

SHOP TILL WE DROP

WHY WE CONSUME

14

"Economics are the method. The object is to change the heart and soul."

MARGARET THATCHER ¹

As we have seen, where once consumption was synonymous with poor management and wastefulness, over the course of the industrial revolution, buying things became associated with productive social activity in a market economy. To keep the wheels of industry going and to maintain people's jobs, particularly during recessionary times, governments now encourage us to take any money we might have from under the mattress and spend it generously. Buying is not only essential to keep manufacturers, distributors and salespeople in business, it is also co-dependent on the activities of marketing and advertising machines – products are marketed and advertised so that we will buy them, our spending then funds more marketing and advertising. And in the process, what we really want, or what others want us to want, seems to become more important than what we really need or what the planet can sustain.

And in a world of plenty, there seems to be no limit to what we can purchase, which fits our Neolithic brains very well. Our evolutionary origins tilt us towards valuing the present more than the future, responding to immediate rather than deferred gains. When times and circumstances were good, we gathered resources and reproduced. If we put off opportunities to eat, we couldn't be sure the food would still be there later on, especially if the prospects for the future were uncertain. So if what we want is available, we should get it now. Remember the Celtic Tiger?

As a committed environmentalist, I felt it was my duty to set an example and help lead everyone into a more sustainable future - by growing our own food, eating our animals, knitting jumpers, weaving rugs and even making our soap and face cream and then telling everyone about it.

That was then and this is now. Quentin and I have separated, our neighbours are still shopping, and the message from the struggling local shops is, please shop more. Somewhere along the way, I relented (have I sold out?) and now have a nice stash of fashion boots (too many to admit to), and a bulging wardrobe of clothes. And I don't fret so much about driving long distances and buying our son plastic football shirts...I also dye my hair (that one took a lot of soul-searching), and use paper towels (quite a revelation to see how they tackle greasy pans) and the odd pack of tissues.

The question is - are we right to simply assume that people just need to be encouraged, cajoled or harangued into shopping less? Are books like *Enough*² or *The Story of Stuff*³ (and Annie Leonard's

¹ <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475>

² John Naish (2008) *Enough- breaking free from the world of more*

³ Annie Leonard (2010) *The Story of Stuff-how our obsession with stuff is thrashing the planet, our communities, and our health-and a vision for change*

popular internet films⁴) changing the consumption habits of the masses? Do ethical experiments like those described in the following books (all very enjoyable reads for us environmentalists) influence other people's behaviour?

A Life Stripped Bare-my year trying to live ethically by journalist Leo Hickman

Not Buying It - my year without shopping by Judith Levine

Plenty-eating locally on the 100 mile diet by Alisa Smith & J.B. Mackinnon

Crap at the Environment-a year in the life of one man trying to save the planet by comedian Mark Watson

A Year Without "Made in China"-one family's true life adventure in the global economy by Sara Bongiorni

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle-our year of seasonal eating by author Barbara Kingsolver.

Notwithstanding the fact that shopping, and consuming in general, is the bedrock of our capitalist system, and an increasing number of people now wonder if the whole ballpark needs to be changed (but that is a whole other story), do the benefits of shopping far outweigh any possible future planetary downside? In other words, are we wasting our breath?

It's time to understand why we shop, and to look from the inside out rather than the outside in.

SHOPPING AND EVOLUTION

Evolutionary psychologist, Geoffrey Miller,⁵ believes that all human brains have a deep and abiding interest in two sets of evolutionary goals: attaining higher social and sexual status and striving for better survival and parental prospects.

As we have seen in Article 6, our minds evolved not purely as survival machines, but also as courtship machines. Therefore, we want to display certain physical traits such as health, fertility and beauty; personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to novelty; and cognitive traits such as general intelligence.

And we consume and buy products in an effort to highlight these virtues, and subconsciously, to attract respect, love and support from friends, family and allies and to bring us status when others see that we own them. We may be semi-aware of our efforts to show off but we are blind to our deeper biological yearnings.

Consumer culture theory posits that people don't just buy things that *match* their own identities, they buy to *create* and *display* who and what they are, with a view to impressing others, fitting in and finding a mate. So-called "positional goods", like the sports car, can help rank us socially and help attract potential partners.

