

Making the Unconscious Conscious

How Neuroscience Can Empower (and Inspire) Marketing

Douglas Van Praet

We are not in control.

We are living a delusion. We think the conscious or rational mind is in control because it's the part of our mind that talks to us, the voice inside our heads as we silently read the words on this page. Because we believe that this part of our mind is running the show, we also believe that the conscious minds of consumers must similarly be driving behavior. For marketers, this leads to a false pretense that purchase behavior is a conscious choice, but science shows the exact opposite is true.

In 2008, startling evidence to support belief in the role of the unconscious in decision-making was demonstrated in an experiment by a group of scientists led by John-Dylan Haynes from the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, Germany. Using brain scans, these researchers were able to predict participants' decisions about seven seconds before the subjects had consciously made the decisions. As the researchers reported, "Many processes in the brain occur automatically and without involvement of our consciousness. This prevents our mind from being overloaded by simple routine tasks. But when it comes to decisions, we tend to assume they are made by our conscious mind. This is questioned by our current findings."

By observing micro-patterns of brain activity, the researchers were able to predict the subjects' choices before they were "known" to the participants themselves. "Your decisions are strongly prepared by the brain activity. By the time consciousness kicks in, most of the work has already been done," says Haynes.

Brands Are Learned Unconscious Behaviors

Try a little experiment on your own. Sit in a chair and extend your dominant leg. With that leg, make small clockwise circles with your foot. While performing this motion, draw the number 6 in the air with the index finger of your dominant hand. What happened? Everyone who attempts this task usually has one of two reactions; their foot will either freeze in midair or reverse directions while the hand easily completes the task of drawing the number 6.

What's going on here? Drawing the number 6 is an unconscious motor program. You have done it so many times in the past that you do it automatically without thinking. It is a learned behavior. Making a circle with your foot is a conscious activity that requires thought-focus and energy because it is not likely a behavior that has been previously learned. Instead, the learned behavior overrides our conscious effort. This happens throughout our lives more often than not. We defer to our autopilot learned responses, instead of adapting to a new process or pattern.

Brands are learned behaviors: unconscious automatic intelligence acquired through experience. Learned behaviors are conditioned responses that have been internalized. They simplify our lives by generating choices and action without requiring us to think.

The Widening Chasm Between Science And Business

We are living on the edge of a great shift in our understanding of human behavior, changes that will have far reaching economic, social, political, and moral implications. It will challenge the very foundations on how we live and do business. And it offers great promise to our market economies. Problem is, these insights are widely unknown to marketers.

That's because as scientific evidence continues to pile up, the divide between what cognitive science knows and what business practices continues to deepen. The “elephant in the room” is unconscious decision making. And one of our most cherished concepts of humanity—the notion of “free will,” our ability to act and do as we choose—is under siege.

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The world's leading cognitive scientists are telling us that we are not really the conscious authors of our own intentions and actions. This is not science fiction. It is science fact. The most extreme view is that "free will" is a delusion and that no part of the brain is ever "free" of the influence of thoughts and causes with unconscious origins. What cognitive scientists do agree upon is that the vast majority, at least 90% or more, of our decisions are made without our ever knowing.

If we don't understand our own preferences or the true motivations behind our own behaviors, marketers are wasting billions of dollars each year by asking questions in quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups people simply can't know the answer to. And marketers are using that information as the guiding forces to bring innovation and improvement to the marketplace. Not surprisingly, the success rate is abysmal, as only two of every ten new products launched in the U.S. succeeds. "Houston, we have a problem."

It is as if we are all playing the game of marketing without even knowing the rules. That's because most of the business of life happens below the level of our own awareness. Markets, economies, and consumers all suffer because people can't express their true wants and needs, and companies are unable to connect to these deeper, unmet desires. The blind are leading the blind.

Not everyone has played by these rules. When a reporter asked Steve Jobs how much market research guided their efforts in launching the iPad, he replied, “None. It isn’t the consumers’ job to know what they want.” The iPad would become the most successful consumer product introduction in history according to some measures, and Apple the most valuable company of all-time.

Creativity, the driving force of economic growth, is being shackled by a false belief system. And ideas are being developed to beat a flawed research testing system, which has little predictive validity in moving real life flesh-and-blood people in the real world. We need to narrow this great divide between science and marketing.

The Building of a Bridge

It has often been said that if you want better answers, you need to ask better questions. I believe we have been asking all the wrong questions. Instead of asking people “why” they do what they do, we need to ask them “how” they do what they do. And this answer does not reside in the realms of data tabulations of market research studies, but rather in the research of behavioral and cognitive authorities.

Before marketers develop strategies, they need to first recognize that consumers have strategies too. . . human strategies, not consumer strategies. These ways of thinking lead to a set of

neurological and behavioral steps with a process, sequence, and structure rooted in our biology and evolution, not just in our culture and marketplace. And they are steps that can be uncovered and harnessed at will to guide and inform marketing and advertising strategy.

