
Branding in Mind

Our brains make brand-influenced decisions at the speed of thought. Follow these five golden rules to make the selection process work for you.

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We make brand choices subconsciously, algorithmically, and fast (we're talking milliseconds). And although we can veto decisions once they enter our conscious awareness, consciousness is not the driver of our choices. We're not irrational – our brain seeks to satisfy our goals and emotional needs in the best possible way, maximizing reward and minimizing energy, costs, efforts, and risks – but it's from the subconscious that we make brand-influenced decisions.

How does the process work and what does it mean for marketers seeking to get their brand in pole position? A useful way to think about it is this: Our brand choices are analogous to the way that Google selects websites – the brain follows a fixed algorithm to pick the brand from our memory that best fits our needs. Five principles summarize the main implications for marketers.

REWARD

From the brain's perspective, brands promise rewards that deliver on our subconscious cocktail of goals. To make choices, our brain integrates ➡

Quantify: Speed

Half of ecommerce shoppers expect a page to load in two seconds or less.¹⁰



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a range of elements into a valuation. Deciding between something simple like a Frappuccino or a Fanta means considering factors like taste, previous experiences, relative price, your energy level, your thirst, the time of day, the humidity, the temperature, etc. Whichever brand comes out on top gets selected.

Instead of worrying about classical attribute differentiation, marketers must focus on creating an overall relevance edge – being substantially more rewarding than competitors. This is difficult, because the subconscious goals brands must deliver on are, well, subconscious. Steve Jobs captured the point in his reply to a question about the market research that Apple undertook for the iPad. “None,” he said. “It’s not the consumers’ job to know what they want.” The best approach is to think like a customer.

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REPEAT

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Brand associations are stored in our long-term memory. These memories are considered in the quick valuation our brains calculate when making a choice. But as memories decay if not regularly reactivated, marketers must continually reiterate both a brand’s promise and the proof that it delivers.

Advertising is, of course, one of the best ways to refresh brand memories, especially among light users. As a result, advertising generates sales even when the brand’s sales volume remains flat or, worse, when volume is decreasing.

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UNDER-PROMISE; OVER-DELIVER

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Our brain keeps track of the difference between the promised reward and the actual experience. Based on that difference, it adjusts its valuation of the brand, meaning that if your brand promises the world, deliver the moon. When our reward centers get more than expected, they naturally want to return to the source of that experience again and again. Like a benign drug, marketing can benefit from this mechanism.

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PARTICIPATION

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We create thousands of new brain cells every day – especially in areas related to learning and memory – but exposure to participatory environments can double the number. The result is that

brands we interact with are easier to remember and are therefore more likely to receive a higher memory ranking. Nike+ is perhaps the most dramatic example of how a static product was transformed into a participatory experience, more deeply embedding the brand in users’ memories.

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REACH WITH MEANING

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Around 50 percent of sales generally come from 80 percent of buyers – this is called the ‘Pareto distribution’ (and has recently been reaffirmed in Byron Sharp’s *How Brands Grow*, Oxford University Press 2010). It means that to grow, advertising must reach the large numbers of lighter users who deliver 50 percent of volume but seldom think of the brand. This may explain why mass media such as TV and radio are still popular with advertisers. The biggest help marketers can get from digital media companies are means to reliably reach the entire customer population of their category. The one-on-one nature of social media can make them very effective at the micro level. But to grow, brands need mass penetration. The best digital advertising delivers this reach but does it while retaining that personalized relevance ☺