The 2007 report; *Positive Energy*, echoes this, saying that our motivation to beat competition, and to attract a mate, leads us to adopt display behaviours, and to establish social status, since a high position within a social hierarchy in evolutionary terms corresponds to improved access to financial, physical, sexual, social and informational resources, which in turn will help protect our individual long-term interests and those of our children.⁶

Vladas Griskevicius, Josh Tybur et al carried out a series of four experiments to see how people's consumption decisions might shift as the potential mating benefits of costly signalling became more salient.⁷ College students were randomly assigned to one of two conditions - "mating" or "non mating".

⁴ <http://www.storyofstuff.org/>

⁵ Geoffrey Miller (2009) *Spent-sex, evolution and consumer behaviour*

⁶ S. Retallack, T. Lawrence & M. Lockwood (2007) *Positive Energy*; p. 121

⁷ *Blatant Benevolence and Conspicuous Consumption: When Romantic Motives Elicit Strategic Costly Signals* in Geoffrey Miller (2009) *Spent-sex, evolution and consumer behaviour*; p. 106/9

The mating subjects looked at three photos of attractive people of the opposite sex on a computer screen. They then picked which one they thought was most desirable, and spent a few more minutes writing about an ideal first date with that person. The non mating subjects looked at a street scene photo and spent the same amount of time writing about the ideal weather for walking around and looking at the buildings it featured. Then, all the subjects were asked to imagine that they had a modest windfall of money (such as a lottery win of a few thousand dollars), and to choose which of several conspicuous luxuries they would want to buy (such as a new watch, European holiday, or a new car) as opposed to saving money in a bank account. They were then asked to imagine that they had some extra time available per week, and were asked to choose how many hours they would spend volunteering (such as working in a homeless shelter or helping at a children's hospital). The results were dramatic: men in the mating condition said they would spend more money than men in the non-mating condition. But there was no mating effect on women's consumption decisions. On the other hand, women in the mating condition said they would spend much more time volunteering than women in the non-mating condition. But there was no mating effect on men's volunteering.

Over the course of their experiments, the authors were able to show that inducing mating goals in men increased their willingness to spend on conspicuous luxuries but not on basic necessities. In women, mating goals boosted public - but not private - helping. Although mating motivation did not generally inspire helping in men, it did induce more helpfulness in contexts in which they could display heroism or dominance. Conversely, although mating motivation did not lead women to conspicuously consume, it did lead women to spend more publicly on helpful causes.

So, whether we're all out to find a mate or not, it would appear that most of us are driven in some way by pressures to live up to, or improve our perceived social status, the prestige attached to our position in society, or to a rank we hold within a certain group, such as the family, workplace or community.

As we have seen from the chapter on peer-pressure, most of us are also bound by the social and cultural norms of our "group". Status and social norms are inextricably linked.

Cultures can also affect consumption by influencing perceptions of what is a necessity versus a luxury. This boundary can shift over time. For instance, in 1996, 32% of people in the U.S. thought that a microwave was a necessity, whereas in 2006, 68% believed this.⁸ These perceived needs vary across different demographic groups. In particular, the more income a person has the more likely he or she will view the items examined in the survey (clothes dryers, home and car air-conditioning, microwaves, television sets, etc.) as necessities.

Culture can also create real needs. Products that were once luxuries, such as cars, have become necessities for many people because human settlements have developed in ways that make it very difficult to engage in necessary activities, such as getting food and employment, without a car.

Laurie Michaelis⁹ says that consumption means different things to different people, and can be explained in a wide variety of ways;

- Much of our consumption is shaped by habits, norms and routines
- Our consumption choices help us to divide the world into what is "allowed", "good" and "desirable", and what is not.
- It may also be the key to social participation and acceptance, sense of belonging, and role definition
- Consumption can be a displacement activity - used to avoid experiencing negative feelings or a lack of purpose in life. It can be part of fantasy, dreaming, desire and the pursuit of happiness, and can help to symbolise our pursuit of the perfect life

⁸ Pew Research Center, 2006

⁹ S. Moser & L. Dilling (Eds.) (2007) *Creating a Climate for Change*; p. 251-3

- Consumption can play a role in political and social discourse - forming an expression of our individual and collective values, ethics and worldviews
- And it can be a way of establishing and expressing our individual and collective identities – our understandings of who we are and our purpose in life.