We need to shift from just measuring the outward expressions of beliefs and attitudes to better understanding the inward processes and real behavioral causes behind them. That is, how do the minds of people process information, structure their experience, and form the often-unconscious beliefs and motivations that drive their behavior?

Making the Unconscious Conscious

As W. Edwards Deming, the world's foremost authority on quality control management, once said, "If you can't describe what you are doing as a process, you don't know what you are doing."

It's like the story about an old boilermaker who was hired to fix the steam engine of a giant ship. After listening to the engineer's description of the problem, he asked a few questions and then checked out the boiler room. Carefully inspecting the maze of twisting pipes, he listened closely to the hissing and thumping sounds, occasionally feeling the pipes with his hands. He then reached into his tool bag, grabbed a small hammer, and tapped once on a valve as the boiler system lurched back into perfect action. A week later the steamship owner received a bill for

\$1,000. The ship owner complained because the boilermaker barely did anything and spent a mere fifteen minutes of his time fixing it.

When the owner asked to see an itemized bill, this is what the repairman sent him:

Tapping with hammer:	\$.50
Knowing where to tap:	\$	999.50
Total:	\$	1,000.00

It's important to make an effort, but knowing where to focus your resources makes all the difference. By knowing where to tap, we can dislodge chunks of the iceberg that hides below and float them up to the surface to be examined in full view. As Carl Jung once said, "Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."

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Here are the Seven Steps. Let's view real world marketplace successes through this new empowering lens, using insights from cognitive neuroscience to shed conscious light on their intuitive successes.

Step One | Interrupt The Pattern

The mind is what the brain does, it is the brain in action, and it works through a process of pattern recognition. If we want to get attention and shift people's behavioral patterns, we need to interrupt their perceptual patterns by doing something interesting and different.

An ad we created at Deutsch LA for Volkswagen leveraged many levels of the first of my seven steps: Interrupt the Pattern. The window into the unconscious best begins by galvanizing our conscious attention. But we only notice things in our environment when something interrupts our expected pattern. When something defies our prediction we take notice in an effort to learn. This is the basis of how marketers break through the clutter and consumers learn about their products.

The commercial we created interrupted patterns on four levels. First it was launched in advance of the Super Bowl online, a bold move that defied conventional wisdom. Second, it interrupted the concept of the evil Dark Lord by featuring a cute little boy, an innocent adorable pint-sized

version. Third, it was an ad that whispered while others shouted by telling a charming tale of a small moment in the life of an imaginative little boy, while other Super Bowl commercials featured over the top antics with outrageous gags, celebrities, rock stars, and sexy women in tight or scantily clad clothing. And forth, the structure of the spot itself was based upon a pattern interrupt.

In the commercial, a mini-Darth Vader attempts a series of unsuccessful efforts to use “the Force” on various items around the house, each time predictably failing, until he encounters the new 2012 Passat. This time the pattern is interrupted as his dad remotely starts the engine to the surprise and delight of mini-Darth.

The result: “The Force” generated a massive 55 million views on YouTube to date and a reported 6.8 billion impressions worldwide and more than \$100 million in earned media. And the Volkswagen brand that year went on to earn the highest market share in thirty years.

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Step Two | Create Comfort

Humans gravitate to the known, the safe, and the trusted. Although we are attracted to what is different, we move toward the familiar seeking balance, and rely on predictable patterns not just in our biology but also in our environments.

An example of this is the “Southwest” effect—which reduces costs for travelers across the board and increases air traffic to cities serviced by the airline. It has engendered goodwill among its customers for years and may largely be fueled by the comfort of the “golden rule” and the familiarity of treating people as if they were family.

Joe Harris, a labor lawyer for Southwest Airlines, explains that the company’s harmonious employee relations are no accident. “At Southwest, our employees come first; our customers come second; and our stockholders come third,” he said. “The rationale is pretty simple.

“Humans gravitate to the known, the safe, and the trusted. Although we are attracted to what is different, we move toward the familiar seeking balance ...”

If we treat our employees right, they're going to treat our customers right. If our customers are treated right, they will come back and our stockholders will benefit." As Southwest's CEO Gary Kelly explains: "We treat our employees like family and our customers like guests in our home. Our guiding principle is, above all else, the Golden Rule." It's no surprise that "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" is also what evolutionary psychologists call reciprocal altruism, the enduring cornerstone of humanity since the dawn of man.

The Result: In 2009, Southwest Airlines was the largest airline in the world based on the number of passengers that fly the airline each year, and in 2011 it was not only America's leading low-cost carrier but was also rated America's favorite airline by Consumer Reports.

