INTRODUCTION

The essential goal of marketing research is to discover and understand buyer perceptions and behaviors related to products and brands. Marketing researchers are typically mindful of the explicit need to develop these understandings in an objective and unbiased manner. This premise is fundamental and universal to accepted and commonly practiced consumer marketing research methodologies.

A number of scientific studies in cognitive science, neuroscience, social science, psychology and other disciplines have revealed important realizations in understanding human behavior. These studies confirm human behavior is largely driven by emotions and motivations that arise in a nonconscious manner. This creates a realization that most decisions—including which products or brands they prefer—occur outside of the buyer's conscious awareness.

There is also a considerable body of social cognition research that demonstrates it is possible to influence or "prime" consumers' nonconscious perceptions, beliefs, and actions through subtle and unintentional measures. Academic and scientific literature is rife with findings related to the research implications of “priming,” suggesting that even the research process itself has the potential to influence the respondents’ responses and behavior (Bless, Strack and Schwarz, 1993).

Awareness and informed discussion of nonconscious processing and “priming” are rarely found in professional or academic marketing research literature. There is more scientific study relevant to consumer behavior and the subtle nuances of nonconscious mental processing outside the field of consumer marketing research than inside the industry (Zaltman, 2000). This raises a critical question regarding the level of awareness and concern for the consequences of nonconscious processes and priming that may inadvertently influence consumer responses to marketing research.

This review will endeavor to interpret a wide selection of work on nonconscious processes and priming and apply it to the field of consumer marketing research. The goal is to stimulate an increased realization of the implications of nonconscious and priming phenomena for all consumer marketing researchers. This review will begin with an overview of the critical aspects of nonconscious processing and its interrelationship with priming. Numerous areas of study with emphasis and relevance to consumer marketing research are considered. Finally, this review will conclude with a discussion of the implications for consumer marketing researchers who may unintentionally and inadvertently influence consumer respondents and therefore the outcomes of consumer marketing research.

NONCONSCIOUS MENTAL PROCESSES

The answers consumer-marketing researchers seek reside only one place—inside the human mind. Thus, psychology and consumer research should logically rely on the same methodologies and procedures to reveal the root causes of human behavior and motivations. In fact, both disciplines do utilize extensively similar techniques that involve “self-reports of attitudes, stereotypes and other beliefs, preferences, values, goals and motives” (Kihlstrom, 2004, p. 195). These standardized cognitive techniques have been utilized for decades under the assumption that “people were aware of their attitudes, beliefs, and values that guided their behavior, and that they would be willing to reveal them if asked appropriately” (Kihlstrom, 2004, p. 195).

Yet, an increasing body of science confirms nonconscious mental processes govern human behavior and that a large portion of decision-making happens outside of conscious awareness (e.g. Bargh, 2002; Hassin, Uleman and Bargh, 2005, p. 3; Zaltman, 2000). “According to most estimates, about 95 percent of thought, emotion, and learning occur in the unconscious mind—that is, without our awareness” (Zaltman, 2003, P. 40).

Consumers do not realize these automatic responses and are unable to articulate them. The most willing research respondent cannot reveal why they do what they do regardless of how much they try. (Chartrand, 2005). The best a respondent can offer is a cognitive rationalization of what they believe or sense to be a correct response (Bless, Strack and Schwarz, 1993).

Consumers are also well equipped for nonconscious deceit without any awareness or the associated guilt that might necessarily accompany a conscious falsification. Researchers Nisbett and Wilson demonstrated consumers unwittingly gave misleading answers based on social conventions, ideas about what they believed to be “right answers,” and outright guesses (Wilson, 2002, p. 168). “In other words, the inner workings of what they believe or sense to be a correct response (Bless, Strack and Schwarz, 1993).

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Research studies examining nonconscious phenomena, over the past decade, have explored various social aspects including attitude formation (Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell & Kardes, 1986), emotion (Berridge & Winkielman, 2003), goal pursuit (Chartrand & Bargh, 1996, 2002), perception (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994), and others. This research illuminates the realities and limitations of a human’s conscious capacity and suggests, by necessity, most psychological life must occur automatically and outside of conscious awareness (Machin & Fitzsimmons, 2005, p 10). There is simply too much information to process otherwise. Many researchers conclude conscious processing plays a role only 5 percent of the time (Baumeister, 1998).