Michaelis points out that one of the strongest messages emerging from research is that consumption and lifestyles are shaped more by people collectively than individually. Consumers often feel they have no choice, that they are “locked in” to their consumption patterns.

Research carried out by Vldas Griskevicius, Josh Tybur, and Bram Van den Bergh¹⁰ in 2010, explored the evolutionary psychology of status and environmentalism.

In their first experiment, the researchers asked participants to imagine they were out shopping for a car, a household cleaner, and a dishwasher. For each of the three products, people were asked to choose between the more luxurious non-green option and an equivalently priced, but less high-performing, green option. For example, they chose between two versions of the Honda Accord, both costing \$30,000 - one was a hybrid with less luxury, power, and comfort, the other was a high performance feature-rich EX-L model with a sporty V6 engine.

Before making their choice, some of the subjects had been primed to think about status by imagining they’d just arrived for their first day at a high-powered job, where they’d been immediately impressed by the upscale lobby and well-appointed offices. When they meet their new boss, he introduces them to two other new employees. He informs them that there was a lot of competition for this job, and that in a year, one of them will move up into a fancy office, but the other would likely be out looking for a new job. In the control conditions, participants either read no story or imagined they’d been searching their house for a lost concert ticket, which they found just before they had to leave.

The results showed that thinking about status led people to be more eager to purchase environmentally friendly products. Why? The authors proposed competitive altruism theory - that conspicuous displays of altruism often function to build reputations which makes people more desirable as group members.

Vldas Griskevicius et al also carried out another piece of research and found that people who are thinking about status do not purchase green products if no one else is going to know about it. When purchasing light bulbs over the internet, for example, they selfishly choose the better features of the non-green option - when other people will know about their decisions, they go green.

Furthermore, people thinking about status did not prefer a green product if it was less expensive. That is, status motives led people to make a rather economically irrational decision, at least from a superficial perspective. When people are thinking about status, they in fact want to spend more - to demonstrate not only that they are environmentally conscious, but also that they can afford to be environmentally conscious.

That last finding might explain two economically unexpected events in the US in recent years. When tax credits for Prius cars (which have been heavily associated with Hollywood celebrity use) expired in late 2006, economic experts expected to see sales drop. But they didn’t, in fact they went up by 79%. And it might also explain another event that bewildered the experts: When Lexus introduced a new sedan that cost over \$100,000, it seemed somewhat irrational to power it with a penny-pinching hybrid engine. Yet Lexus was unable to keep up with the demand for the conspicuously environmental Lexus LS600h, which exceeded sales projections by 300%.¹¹

¹⁰ “Going Green to be Seen” in www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sex-murder-and-the-meaning-life/201002/want-show-your-wealth-and-status-buy-hybrid

¹¹ www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sex-murder-and-the-meaning-life/201002/want-show-your-wealth-and-status-buy-hybrid

People may buy products for reasons we don't expect.

Josh Lauer looks at the SUV craze in the US¹² and asks why did military ruggedness and off-road capability - rather than refined urbanity or daring speed or superior agility, for example - become prized automotive attributes during the 1980s?

He suggests that the SUV has to be seen in the context of fear of crime and risk management, and that the notions of safety and space these vehicles offer, are not just about road safety and interior cargo space, but also about personal safety, and social space, including the ability to traverse the most inhospitable terrain to get away from the hazards of modern civilization. Lack of trust in the police force or its ability to control crime has led to what the theorists call "the individualization of social risk" - people take their own measures to ensure their family's personal safety.

The SUV is a large, intimidating vehicle that occupies high ground and is heavily fortified. It's popularity reflects underlying American attitudes toward crime, random violence, and the importance of defended personal space. For similar reasons, despite its image as a macho, masculine vehicle, growing numbers of women also opted for SUVs over cars.

SHOPPING AND INDUSTRY

We also shop because companies do all they can to make us. Branding expert Martin Lindstrom¹³ explains the tactics used by big brands to hook in potential customers.

GET THEM YOUNG

Apparently, most of our adult tastes and preferences for things like food, drink, clothes, shoes, cosmetics or anything else are actually rooted in our early childhood. Lindstrom reckons that, thanks in no small part to the tricks of his trade, brand preferences can be set in stone from as early as four or five years of age. The indoctrination can even begin in the womb.

