

**BRAND BLINK**

Malcolm Gladwell described every marketer's dream come true in his bestselling book, *The Tipping Point*, named for that little but vital thing that causes an idea, product or trend to become a pervasive part of our everyday lives. Gladwell enlightened our thinking again in *Blink*, his fascinating exploration of how decisions are made in the blink of an eye before consumers are even aware of it. He describes it as, "*how we think without thinking.*"

Gladwell's effort to share emerging insights into how our brains work has been timely. In this decade and the last, we are learning more about how humans think and feel and what drives our behaviors than the whole of our discoveries between the time Sigmund Freud dreamt up the idea of psychoanalysis and the 1990s. This has profound implications for marketing and brand professionals. As it turns out, these developments are revealing just how faulty and inadequate conventional research methods are when it comes to truly understanding consumers.

"Since the early 1990s, fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) has been a tremendous boon to neuroscience research, helping scientists learn more about how the brain works by visualizing changes in the chemical composition of various regions or changes in the flow of fluids that occur over seconds or minutes" (Conlon 2002). In this short time span, we have witnessed a deluge of startling new insights about human thought and how the brain works. Since brands really exist only in the human mind, these insights are also creating new breakthroughs in understanding the psychology of brands.

**WHAT'S BEHIND BLINK?**

In *Blink*, Gladwell explains that people make decisions through rapid cognition and "thin-slicing" — our unconscious mind finding patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience. "Thin-slicing is not an exotic gift. It is a central part of what it means to be human. We thin-slice whenever we meet a new person or have to make sense of something quickly, or encounter a novel situation" (Gladwell 2005, p.43). We thin-slice so we can cope with the complexities of life. Otherwise, it's far too chaotic for us to manage all the details and preserve our sanity.

More than we realize, we evaluate a situation or a brand and frame our response before we ever consciously think about it. When we thin-slice, we recognize patterns and make snap judgments, and we do this process of editing unconsciously. We first see and perceive a color several hundred milliseconds before we can think or say "red light." Our foot seeks the brake

long before we actually think about stopping, that is, if we think about it at all. "Our conscious mind is just too slow to figure out what the best course of action is, so our non-conscious mind does the job for us and sends us signals that tell us what to do" (Wilson 2002, p.36).

"The brain uses vast amounts of memory to create a model of the world. Everything you know and have learned is stored in this model. The brain uses this memory-based model to make continuous predictions of future events" (Hawkins & Blakeslee, 2004, p.6). This includes things like reminding us to stop for red lights. There is a lot of information out there to analyze, and it is clearly to our advantage to prioritize it, recognizing what we should focus on and what we can safely ignore (Wilson, 2002). Antonio Damasio, a leading neuroscientist and the source of many of these emerging insights says, "Our brains contain a kind of mental toolbox selected over millions of years of evolution to help our ancestors survive and reproduce in challenging environments" (as cited in Johnson 2004, p.9). "All that has been learned empirically about evolution in general and mental process in particular suggest that the brain is a machine assembled not to understand itself, but to survive" (Wilson 1998, p.96). Survival in our modern world is different, but no less challenging in its own way. A lion chasing you on the savannah is a lot different than a red light. One you run from and one you stop for. But you still may end up a bloody mess if your brain fails to respond quickly enough.

"The part of our brain that leaps to conclusions is called the adaptive unconscious, and the study of this kind of decision-making is one of the most important new fields in psychology" (Gladwell 2005, p.11). "The adaptive unconscious plays a major executive role in our mental lives. It gathers information, interprets and evaluates it, and sets goals in motion, quickly and efficiently" (Wilson 2002, p.35). The problematic part of this for marketers is that most of it happens without our ever being aware of it.

