

Creative Development Research Techniques

This post is about the personal internal tracks that brands leave in our minds and how to uncover these. I aim to answer this question:

'If advertising is largely processed unconsciously and may weave its effects outside of our awareness, what can we do to explore this in qualitative sessions?'

For compelling evidence of this assertion, see ['Seducing the Subconscious'](#) by Robert Heath

As our starting place, we can assume that everyone has a set of thoughts and feelings about lots of brands and they may be unaware of these, or how they acquired them.

Let's start with the brand elements people are conscious of. These are called to mind from memory which may be activated by events in your outer or inner world. For example, as you walk down the road you see a pack of Persil on a hoarding, this triggers a memory of your mother and is accompanied by a set of associations and feelings triggered by an inner representation of mum and the brand. You may remember a Persil commercial, probably not. But you will almost certainly experience a feeling of some kind, which could be said to be an embedded brand association.

Whether we know a brand or not, **it is *not* always present in our mind**. It may be there, somewhere, but is not always accessible. This is what we call a **State Dependent Memory**. Think of it like driving a car, you may know how to do it really well, but that knowledge is only triggered when you are sitting at the wheel and the state of readiness to drive calls your capabilities to the foreground. Again, there is likely to be a feeling, perhaps more than one, triggered by the anticipation of driving. That is your driving association and you may be blind to it until you are in the driving seat.

So even for brands we know well, they are inactive in consciousness most of the time, our working memory simply is not large enough to keep them all available –besides it would take up much processing space that we might need for other operations. And it would be highly annoying too!

This means that to explore brands, whether or not people have conscious recall of them, **we need to establish a base-line of associations and feelings before they see any new communications or stimuli**. The question is: 'is the brand in there, in this person? If so, what exactly is in there?' That will influence how they react to any new information about the brand.

Most researchers pay too little attention to this, the existing 'tracks' or traces of the brand in our inner world and how to access them. The problem this creates is that if you try out some new stimulus before you have mapped the existing tracks you don't know whether the response is to the new stuff or the old. But if you establish that baseline, you will.

We all have a set of tracks or traces of brands and we must start our work by bringing these to the

surface as best we can. Here are four techniques to use at the start of qualitative sessions to facilitate this:

Free associations: you give people the brand name and ask them to write individually for 5 minutes without editing any thoughts or feelings that come to mind.

Quick attributions: you give people a set of attributes, some of which may apply to the brand while others don't. You ask them to put a check-mark quickly, without thinking too much, against those that apply to the brand. You can do this in a more sophisticated way by using the same list of attributes for several competitive brands and drawing a map of the results.

Chinese Portraits: here we use metaphor to bring to life characteristics of a brand. "If Persil were a country, what country would it be?" Ask everyone (if it's a group) to write down their answer and then, in a go-round, listen to all the answers and gently question people about their choices. Or you can ask the rest of the group to explain each choice and by so doing build the group's associative framework for the brand.

Recognition: before you start in on new material, show a sample of historical ads for the brand you are exploring. Just ask people if they recognise any of them. If they do, this is a much more reliable evidence of a brand 'track or trace' than recall. Then ask people what they recognised/what prompted their recognition, and any feelings they had when they recognised the advertising.

Here are four pieces of detective work you should do before you expose new work. If you do them you will have a solid, evidence based picture of respondents associations arising from the brand. Then you have a much firmer starting place for the effects on this picture of new information – new propositions, variants, promotions, packaging, commercials. Even if you don't do them all in every research session, you can do one of them in each new session and aggregate the results. I recommend that you start a creative development study by uncovering these baselines.