Step Three | Lead The Imagination

The prefrontal cortex gives us the unique ability to plan behavior and create new possibilities. It functions like an alternate reality simulator by giving us the capacity to imagine the benefits of a better life and anticipate the consequences of our actions.

In 1956, copywriter Shirley Polycoff of ad giant Foote Cone & Belding, penned the titillating ad slogan for Cairol hair coloring, "Does she . . . or doesn't she?" a campaign that would forever shift the fashion sensibilities of American women. At first, obtuse executives at Life magazine

refused to run the suggestive print ad, concerned over what could be perceived as its smutty connotations. Polykoff challenged them, suggesting they survey the women around their office to see if they found any offense in the statement. She knew what most advertisers failed to see, and still fail to consider: the inner workings of the human mind. She knew that no decent lady in the conservative 1950s would ever admit to the off-color overtones of the risqué line. She was right. The women polled reported no such offense, keeping the unstated implications to the confines of their own imaginations. So the magazine's executives decided to run the ad and, according to Polykoff, "Everybody got rich."

The result: The incidence of hair coloring skyrocketed from 7 percent to about half of all American women within a decade. And sales of Clairol soared, going from \$25 million to \$200 million, accounting for more than half the total of hair color sales, a market share dominance that endures today with industry sales in excess of \$1 billion.

Step Four | Shift The Feeling

We do what we do because of how we feel. We assign value to things through our emotions. Because of the way our brains are wired, emotions influence our thinking more than our thinking influences our emotions.

Emotions are also the basis in which powerful memories are formed. And brands are essentially memories or expectations of outcomes based upon past experiences. As the late Roy Disney said in his shareholder speech of 2004, “The Walt Disney Company is more than just a business. It is an authentic American icon—which is to say that over the years it has come to stand for something real and meaningful and worthwhile to millions of people of all ages and backgrounds around the world. This is not something you can describe easily on a balance sheet, but it is tangible enough. Indeed, it is the foundation on which everything we have accomplished as a company—both artistically and financially—is based. I believe our mission has always been to be bringers of joy. . . . We do this through great story telling, by giving our guests a few hours in another world where their cares can be momentarily put aside, by creating memories that will remain with them forever.”

The Result: The Disney brand remains one of the most powerful in the world with a brand value of \$27.4 billion, ranking #13 globally in 2012.

Step Five | Satisfy The Critical Mind

Consciousness gives us the exclusive ability to rationally reject an idea if it does not make sense based upon our experiences. Often, in order to act, we need to give ourselves logical permission to submit to the emotions and impulses that drive us.

An inventor and industrial designer, James Dyson founded his company on twin product pillars, equal parts engineering and design. Dyson didn't employ glitzy branding or fancy ad campaigns. But Dyson made millions because he also offered visible proof that his product worked, by letting people actually see the dirt they sucked up with his pioneering see-through, bagless vacuum cleaner. His advertising was as effective as his product because he told a simple, sensible brand story aimed squarely at a key marketplace weakness: "Bags and filters lose suction." Dyson never waived from the facts about how his best-selling vacuum came to be. From the hard-working end product of 5,127 prototypes to a clear product demonstration, from patented Cyclone technology that moves the air inside the vacuum at 924 miles per hour to a smart-sounding, technologically advanced name, G-Force Dual Cyclone, Dyson knew the least sexy aspects of his vacuum would sell the sexiness of its design.

The result: Today Dyson's products continue to steal market share from everyone; they have earned the brand a 40 percent leadership share of British sales as well as market leadership in

the US, Canada, Australia, France, Belgium, Spain, Switzerland, Ireland, and New Zealand. Even during a recession in 2010, the company reported that it had doubled operating profits in the past 12 months to £190 million.

Step Six | Change the Associations

Our minds and our memories work by association. Repetition and emotion strengthen these neural associations so that they become automatic. If we want to change perceptions of anything, we have to change our associations.

A great example of the tremendous power of cognitive reframing is the National Pork Board's long-standing "The other white meat" campaign. This effort debuted in 1987 with the goal of increasing consumption by dispelling pork's fatty reputation. Even though pork was perceived to have more fat than white meat chicken and turkey, pork shared an important opportunistic association with these lean protein choices. It turned white when cooked. With one simple flip of perspective, a common heuristic—that white meat is lean meat—was put to work. Pork had joined the ranks of its healthful poultry counterparts by association with a commonly shared and meaningful attribute.

Many consumers at the time had already unconsciously viewed pork as a white meat. Webster's dictionary even defined pork as such. After extensive pretesting of the campaign, which showed that the approach was both believable and effective, "The other white meat" campaign was born.

The results: At the end of the first year of the campaign, agriculture economist Glenn Grimes of the University of Missouri said, "The apparent increase in demand for pork put \$500 million in US pork producers' pockets during 1987 that wouldn't be there under normal conditions." The campaign would become one of the food industry's most successful, increasing pork consumption by more than 20 percent, and last for 23 years. Eventually farmers would also raise hogs to be leaner, better fitting the changed image of pork and the desires of today's consumers.