As Gladwell warns, "While people are very willing and very good at volunteering information explaining their actions, those explanations, particularly when it comes to the kinds of spontaneous opinions and decisions that arise out of the unconscious, aren't necessarily correct. In fact, it sometimes seems as if they are just plucked out of thin air. So, when marketers ask consumers to give them their reactions to something—to explain whether they liked a song that was just played or a movie they just saw or a politician they just heard—how much trust should be placed in their answers? Finding out what people think of a rock song sounds as if it should be easy. But the truth is that it isn't, and the people

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who run focus groups and opinion polls haven't always been sensitive to this fact" (Gladwell 2005, p.155).

#### FINDING BLINK

Brains are pattern machines. It's not incorrect to express the brain's functions in terms of hearing or vision but at the most fundamental level, patterns are the name of the game (Hawkins & Blakeslee, 2004). These patterns make blink moments possible. But, if you are a marketer looking to capitalize on a blink phenomenon, be aware the brain cannot command itself to go into "think blink" mode. Instead, it involuntarily retrieves from memory the feelings that drive blink encounters. Our brain does not remember exactly what it sees, hears or feels. We don't remember or recall things with complete fidelity—not because the cortex and its neurons are sloppy or error-prone but because the brain remembers the important relationships in the world, independent of details (Hawkins 2004).

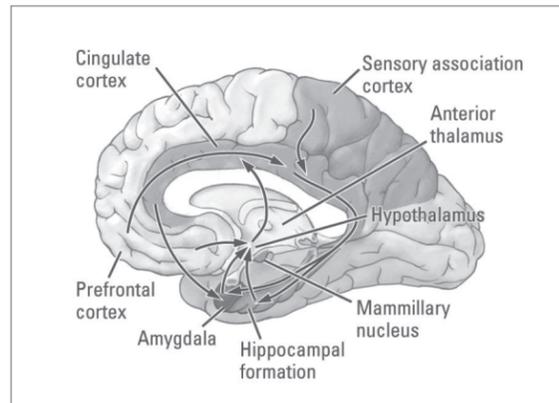
The relationships we feel are important in our world are stored as images in our unconscious mind and are linked directly to our emotions. In fact, we don't really think in words, but more in pictures or images. The brain is elegantly designed to store whole concepts within an image. We store memories in images because they are more meaningful and easier to access quickly and automatically. Stringing words and sentences together is clumsy and slow. Remember, survival is at stake. We can't waste time thinking everything through. Emotions are largely responsible for creating these memories and are the key to unlocking the meaning within. "Emotions are by definition unconscious" (Zaltman 2003, p.79). Accessing these powerful influences requires specific and intentional methodologies such as Brandtrust's Emotional Inquiry®.

It is critical for marketers to understand the role of emotions in human decision making and behavior. Raised in Western culture, we are well indoctrinated in the forces of logic and reason, but we've lost sight of the essential role emotions play in determining human behavior. In fact, all human behavior is driven by emotional input derived from these stored visualizations.

There are two systems in the brain. One is for logic and reason. It resides in the neocortex, the outer surface layer and, in an evolutionary sense, the newest part of the brain. The other is found in the limbic system, the emotional and more primal part of the brain deeply and protectively embedded

at the innermost reaches. The emotional components appear in very discreet, well-identified and interconnected regions of the brain. The interconnection occurs in a handful of brain sites that are collectively known as the limbic system. One site in the system, the amygdala, is the brain region responsible for the subjective experience of emotion. Another site, the hypothalamus, is responsible for triggering the physiological response of the emotion. The hypothalamus, amygdala, and cortex all feed back on each other in a complex alchemy of emotion and reason to coordinate the appropriate behavioral response. This information is also saved and stored by a third member of the limbic system, the hippocampus. All of these brain regions, from the higher cortex to lower limbic systems, converge in a single brain region known as the cingulate cortex.

One very important scientific aspect of this whole process is that we know the decision-making process does not work in the absence of an emotional signal from the limbic system. Left to its own devices, the consciously thinking part of the brain is incapable of making a decision. The implications of this for marketers are inescapable.



