Unethical Neuroadvertising

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Advertising sphere of the world of marketing is immeasurable in terms of information amounts projected onto consumer masses, stimulated purchasing desires, as well as costs spent on advertisements. Obviously, the ad creators would like to make their appeal to the audience maximally efficient. Modern practice shows that conventional methods for predicting and testing the effectiveness of advertisement fail. Due to the laws of evolution in marketing, ineffective methods of studying and shaping customer behaviors should be substituted for the new, better ones. Such an evolution has its price and often, the customers are those who pay it. The analysis of the current marketing realities suggests that modern advertising, namely neuroadvertising, a product of neuromarketing, the study of the brain’s responses to advertising, has gone too far in manipulating the behavior of potential consumers and too deep into their brain.

In its current form, neuromarketing appeared in 2002, and has been gaining popularity ever since. Tracking Google’s search results for “neuromarketing” shows a phenomenal progression from a few hits in 2002, to thousands of them in 2010. Neuromarketing is a science, which regards consumer behavior from a brain perspective. Neuromarketing ignores the mindful part of customer reaction and focuses on the subconscious, emotional mechanisms that shape people’s decisions even prior to the time they reach their logical conclusion on the buying decision (Morin, 2011; Heath, 2012; Fugate, 2008; Singer, 2004). In other words, marketers can gain a better understanding of the role of emotions in the decision-making process, develop more efficient methods of triggering these emotions, build greater brand loyalty, measure positive and negative reactions and become more effective marketers (Upadhyaya, 2012). The seemingly limitless possibilities of the neuromarketing’s methodology result from and are based on the technological innovations of health care. The invention of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanner allowed health professionals to study the human brain circuitry in order...
to make diagnoses and save lives (Morin, 2011). After marketing “borrowed” the technology, marketers became able to study human brain as well, but for their own purposes, namely testing the effectiveness of advertisement and saving money on campaigns. Additionally, electroencephalography (EEG) and magnetoencephalography (MEG) devices may be used, but fMRI prevails (Fugate, 2008).

For the last decade, neuromarketing has been viewed and used as a key to purchasing desire. The first scholarly study of brain reactions towards the brand names took place in 2003. The participants were asked to drink either Coca Cola or Pepsi Cola, while fMRI machine studied their brains. The study showed that when people saw the brands and could choose consciously, they preferred Coke, but when they did not see the labels, they chose Pepsi based exclusively on their feelings. The experiment revealed that during conscious and unconscious choices, different segments of the brain “light up.” It means people’s choices can be ruled not only by consciousness, but also by emotions, subconscious desires, and preferences (Morin, 2011; Singer, 2004). Consequently, neuromarketing may be the way to “crack the neural code of our decisions” (Morin, 2011, p. 132). There are already dozens of neuromarketing consultancies, which work with such brands as McDonald’s as well as with various movie studios, banks, and even political campaigns (Fugate, 2008).

Why do “good old” focus groups and questionnaire-based studies fail? Traditional methods of retrieving information on consumer reactions to suggested products are unreliable and faulty because of the limitations associated with the human factor. The main and only source of information in such studies is the respondents. Studies rely fully on people’s honesty as well as willingness and mental capacity of adequately expressing their feelings and judgments. Why does neuromarketing succeed? Neuromarketing excludes the human factor to an extent that the
only human feedback is given by the researchers, when they analyze the objective data received via fMRI imaging. By removing the major factor of data distortions, neuromarketing removed a great percent of errors in designing advertising campaigns (Morin, 2011; Singer, 2004).

As any new phenomenon, neuromarketing has brought speculations on whether neuroscience is an ethically acceptable and highly efficient study of consumer behavior, or just another unethical tool designed to trick the customers into purchasing. As usual, the opinions split. Proponents believe that neuroadvertising is good because it is effective, insightful in terms of revealing the mechanisms of decision-making, good for social advertising, and it has a great potential for the future of marketing. Efficiency is one of the major arguments for neuroads. This argument results from the recent findings about the role of subconscious and emotions in decision making. Many scholars also view the new advertising tool as an opportunity to explain the mystery of the consumers’ decision-making process. As worded by Upadhyaya (2012), “A giant fMRI brain scanner can possibly reveal what every brand has strived to discover: the key to understanding how humans unconsciously see their products” (p. 290). Since people use only about twenty percent of their brain consciously (Morin, 2011), it is reasonable to assume that the key to the remaining eighty percent will be the key to consumer purchasing desire. “Great advertising strikes a responsive chord with consumers where it matters most; the subconscious” (Upadhyaya, 2012, p. 288). Some authors such as Morin (2011) believe that advertisement should not be viewed as a completely negative, profit-oriented phenomenon. Instead, he claims that social advertising, which aims at inter alia, convincing people to quit smoking can be made extremely effective with the help of neuromarketing. Also, it may be used for propagating socially responsible corporate behavior or augment public policies (Fugate, 2008). Morin (2011) compares advertisers disclaiming of neuroimaging with astronomers rejecting electronic
telescopes. This comparison expresses a belief that marketing should benefit from all technological and scientific advancements available. Breakthrough essence of neuroimaging and its future potential are viewed as arguments for using it for advertising purposes.

