

Bad Science?

A big reason for poor advice is poor evidence.

There are lots of ways in which evidence can be poor, it can be badly collected, badly interpreted, poorly observed or biased. This last point, bias, is very often driven by someone having a technique or product – usually expensive – that they wish to sell you – and which they will provide evidence for using a biased argument. There are many kinds of bias, but the one most found in our field is the elevation of one measure above all others as proof of a consumer decision.

Marketing, market research and journalism are full of bias. I expect the Daily Mail to put forward 'evidence' that the country is full of benefits scroungers, even though the DWP – the experts in this field - estimates that around 3% of welfare benefits are claimed fraudulently while the general population thinks that 37% are, in part driven by the copy and biased editorial of the Mail.

I was reading a 'Science Update' from a market research agency the other day. It was centred on the idea that attention is, in itself, a factor in your purchasing decisions. For five pages the Update provides evidence of the fact that the more attention you pay to something the more you are likely to buy it. Here is a piece from it:

"For these studies, test subjects were asked to look at products on shelves and decide on one product. Whilst doing this, their eye movements were recorded. The results are very clear: For every millisecond longer that a product is looked at, purchase probability increases by 0.2 per cent. **Therefore, if a product is looked at for 0.5 seconds longer than a competing product, this increases purchase probability by 100 per cent.**

The influence of stopping power or attention increases under the following conditions: 1. Pressure of time (the less time available, the greater the influence of attention), 2. Overload (the more diversion, the greater the influence) and 3. low brand dominance (if there is no clear preference, the influence of attention is even greater)."

This is hardly surprising, the more interested you are in something, the more likely you are to buy it. **The really interesting fact is 'what is driving that attention'?** The Update concludes that we should optimise our influence on the purchasing decision by *maximising the stopping power of a design* or display because *attention plays an active role in constructing decisions*. Is that the best advice based on the fact that attention is correlated with purchase?

I go shopping quite a lot, yet hardly ever find myself in a purchase situation where I don't have an intention, an inclination, an idea, a recommendation, a memory or a brand association influencing my behaviour. I would say that 95% of the time, I have some 'Top Down' factors (see below) influencing my choices.

Even in the experimental situation reported in the Update, what transpires is that if other stuff is

going on, like time-pressure, overload or low brand dominance – in other words, if you are preoccupied hurried or distracted - then what you notice most you are most likely to buy. Really? We've all picked up stuff in a rush because it stood out and it hasn't been quite what we wanted. This hurry or overload or is most likely to dominate when you don't have another reason or factor influencing your decision. Most things that are bought without much thought are done so using heuristics or short cuts, based on things like familiarity, time available, affect & availability.

So the real conclusion is: 'when all other things are equal *or not the centre of attention*, then stopping power is quite influential'.

It is not until Page 7 in our 'Science Update' that we meet the idea that there is more than one type of attention. What I would call attention from my inner world (my brain, with its thoughts, feelings, perceptual and social biases and values) they call 'Top Down' attention, while the attention driven by the stimulus of packaging and presentation they call 'Bottom Up' attention. Suddenly, which is the chicken and which the egg becomes important. Is my Top Down mechanism driving my attention or my Bottom Up bit? Because we don't have any idea of the effects of 'stopping power' on Top Down decisions.

The idea that we should maximise 'stopping power' – an element of 'Bottom Up' attention is just plain wrong in many cases. That is because the stimulus created by a pack is only one factor affecting the final percept we form about a product and whether to buy it. There are many other important Top Down influences from our inner world too:

- What will this product say about my social standing/status? Is it cool? Acceptable? Status enhancing/diminishing or neutral? Do I care?
- What will other people – both those outside and inside me (e.g. my mum and dad) think if I buy this product?
- What might I have to sacrifice or substitute in order to have this product. What budgetary or self-esteem impact might it have?
- What does my own value system have to say about an association with this product? Is it consistent with my preferred picture of myself? Or not? Or neutral? If its out of tune with my values how will I justify or sublimate this?
- Do I wish to portray or consider myself a discerning buyer in this sector. If so, what are the premium cues here? Should I avoid brash, bright or vulgar cues? I stopped shopping at Tesco because there was so much 'stopping power' it did my head in!

However by the time we get to the idea that attention is multidimensional, we may have been seduced by the graphs and charts embedded in the presentation. That's where the bad science

comes in. The persuasive power of 'evidence based' reasoning is so strong that just planting a few graphs on a page looks like 'evidence'. But evidence of what?

In real life, getting noticed is only part of the game: it's the meaning driving & flowing from that noticing that will play the biggest role in motivating or inhibiting purchase. Freud and many others have pointed out that conflicts and defences play a huge part in guiding our perceptions and choices. We will not even see things that alert our defence mechanisms, just as we will notice things that connect with our significant figures and memories. Furthermore, just being noticeable is a risky tactic if your product is loaded with uncomfortable social messages like condoms, piles cream or saturated fat. Why do you think the %fat, sugar and other nutritional information is so often hidden in the small print? Now that would have stopping power, "90% fat+sugar, 10% water" in big bold letters. But would you buy it?

You might well spend hundreds of thousands optimising your 'stopping power' but if buying your pack or product is socially disabling or ambivalent, people may still walk away from your powerful pack. In many situations people are more influenced by what other people including the 'judges' inside their head say than they are by stopping power.

It isn't that there is anything wrong with thinking about the Stopping Power of your product: it is simply the assumption that this should be maximised in order to increase sales – and that putting a lot of money, time & effort into measuring this by eye-movement style technologies is worthwhile - that is arguable.

I have no doubt that the publishers of the Science Update are a good, clever and leading-edge agency - and if challenged on this science - will backtrack and say that, of course, other forms of evidence are important and that these are included in their (by now) *very* expensive solution.

Methinks they might protest too much!