a lot of things out there that have migrated from academia and medical practice that are becoming available to marketers. It (neuroscience) is new and exciting and has a lot of promise. It is one of those things that are just beginning to be adopted and there are a lot of questions surrounding it.

Ultimately, I would define the term as the application of these techniques to try to understand what makes consumers or professionals – whomever it is we're interviewing – decide to do what it is they're going to do. We subscribe to the idea that these things are enhancements to, not a replacement for, the tried and true techniques we've been using for many years to decide why people do what they do.

MR: *In 2008, Martin Lindstrom, in his book, "Buyology", predicted a revolution in market research that was predicated on the use of neuroscience in marketing. Where are we in that revolution?*

O'Connell: Revolution might be a bit strong. I think it's more of an evolution. A lot of researchers and marketers have been adopting these techniques to help them understand the answers to their questions, which is a good thing. We're still in the early days and we've done a lot of work in the adoption of these techniques but integrating them into traditional techniques is really the key.

I've had conversations with clients who have the idea that "We don't have to do surveys anymore. We'll just put a couple of electrodes on people's heads and we'll know everything that we need to know." That will never be true. These techniques have a lot to offer and can help us unlock the door to things that were difficult to understand but they will never replace the things we've been doing for many years.

MR: *Do neuroscience techniques provide greater ability to tap into consumers' unspoken thoughts and feelings than traditional techniques?*

O'Connell: There are some things that either people are uncomfortable talking about or are difficult to articulate. I have a friend who tells me if you ask a guy to watch an ad and then ask "How does that make you feel?" he'll say "Oh, good." Gee, can you elaborate on that?

It's very difficult for people to convey the nuance of their feelings. They may feel uncomfortable doing that. Likewise, when you're talking about higher order or abstract ideas like "What does a brand mean to me?" and "How do I really feel about it?" you may say the car is reliable or drives well, but if it's something that enhances your life or makes you feel better about yourself, those are things you may not even know you know. The value in these techniques is getting at these types of thoughts and feelings. Neuroscience techniques are extremely good at getting at underlying emotions people either can't articulate or that are difficult to articulate, as well as other underlying ideas or concepts individuals may have about the brand they may not be aware of.

It's those sorts of more ephemeral things, alongside the things that are fully processed, that individuals can articulate, that provide a more nuanced story.

MR: *Your organization advocates an approach in which neuroscience techniques are used in combination with rather than a replacement for traditional research techniques. What is the value that comes from this kind of approach? If neuroscience techniques serve only to validate existing methodologies, is it worth the often hefty price tag?*

O'Connell: I completely agree with you. As in any engagement where we're trying to get the answer to a question, it's sort of a matter of "What's the question? What's the best technique to apply to answer the question?"

Sometimes neuroscience techniques are appropriate, sometimes they are not.
That should always be the guiding principle. You use the tools you have that are best suited to the problem you are trying to solve.

If all you're doing is confirming what you learned through another approach, it doesn't make any sense (to use neuroscience techniques) because you're adding cost without adding any value. It's only worth doing if you're getting additional information, and not just teeny tiny incremental information, but rather something sufficient to justify the costs.

I don't want to go to my clients and say "Oh, we've got something new and fancy and a bright shiny object you can employ" if it's not going to tell you more than you're going to learn from doing something that costs half as much. There's really no point.

MR: *Within your Neuroscience Practice, Millward Brown has tested consumer response to brands and advertising using a variety of techniques. What are some key takeaways from those efforts?*

O'Connell: We have a global practice so we've done this around the world. We've used this for testing advertising and communications development. For concept testing, we've tested logos and looked at overall brand equity. How do people feel about the brands? What do the brands mean to them? What are their emotional reactions to the brand?

Recently, we conducted a concept test for new positioning for a prescription medication. The explicit work showed that while some of the concepts performed well in some dimensions, in others they were not doing so well. This was among healthcare professionals. They wanted to understand what affinity physicians had for the medication and what did the brand say to them about the value of the medication when they were thinking of prescribing it to their patients.

The work showed, "They're doing ok but not doing so well at other things." They were responding as rational, prescribing physicians who were looking at the facts. We used our implicit association measures to get a window to see how those concepts resonated with them as far as caring for their patients was concerned. When we did that we learned there was one concept head and shoulders above the others that really helped guide their decision.

MR*: A recent Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) panel concluded that the value of neuroscience techniques is largely dependent on interpretation, just as with traditional research techniques. How should researchers assess whether they should add neuroscience techniques into their mix when it comes to obtaining consumer insights?*

O'Connell: I was at the ARF conference and looked at the panel's interim report. What they said and recommended was very sensible and, quite honestly, what most people in this arena already feel: these techniques make sense, depending on the questions you're asking. You should go in with your eyes wide open, know what you're doing, understand what the technique can and cannot deliver, and use it in conjunction with other conventional research tools to help you tell a fuller story. These techniques are in no way meant to replace the things we're currently using; they are meant to be an enhancement.

MR: *What specific techniques are most applicable to everyday use for researchers and what is required to implement them? Can you speak specifically about 3 key techniques---eye-tracking; brainwave measurement and implicit association measurement?*

O'Connell: Eye tracking can be valuable if you're interested in understanding what about the stimulus you're presenting captures visual attention. It's pretty straightforward and can be very valuable if you want to see how people are working their way through it visually.

In terms of brain wave measurement, we've partnered with EmSense communications and creative assessment. Using a copy tested system, the two elements together really provide a great analysis of how the advertising is working and a really solid, holistic evaluation of the creative. The system utilizes both a close-ended, rigorous rating scale as well as a lot of open-ended diagnostic questions so we can get a sense of how the advertising is working. It provides a moment-by-moment evaluation of what the cognitive and emotional responses people are having while viewing the ad. The two things together can really help us provide a complete picture and very useful diagnostics for optimizing the creative.

Implicit measurement is really quite flexible. We can use it for brand evaluation, brand equity, logo testing, product development and product naming. It really has a broad range of applications. It can be used in creative development as well and can help understand "What kind of emotions am I evoking?"

MR: *A lot of excitement is being generated about "facial coding", the process of reading others' expressions. How valuable is this technique and how can it be used by researchers effectively?*

O'Connell: We're actually investigating that, as well. One of the issues is that when we are surprised, frightened or pleased, we don't really have a lot of control over our facial muscles which is the value of the technique because it gets us visceral responses to things.

But there are cultural differences in the extent to which people express things. It's very subjective in a sense and it's kind of labor intensive because someone has to sit, look and decide what exactly your face is telling me. There are several agencies working on more automated approaches which may not take you all the way but which makes the process more scalable that it is currently.

MR: *What caveats can you offer researchers when considering incorporating neuroscience techniques in their research toolbox?*

O'Connell: There are really a lot of agencies out there; some are purely neuromarketing agencies and they'll say "I'll do whatever technique, say here it is and good luck." I really think the key is to think of these as enhancements to the techniques we've been using for years. Do your homework. Look at the experience the agency has, at what they provided, what information you are going to get and determine whether that is going to be useful to you. Does what they are offering make sense? Does it provide value? Does it provide answers to your questions?

Nancy Pekala is the AMA's Director of Online Content and Editor of *Marketing Researchers*. Be sure to continue the research conversation in the *Marketing Research Group* in AMAConnect™, the AMA's new online community. You can also follow the AMA on Twitter @marketing_power and our marketing research list @marketing_power/resrch.