Opponents sidestep these claims with counterarguments. As brain scanning and interpretation techniques advance, ethical and legal issues surmount as well. Let alone high purposes of scholars and profit-oriented focus of marketers, neural imaging, as used for creating highly efficient ads of a new generation, is unethical. Basically, this technology means that someone is “digging” into the consumer’s brain in order to reveal its mechanisms, locate targets for effective appeal, play on emotion bypassing the conscious, and use the subconscious in order to stimulate the brain into producing necessary positive responses, which would stimulate a buying desire. Consumers cannot spot the “subconscious seduction” (Heath, 2012, p. 207); thus, they are not able to protect themselves from it. Legally, brain scanning for marketing purposes may threaten consumer’s rights. The first issue of concern within the debate on the legal cons of neuromarketing is the lack of procedure transparency and consumer awareness. Both those consumers, who participate in neuroimaging for advertising studies, and those, unknowingly exposed to the products of these studies, may be under-informed in terms of the essence and effect of neuromarketing on their behavior as consumers. The second issue is that accidental pathology findings in subjects of neuroscientific studies can be sold to the third parties, such as insurance companies, without individuals’ consent. The third issue is the fact that the human brain is the vessel for an individual’s personality, and studying the brain may reveal too much of it to the researchers (Upadhyaya, 2012). Apart from being expansive, neuromarketing is also expensive. It is the third argument against the use of neuroimaging in marketing. The following issue of the lack of evidence and research reinforces this “con.” Indeed, few scientific
neuromarketing studies have yet been published. Respectively, scholarly data are scarce, and the true efficiency of the method is still doubted. Partially, this happens due to public dissatisfaction with commercialization of technologies and techniques originally pertaining to healthcare, and concerns regarding ethics and privacy (Morin, 2011; Upadhyaya, 2012; Singer, 2004). At this point, the realities of argument and counterargument link to form a circle.

Neuroadvertising can be a cause of the public outcry similar to the one which followed James Vicary’s covert manipulation with subliminal images in 1957. When started, the public outcry will not end, until the society is provided with the evidences and guarantees of clarity, legal safety, and morality of neuromarketing techniques; however, the official evidence is impossible to collect under the pressure from the society. The only possible way out of the abovementioned circle is for marketers to ignore the public attitude as well as explore and exploit neuroimaging secretly for the sake of efficient advertising and their own benefit. The chances are high that this scenario is true. Since the hopes associated with neuro-ads are growing, the “neuromarket” will grow in spite of numerous concerns. Still, counterevidence base and the associated prospects are enough to label neuro-approach to advertising unethical and disturbing.

Neuroadvertising does go too far in manipulating the behaviors of potential consumers, and too deep into their brain. If the traditional ad techniques represent “direct” advertising, neuro-advertising can be reasonably called “indirect” since it appeals to the subconscious. By analogy, if traditional techniques start to fade away, neuromarketing starts to prevail despite all the issues it raises. Neuroadvertising is an ambiguous phenomenon the ethics and efficiency of which is debated and doubted. On the one hand, it is a potential opportunity to explain the mystery of the consumers’ decision-making process and a key to effective social advertising, as
well as the future of overall advertising. On the other hand, neuroadvertising can be regarded as “digging” into the consumer’s brain in order to stimulate a buying desire or retrieve sensitive information which can threaten consumer’s legal rights, be sold to the third parties, or reveal too much of the human personality. While consumers are under-informed and unaware, marketers invest in neuroadvertising and believe that it has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of both cause-related and commercial advertising messages and services marketing of the nearest future. Morin’s (2011) prediction is quite univocal: “Neuromarketing is here to stay. And it will evolve, like humans - and even brands - do” (p. 135). It means that it will be difficult to eliminate neuroadvertising from the marketing fabric.
References