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Step Seven | Take Action

Our brains exist for movement. Things that don't move don't have brains. Physical actions use more of our brain than just imagining a behavior. The more of our brain we use and the more we repeat an action, the more ingrained the experience becomes in our unconscious mind. By physically doing something we also engage more of our sensory systems such as tactile (skin) and proprioceptive (internal, such as muscle) feelings; we see it, smell it, possibly taste it, hear it, et cetera. This makes the experience deep-rooted in our unconscious—second nature to us.

Perhaps the hottest brand to fly in the face of traditional trends is Red Bull, the Austria-based company that first conceived the energy drink category. From the very beginning the brand was not without its challenges. When founder Dietrich Mateschitz was first inspired by a syrupy, medicine-like tonic that helped revitalize him after a business trip to Thailand, the concept of an energy drink was neither well known nor well received among Westerners. As Mateschitz said, “If I don't create the market, it doesn't exist.” When he hired a market research firm to test the product's appeal, the survey research yielded catastrophic results. Mateschitz recalls, “People didn't believe the taste, the logo, the brand name. I'd never before experienced such a disaster.” He chose to ignore the research results and introduced Red Bull.

From the start, traditional marketing was summarily rejected. Initially, Red Bull avoided television, and didn't use outdoor, print, or digital ads, but chose grassroots, experiential efforts. Red Bull let people try the product free of cost through one of the most celebrated human activities: the time-honored tradition of a good (but not necessarily old-fashioned) party. The foolproof branding plan was to give hip, young, and influential college students free cases of the energy drink and encourage them to throw their own event, a lucrative tactic that cost the marketer next to nothing.

Red Bull would later expand these tactics to bring the energetic brand to even greater experiential heights by sponsoring live events of the most intensely physical sort: extreme sports. Red Bull sponsored legions of affordable, death-defying athletes of less-than-mainstream but greatly exhilarating sports. These athletes were the up-and-coming rock stars of the newer generation, showcasing physical bravery and athletic prowess universally admired by men and desired by women. These branded iconic heroes enjoyed cult-like followings among the younger and more influential demographics. Today there are close to 500 world-class Red Bull sponsored athletes including BASE jumpers (BASE stands for buildings, antennas, spans—i.e., bridges—and earth—i.e., cliffs), cliff divers, big-wave surfers, motocross riders, snowboarders, and skateboarders, all risking life and limb in worldwide competitions and outrageous stunts.

The results: In 2010, the privately held company sold a total of 4,204 billion cans in over 161 countries, including over a billion in the US alone, earning Red Bull a total of \$5.175 billion in revenue—a jump of 15.8 percent versus the previous year in a now highly competitive marketplace crowded with imitators desperate to get in on the action.

You Too Can Leverage These Steps

This process is intended not only to inspire marketing communications and consumerism, but also to precede and inform strategy development and purchase decisions.

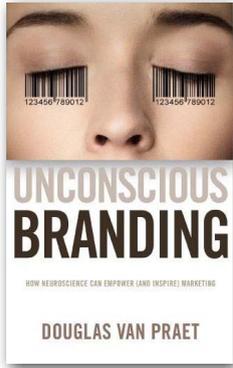
Before you develop your brand strategy, write these seven steps on a single sheet of paper and fill in briefly what has to happen to accomplish each. What is the convention or pattern your brand needs to interrupt to get noticed? What needs to be done to make people comfortable to consider buying it? What do you want them to imagine as the benefits and outcomes of buying and using your brand? What are the key emotions and feelings you need to shift to gain interest? What logical support points help them overcome their resistance to buying the brand? What brand associations do you need to change or reinforce? And how can you physically engage your audience beyond just communications to experience your brand so that they may understand how it can make their lives better?

With this as a backdrop, your strategy development process will become much more focused, empowered, inspired, and actionable.

Once you have created your entire marketing communications, use these steps as lens and filter to evaluate and improve your efforts.

The ultimate goal is to uncover these steps in our markets so that we all can leverage them, and are not leveraged by them. Buyer and seller beware. Only through conscious knowledge of this process can we begin to make better brands and make better-informed purchase decisions. The brands that prevail amidst this leveled playing field of equally enlightened marketers and customers will be those that create real value. **When we all are aware of the real causes of our deeds, we can inspire real progress on both sides of the free market fence.** 🏡

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Douglas Van Praet is the Executive Vice President at the ad agency Deutsch LA, where his responsibilities include Group Planning Director for the highly acclaimed Volkswagen account. Van Praet's approach to advertising and marketing draws from unconscious behaviorism and applies neurobiology and evolutionary psychology and behavioral economics to business problems.

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