The conflict of the conscious and unconscious mind

Researchers assume respondents are answering honestly but human behaviour is complex and often unconscious, so to better connect with consumers, avoid over-reliance on conscious assessment.

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Most marketing research relies on assessing consumers’ conscious reactions to marketing ideas, ads, etc. through methods like questionnaires, surveys, and focus groups. It also often relies on evidence that the message was attended to by assessing recall of ad content.

One assumption these researchers make is that respondents can, and will, honestly tell you how they feel and how they will behave towards a product. Another assumption is that if the ad has been attended to and consciously processed, it will be effective.

The problem is that no matter how well this research is done, it often does not successfully predict consumer behaviour. For example, political focus groups and surveys invariably find that voters hate negative ads. And then it becomes clear that attack ads and negative campaigns work. CNN and Good Morning America aired studies showing this back in 2008. Marketers may recall the launch of ‘New Coke’, which passed all the research and taste tests and then resulted in consumer anger and backlash. How can this be explained?

The answer is that conscious processes only get at part of the picture. Cognitive science, neuroscience, and psychological science have been showing this for more than 20 years, but marketers are just getting around to dealing with these findings. One major insight is that a great deal (not all) of our mental functioning is unconscious. So asking people what they think, how they feel, and what they remember is only part of the picture. We need to know what is going on outside of awareness as well.

What do we know about these unconscious processes? We seem to know two things pretty clearly. First, the mind, like the brain, is organised in terms of networks of associations. This means our thinking processes do not follow a logical, linear path; instead, they are organised in terms of how they are connected associatively. Marketers know this intuitively. That’s why they have mascots and taglines like the Geico Gecko and ‘Just Do It’. The second thing we know is that we are emotional beings and our first reaction to anything is emotional. This then colours our later reactions. Emotion trumps rationality. Go back to New Coke – the reaction to the campaign was not logical, rational, thoughtful, or even sensible; it was emotional and immediate.

Another insight provided by science concerns the relationship between conscious and unconscious processes, as well as what kinds of behaviour each predicts. Conscious and unconscious processes need not agree. In fact, they are independent of one another. In statistical terms, they are orthogonal. They may agree; they may disagree. Conscious and unconscious processes are both important but predict different kinds of behaviour. Conscious processes predict behaviour in the immediate situation, when we are reflecting on what we ought to do. A value or motive must be kept in mind consciously if it is to affect what a consumer does. Unconscious processes predict spontaneous and long-term behaviour. This means that conflict is part and parcel of the consumer’s mind. We should not expect consistency but we should be able to predict when one process is likely to hold sway and when the other will.

In the spring of 2013, we conducted a study with these points in mind. The main part of the study concerned conscious and unconscious values and was carried out in three countries/cultures (the US, China and Brazil). We assessed the associative strengths of major values in each country. The other part of the study concerned brands and was only conducted in the US. Here, we looked at conscious and unconscious emotional reactions to major brands.

The values study was conducted online with about 900 adult (18+) respondents in the US, Brazil and China (about 300 in each country) participating. We employed a representative sample in the US and A, B, and C social classes in China and Brazil. We used self-report surveys to measure respondents’ conscious values. We employed an implicit test, based on reaction time, to assess their unconscious values. The values assessed were taken from the Schwartz’s Circumplex model of values, a well-researched, reliable and valid measure of values that has been used cross-culturally in the past. The study took about 15 minutes to complete.

Results demonstrated dissociations between conscious and unconscious processes. That is, some values that were important consciously were relatively unimportant unconsciously and vice versa. This was in line with our hypotheses, based on current work on conscious and unconscious processes. The results differed to some degree across cultures, but here we focus on those conscious and unconscious values that showed relative consistency across the three cultures. Let us call these ‘global values’. The number-one global value consciously was ‘Meaning in Life’.
Unconsciously, however, this was a relatively low level value. The number one global value unconsciously was ‘Sexual Fulfilment’. But consciously it was middling. People deny that sex moves them in ads at the same time as it shows powerful effects. The denial refers to conscious values. But unconsciously nothing moves us like sex.

The number-two global conscious value was ‘Choosing your own path’. Again, this was not as powerful unconsciously. The number-two unconscious global value was, instead, ‘Honouring Tradition’, which did not register as strongly unconsciously. We value thinking for ourselves at the same time as we value following social prescriptions and proscriptions. Independence of thought is how we consciously see ourselves but we feel a strong pull unconsciously to conform.

The Emotional Reactions to Brands study was conducted at the same time as the values study but only using the sample from the US. About 300 individuals were examined. Here, instead of looking at associative strength, we examined conscious and unconscious emotional reactions. We looked at conscious reactions by asking people how they felt about major brands. Unconscious reactions were assessed through a method termed implicit priming. Respondents were presented with brand logos too quickly to be responded to cognitively, but slowly enough for the emotional part of the brain to react. Remember, emotional reactions are much quicker and immediate than cognitive reactions. Through this method, we found that brands, too, elicit very different reactions consciously and unconsciously. Tech leaders, like Google and Apple, for example, were very strongly liked consciously but viewed far less favourably unconsciously. In the US, Facebook and the National Enquirer were more liked unconsciously than consciously (‘guilty pleasure’ brands?). Parenthetically, Amazon was viewed highly favourably both consciously and unconsciously. This brand is a ‘winner’ at any level of processing. Figure 1 depicts the results of this study.

The values study indicated that conscious and unconscious values differ. The emotional reactions study indicated that conscious and unconscious valuations of major brands differ. Both sets of results are in line with current research on the dissociation between conscious and unconscious processes. So, these data show that both kinds of processes need to be assessed to obtain a complete picture of consumers’ mindsets. Further, rather than expecting consumers to behave consistently, we should expect contradiction and paradox to be the norm. Conflict is part of the human condition.

Further data collected by us indicate this conflict does not seem to bother the modern consumer overly. We found the following:

- Individualistic: 60% of consumers agree that ‘people should be free to marry, live and work however they want.’
- Empowered: 60% agree that ‘it’s up to me to get what I want in life’.
- Self-Directed: 51% agree that ‘success is about how you see yourself, not how other people think of you’.
- Ageless: 55% agree that ‘my age doesn’t define me; it’s not central to who I am’.
- Evolving: 53% agree that ‘my identity – who I really am – is a work in progress’.

These results suggest to us that a global mainstream exists. These individuals are not defined by conformity to demographic or lifestyle norms, but rather by an embracing of their individuality. Marketers are not connecting very well with these people, possibly because of their overreliance on conscious assessment and their assumptions of a rational, consistent consumer. Only 29% of respondents in the three countries we examined ‘approve of the ways marketers and advertisers portray people like me’. Just 11% in the US approved of most marketing approaches.

Three key implications for marketers emerge from these data: marketers and researchers who rely solely on traditional surveys and focus groups are only getting part of the story; marketers typically see target audiences as uniform segments and expect them to behave in consistent ways but consumers are much more complex; marketers tend to believe that ‘single-mindedness’ is the foundation of all good branding. This research shows consumers are not singular today so, rather than assume a rational, single-minded consumer, marketers need to embrace conflict and tension.

We are obviously in the early stages of tapping into the unconscious and still have many unanswered questions. Is there a ‘hidden’ (unconscious) side of brand equity that is completely unexplored? Can this new side of brand equity help us unlock brands’ hidden vulnerabilities (e.g. the relatively unconscious weakness of brands like Google and Starbucks) and/or hidden potential (e.g. the relatively unconscious strength of brands like Exxon and Facebook)? Future research ought to examine these issues.