Even decision behavioral researchers are coming to the realization their long held assumption—that behavior is deliberative—is not even correct 5 percent of the time (Baumeister, 1998). Increasingly, scientific studies conclude it is possible to influence and prime consumer respondents in many subtle ways that will nonconsciously bias their subsequent responses. “Primming occurs when attention to some stimulus increases the saliency of a category, attribute, identity or goal, which in turn increases the likelihood it will be used when judging a subsequently encountered stimulus” (Machin & Fitzsimmons, 2005, p 9). As we have seen in the nonconscious processing discussion, there is a lot going on outside of a consumer’s conscious awareness. This reality makes the priming phenomenon even more likely to happen in a nonconscious and unaware manner. Clearly, information or experience, provided at any point in the research, has the distinct potential to unintentionally and unconsciously influence the responses that follow. Obviously, this has profound implications for consumer-marketing research.

Certain aspects of consumer-marketing research may be compromised even by the unintended influences of the researcher (Rosenthal, 1966, 1969). A particular gesture, look or word choice can all be interpreted nonconsciously and used as cues to frame subsequent belief (Kruglanski, 1975). Subjects are motivated to look for situational cues that provide them with some direction into what the researcher is looking for because they wish to be affirmed as “good subjects” who answered the questions correctly.

Primming is so subtle and nonconscious a researcher’s respondent may be influenced or biased because of his or her own previous answers (Feldman & Lynch, 1988). For example, a consumer-marketing research subject might prime herself if the researcher inquires about which desert is her family’s favorite and later asks which desert she feels is easiest to make. The very sequence of the questions can easily cause her to misconstrue her answer because a favored desert has most recently appeared in her implicit thought patterns.

Another study primed research subjects with a set of puzzles that contained the names of cars. Subsequently, the cars were tested for preferences of various features and attributes. Price was one of the primed factors. Honda Accord and another more ambiguous brand were tested for price judgments. After priming, the ambiguous brand received higher price perceptions than the Honda Accord even though respondents were aware of quality and price references for the better-known brand (Finlay, Marmurek and Morton, 2005).

Dr. Colleen Seifert, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, tested a group of college students with a set of moderately difficult questions. The students were unable to answer about one third of the questions. Unknown to the students, Seifert prepared a list of words (containing hints to the unanswerable questions) and nonsensical words for a seemingly unrelated task in which she asked the students to determine whether a listed item was a word or not. The following day Seifert administrated the test again with the same unanswerable questions and found that the priming exercise doubled the student’s ability to answer the questions. This study indicates a mere exposure to words, outside of a person’s awareness, is often sufficient to alter or influence one’s responses (Seifert, Meyer, Davidson, Patalano, and Yank, 1996).

CONSUMER-MARKETING RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the literature indicates that a host of subtle, or not so subtle, aspects of environment, context, semantics, sequencing and other variables can and do influence or prime consumer-marketing research subjects. “Nearly all forms of social representation can be primed, it seems—activated incidentally or unobtrusively in one context, to influence what comes next without the person’s awareness of this influence (Bargh, 2006).” This growing realization raises concerns that approaches to consumer marketing research, naïve to nonconscious mental processes and priming effects, are essentially flawed. A person is not consciously aware of all the emotions and feelings that are driving their ultimate behavior and thus cannot articulate those feelings when asked. “If you want to know what people can tell you, you should ask them. If you want to know what people cannot tell you, unfortunately, subtle questionnaire items, like projective techniques, would appear risky choices for the assessment of unconscious mental states” (Kihlstrom, 2004).

Secondly, the phenomenon of “priming” suggests the simple, yet essential, act of posing a question to a research subject may subconsciously provoke their mental processes into “what’s the right answer” mode. Consequently, the findings reflect what the respondents thought would be the correct answer and fail to reveal the actual reasons behind their feelings, preferences and behaviors.

Although these issues are widely understood in the academic and research worlds, many marketers and marketing researchers in the business community appear to be either uninformed or unconcerned about priming and unaware that the findings of pervasive research techniques may lead them astray. The exploration and discussion of priming effects are practically ubiquitous in the social psychological literature and largely nonexistent in the professional consumer-marketing literature. This may be attributable to a lack of awareness or a possible over dependence on conventional consumer-marketing research techniques that require consumers to focus on the questions researchers choose to ask rather than probes designed to reveal their deeper nonconscious minds. Researchers may harbor biases for analysis tools and data due to training and business mentality. Although these approaches are useful, research may be failing to gain the deeper insights that actually motivate and drive consumer behavior, choices and preferences for products and brands.


References


Marketers need to uncover the subconscious emotional motivators that are not apparent with more superficial market research methods.

REFERENCES (continued)


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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’ experience so they do business with us more often?

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