Neuromarketing: Friend or Foe?

With each passing year, the marketing world strives to find ways to entice fellow consumers in an effort to persuade and sway their actions. While this may seem to only need flashy colors and celebrity brand ambassadors, good marketing techniques require understanding consumer needs and wants. Therefore, like any other field of study or profession, knowledge can only be improved by ongoing research. Current market research techniques are useful but can only provide a small amount of information to marketing professionals. But, what if market researchers could read the minds of consumers? For example, instead of looking at answers to questionnaires, using neuromarketing, a marketer might be able to see what types of images illicit responses from consumers. Neuromarketing is a newly emerged field that concerns using mind reading technology to gain insights on consumer desires and perceptions of various products and advertisements ("Put Your Thinking Cap on," 2011). Some researchers argue against the use of neuromarketing by citing ethical complications surrounding consumer privacy. However, after weighing the costs and benefits, neuromarketing is generally a great tool in marketing research, especially to help create more effective advertisements.

In order to fully support that neuromarketing is a useful tool, we must first describe the existing marketing techniques used to study advertisement effectiveness. For example, the "Traditional Consumer Persuasion Model" uses small focus groups where advertisements are presented and consumer feedback is collected. This feedback helps improve the existing advertisement and the improved advertisement is then shown to the consumers. The effectiveness of the advertisement is eventually determined in whether the consumer chooses to purchase the good/service (Wilson, Gaines & Hill, 2008). The "Revealed Preferences Consumer Persuasion Model" uses a more aggressive approach by collecting data from the use of consumer

loyalty cards. For example, a consumer may purchase some type of store "loyalty" card in the hope of getting rewards by accumulating points through making purchases at that store. In agreement to the loyalty card, consumers must willingly disclose information about purchase history and personal information to the store. Market researchers who will attempt to correlate specific purchases with certain demographics of people then study this data. This information is subsequently used to create advertisements/promotions to encourage those people to buy more of those products. The effectiveness is then measured by looking at the purchasing history again (Wilson et al., 2008).

In contrast, neuromarketing or the "Individual/Collective Neuromarketing Persuasive Model" refines marketing research by providing more concise data about vision/memory and emotional reactions to the advertisements (Wilson et al., 2008). According to academics Carl Senior and Nick Lee (2008) the inclusion of neuromarketing technologies will transform market research from being more subjective to objective. An objective method of study will certainly provide a better means to improve advertisements that are more conducive to consumer desires and needs by creating a more precise set of guidelines or methods to follow. Neuromarketing uses technology that reads brain signals to study different components of a consumer's mind. For example, EEG or Electrocenalography is where electrodes are attached to the scalp and electrical activity is measured. EEG can really be utilized when judging emotional reactions to advertisements. According to researchers, activation of the left frontal region of the brain signifies a positive emotion or motivation (Ariely 2010). Apart from EEG, fMRI technology can measure vision and memory by analyzing signals from the rods and cones in eyes and hippocampus and amygdala activation in the brain (Wilson et al., 2008). Vision, memory and emotion can all be useful information to advertisers who are seeking to improve their existing

advertisements. For example, knowing how memorable an advertisement can be will help advertisers deduce what images or words tend to resonate with the viewer. Judgment of emotion can also allow advertisers to assess what objects in ads may evoke positive or negative reactions. While some may argue that other marketing models have worked perfectly so far, it must be stated that none of them come close to studying consumer reactions so objectively. Consumer biases and a consumer inability to judge their own reactions may prove to be frustrating for market researchers using the existing marketing models. Academics R. Mark Wilson, Jeannie Gaines and Ronald Paul Hill (2008) argue that neuromarketing comes the closest to objectively creating advertisements that stand close to the desires of the consumer.

Opponents to neuromarketing argue that consumer privacy is compromised. Consent is only taken after the research participants have fully understood the procedure and uses. In this case, consent will still be taken before completing neuromarketing procedures. If someone doesn't mind this invasion of privacy, why should researchers protest? One may further argue, even if a consumer gives consent, he or she may not know exactly what they are giving consent for. Therefore, it is important to note that this statement is not necessarily particular to neuromarketing but other forms of market research as well. Consumers may not really know what their information is going to be used for under the existing marketing research procedures. For example, under the "Revealed Preferences Consumer Persuasion Model", demographic information is taken from store loyalty cardholders. Cardholders may never be fully aware of how their information is being used. So, it can be said that lack of knowledge on the part of participants is not specific to neuromarketing but to existing and approved market research techniques (Wilson et al., 2008). It is impossible to give all the information to participants without inducing some effect that might disrupt the study. For example, a consumer who is

aware that their purchases are being analyzed may not purchase certain products out of embarrassment. This does not help the researchers or the consumer who wanted that product! This fact is true in other fields of study as well. In medicine, a placebo is always used to reduce this effect. Participants will never really know everything that is happening in the study until the study, itself, is completed.

Outside of the business world, marketing is often portrayed negatively and is seen as an attempt to simply make profits and manipulate consumers. However, marketing is a practice that is beneficial to consumers as well. Academic Rotfeld argues that marketing should also be about "helping more people understand what they really should want" (as cited in Wilson et al., 2008). In other words, marketing is helpful to consumers as well as it educates consumers about products they could find useful even if they are not aware of it or have a particular desire for it. Along these lines, it is important to note that neuromarketing would not only be beneficial to marketers but to consumers as well.

Essentially, neuromarketing should be used in market research and specifically to measure advertisement effectiveness. We see that neuromarketing provides information that regular market research cannot provide and is more useful in judging how useful an advertisement is. Some may argue about the privacy issues brought about by neuromarketing, but consent is always taken and "full" consent has always been an issue among various fields and should not just be particular to the field of neuromarketing. The use of neuromarketing will surely change the marketing world but it will benefit both marketers and consumers alike.

References

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