*It is in the cingulate cortex that decisions are made. Reason and emotion commingle and we are able to coordinate our emotional response to direct our actions and thoughts.*

#### EMOTIONAL INQUIRY®

Emotional Inquiry is a psychoanalysis-based technique designed to tap into memories and make it possible for consumers to access emotions that drive their behaviors. Through directed relaxation and visualization exercises,

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consumers can recall experiences and reveal underlying emotions that cannot be accessed via conventional research.

Visualization is critical to unlocking emotional drivers. Jeff Hawkins, creator of Palm and Handspring and the founder of the Redwood Neuroscience Institute, discussed this in his provocative book, (written with Sandra Blakeslee) *On Intelligence*: "The next time you tell a story, step back and consider how you can only relate one aspect of the tale at a time. You cannot tell me everything that happened all at once, no matter how quickly you talk or I listen. You need to finish one part of the story before you can move on to the next. This isn't only because spoken language is serial; written, oral and visual storytelling all convey a narrative in serial fashion. It is because the story is stored in your head in sequential fashion and can only be recalled in the same sequence. You can't remember the entire story at once. In fact, it's almost impossible to think of anything complex that isn't a series of events or thoughts" (Hawkins & Blakeslee 2004, p. 70).

You can easily experience firsthand how Emotional Inquiry works right now, as you read this. Follow these steps as described: First, think about a time and place when you were very relaxed. Close your eyes so you can see it better. In your mind's eye, go to that time and place. Now, scan the scene very slowly from left to right and describe what you are seeing. Notice all the little details. Who is there with you? What time of day is it? What colors do you see? What is the light like? What are you thinking about? What are you feeling?

Now, did you go to the beach or some body of water, as we see most of the population do in our research? This is because the desire to be near water is very primal human behavior and a clear indication how this research can powerfully tap into underlying emotional drivers.

#### FINDING BRAND BLINK

Emotional Inquiry reveals the elements that create a brand or a blink experience. The directed visualizations of the experiences that first encoded the emotion in a person's memory banks are essential. The visualizations unlock the memories, the emotions, and the feelings that influence people's behavior when faced with a similar experience. For the purpose of brand research, imperfect recall is not an issue. We are simply trying to uncover how the subject feels about a particular experience related to the brand because those feelings drive his or her behavior.

We discover the specific things that actually cause an emotional response related to blink or brand experiences. The sound of your mother's voice, a picture of your grandmother's house, the memory of the loss of a loved one, the aroma of a favorite food, and millions of other experiences trigger emotional responses.

We also explore the deeper drivers of the emotion and how they trigger behaviors that make up the landscape of all of our psychological experiences. Revealing these emotional responses, common to most people, provides the insights into what a brand must say and do to succeed.

Brandtrust Emotional Inquiry has shown many times that memories and emotions, the elements of blink, can be uncovered. There are millions of memories and their corresponding emotional responses stored in the synapses of our brains that are rarely used. Things that haven't been thought of for years can be brought to the surface so we can better understand the emotional needs and barriers of consumers.

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## EMOTION AND TRUST

Quite simply, business is built on trust. Making and keeping promises builds trust. Trust is among the most basic of human emotions. Understanding the real nature of consumer emotions is fundamental to success.

Brandtrust specializes in helping our clients understand the emotional factors that drive consumer decisions, create trust in the marketplace, and engage employees in the workplace.

## SOME QUESTIONS TYPICALLY ANSWERED WITH BRANDTRUST EMOTIONAL INQUIRY

How do consumers feel about our brand? How do they feel about our competitors' brands?

Why do consumers choose one brand instead of another?

What is the best and most effective way to position our brand?

How can we build customer loyalty, and what dimensions of loyalty matter most?

Should we be advertising and what should we be saying?

How can we break through advertising clutter?

How can we determine what aspects of our brand are motivating to our customers?

What are the emotional "drivers" we can tap to attract new customers?

How can we position our brand to clearly differentiate it from others?

How can we realize higher margins on the basis of emotional benefits?

How can we measure and improve the effectiveness of our branding efforts?

How can we enhance our customers' experiences so they do business with us more often?