

David Thomson, chairman of MMR Group, founder of Brandphonics

Professor David Thomson has been a consumer psychologist since the 1970s. He is chairman of market research agency MMR Group, and founder of Brandphonics. David also holds the honorary title of visiting professor in the department of food and nutritional sciences at the University of Reading. His primary interests for the past 30 years have focused on developing an understanding of the processes through which consumers make choices, and on helping brand owners make their products more successful.



It's time to set consumers' hearts on fire with emotion



Pleasant experiences, such as a cup of tea, fill our day with mini emotional highs. Strong brands, such as Red Bull, associate these highs with branding

Building emotions into brands is the real secret of success, says Professor Thomson

Today, new ways of understanding how consumers feel about brands are giving brand owners unprecedented insight into what's happening at an emotional level when consumers make buying decisions. Armed with this knowledge, brand owners can engineer emotions into their brands and enjoy global success.

Up until now, many brand owners haven't always appreciated that when packaged goods are being sold to consumers, the product itself – not only the branding, packaging or manner in which the product is promoted – has an inherent emotional impact on the people who buy it. This explains why so many product launches and relaunches fail.

Instead of focusing on vitally important emotional factors, too many brand owners ask their market research teams simply to investigate liking and propensity-to-buy. But in truth neither is an effective predictor of whether consumers are going to buy a product, let alone an indication of whether they'll make it part of their regular weekly shopping.

The fact is, consumers like a lot of things they don't buy and buy a lot of things they don't like. This suggests that consumer behaviour is being guided by factors other than liking. But if that's so, what factors are consumers really being influenced by and how can we measure them?

People buy things for the same reason they

do other things in their lives: because they get a reward, which we can call positivity.

We all experience heightened positivity (a spike of positivity in emotional branding parlance) as a result of special events in our lives such as holidays, falling in love, getting married, and also as a consequence of more day-to-day events: a good lunch or an excellent cup of coffee, for example.

In practice, most of the time people are content to enjoy a stream of little spikes of positivity from their lives. It's very likely this is the way evolution has designed us to enjoy life.

Many spikes of positivity are, of course, unrelated to the choice of a branded product or service, yet brand owners should take every reasonable step to ensure that their brand becomes intimately associated with spikes of positivity. Doing this makes hard commercial sense: consumers will stop buying a brand if, for some reason, it ceases bringing positivity into their lives. But brand owners should not be defensive. They need to know exactly what their brand means to consumers and why their brand means what it does.

It's true that brand owners have for a long time set their brands in a promotional context that communicates the positivity that using the brand will bring. Car adverts don't just show a shiny new car in the showroom; the ad depicts the car in some picturesque or exotic location unlikely to bear much resemblance to the M25 on a wet Friday evening. Gillette razors are advertised by showing a male model enjoying a particularly close and wonderful shave, and Gillette's ambitious strapline, the best a man can get, is obviously designed to make you

forget that the razors are simply ingeniously engineered small pieces of metal and plastic.

So what should market research really be doing? Nothing less than helping brand owners identify and optimise the triggers that give consumers a heightened sense of positivity through their emotional experience of the brand. By focusing specifically on emotional factors, a brand owner can create a compelling point of difference versus competitors.

So what exactly are these triggers?

This brings us to the vital matter of the product's sensory characteristics.

Most, if not all, of what we experience when we interact with an object in the physical world is channelled to the mind via our senses. Brand owners need to engineer deliberately-crafted associations between sensory characteristics and brand identity. They can do this by taking advantage of their emotional understanding of how consumers see the brand.

Red Bull is a highly successful example of this. Even people who love Red Bull would probably agree that it is not one of the most pleasant-tasting soft drinks, yet its unusual and quirky taste has successfully distinguished it from other carbonates which often have adolescent or juvenile connotations.

We can call the process of experiencing the sensory characteristics of different stimuli perception. Yet perception is only part of the story, because what matters most of all, and what in fact amounts to a key for unlocking the mystery of consumer choice is the meaning that consumers attach in their minds to the sensory characteristics they perceive.

This process of attaching meaning to perception can be referred to as conceptualisation. Conceptualisation matters precisely because buying behaviours don't only arise from perception but also from how we conceptualise what we perceive. In other words, we make a buying choice because of what the sensory characteristics mean to us.

How does conceptualisation work in practice? In the case of Red Bull, the drink's edginess, associations with extreme sports and its promise to "vitalise body and mind" and "give you wings", is adult and aspirational. The associated functional, emotional and other more abstract conceptualisations created by Red Bull's branding are then delivered by the drink. This is achieved in part via the physiologically and psychologically active compounds in the liquid, but also via the associations that have developed between the drink's distinctive sensory characteristics and consumers' conceptualisations of it.

Any competent drinks company could copy the Red Bull liquid in all respects. However, the associations that have developed between the brand-generated conceptualisations and the drink's sensory characteristics are uniquely owned by Red Bull and no other brand. "Me too" energy drink brands do not enjoy the enormous customer mandate Red Bull enjoys.

Appreciating the importance of conceptualisation in consumer choice is like Neil Armstrong landing on the moon: a giant step forward. Armed with this understanding, brand owners can create market research programmes designed to give them a detailed understanding of precisely what kind of

emotional meanings consumers attach to their products through conceptualisation.

One especially potent way of accessing this is through language: carefully selecting a lexicon of terms describing the widest range of possible emotions (both positive and negative) relating to a brand and asking consumers to choose the most fitting and least fitting terms using choice-based research techniques. This lexicon will be customised for every client, but, in Brandphonics's case, can be drawn from our proprietary "master lexicon". This is the product of many man-years of research experience. We then add sector-specific terms as needed.

Applying market research to finding out what a brand means emotionally to consumers brings scientifically sound, quantitative research to an area often dominated by qualitative research. Brand owners can now use these research techniques to get access to brand and product profiles that reveal all the associated emotions and conceptualisations – putting a measure on every one.

Why does this matter so much? The answer is because, after all, we can manage things better if we can measure them.

For a brand owner, the secret of success is to make the product a response to what your research has uncovered, and to optimise all elements of the branded offer (such as the formulation or product design, packaging, marketing and promotion) to maximise its potential emotional appeal to consumers.

Design your brand to play a wonderful and emotional role in the life of consumers, and you'll give yourself the chance to achieve all the success in the world. ●