A few years ago, executives at a major chain of Asian shopping centres realised that pregnant women in their hormonal and emotional state, are fair game for "priming". The nervous anticipation of bringing another life into the world means they highly vulnerable to suggestion. So the company experimented with the unconscious power of smells and sounds. Before long, the mums to be were smelling baby powder wherever clothing was sold and the fragrance of cherry in the food and beverage areas. Soothing music from the era when those women were born (so as to evoke happy childhood memories) was drifting through the air waves. The executives were hoping this would boost sales among pregnant mothers, which it did. But the unexpected result was that a year or so into the sensory experiment, the company received letters from mothers saying that the shopping centre had had a spellbinding effect on their babies. The newborns were visibly calmer when they entered the shopping complex. After some analysis, the executives concluded that the babies had imbibed the pleasant scents and sounds while still cocooned in the safety of the womb. What a bonus, a new generation of potential shoppers had been born.

¹² *Driven to Extremes: Fear of crime and the rise of the sport utility vehicle in the United States*
http://webster.unh.edu/~jyz6/lauer_suv.pdf

¹³ *Martin Lindstrom (2012) Brandwashed-tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy; p.10-15*

It would seem that pregnant mothers are also fair game for food manufacturers. Research carried out by Josephine Todrank, PHD, shows that a pregnant mother's diet not only sensitizes the foetus to those smells and flavours, but physically changes the brain, whereby directly impacting what the infant eats and drinks in the future.¹⁴ In the US, food companies are onto that, supplying paediatricians and doctors, and consequently their pregnant patients, with tasty treats.

According to a study carried out in Minnesota and Washington State in 2007,¹⁵ 40% of 3 month old babies regularly watched television, DVDs, or videos (and don't let us think that this figure might be any different in Ireland). By 24 months, this proportion rose to 90%. The median age at which regular media exposure was introduced was 9 months. Among those who watched, the average viewing time per day rose from 1 hour per day for children younger than 12 months to more than 1.5 hours per day by 24 months. With all this media exposure and its accompanying advertising, product placement and branding, it is hardly surprising that Ronald McDonald and his golden arches have become so recognised by children the world over, even babies as young as 18 months.

In a study by Robinson et al in 2007,¹⁶ 63 children of pre-school age were asked to taste five pairs of identical foods; hamburgers, chicken nuggets, chips, milk and carrots. The first of each pair was wrapped in plain logo free packaging; the second was in a McDonald's wrapper. The children rated the tastes of the foods and drinks higher if they believed they were from McDonald's - even the carrots!

According to Juliet Schor,¹⁷ children who can recognise logos by the age of 18 months not only grow up to prefer these brands but grow up believing the brands correspond to their own personal qualities, to who they think they are. Children as young as three can feel social pressure to use the brands their friends like - that way they will be liked and they'll fit in. Which of course, as I know only too well, causes massive rows at home.

And brands are always one step ahead of regulators. To circumvent rules on advertising junk food on TV, companies are now reeling the children in through their on-line games. As kids play or share these games with their friends they unwittingly become underground ambassadors for the product.

Companies target children because the younger they connect to a brand the more likely they are to stick with it. Children's successful pester power tactics then bring in their parents.

Conversely, the habits and preferences of the parents can also rub off on the children, so it's a win-win situation - top down and bottom up.

PEDDLE PANIC AND PARANOIA

As we saw in Chapter 3, fear of something immediate and tangible raises our adrenaline and creates a primal fight or flight response. Fear is contagious and fear sells. Marketers and advertisers know that fear is a powerful persuader, and they aren't afraid to exploit it.

Despite the fact that neither swine flu nor SARS can be prevented by the use of antibacterial cleansing gels (they are mainly spread through droplets in the air), we have been driven into an antibacterial mania. Companies have worked extremely hard to make us believe that their product is the only sure-fire way to stave off grave and deadly disease. They have released an onslaught of new products, and redoubled their efforts to stress the importance of hygiene in staving off disease.

Even food companies have got in on the act. A few months after the first cases of swine flu hit, Kellogg's introduced a new variant of Rice Krispies and Cocoa Krispies loaded with "antioxidants and nutrients that

¹⁴ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/12/101201095559.htm>

¹⁵ <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=570266#qundefined>

¹⁶ <http://www.medpagetoday.com/upload/2007/8/7/792.pdf>

¹⁷ Martin Lindstrom (2012) *Brandwashed-tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy*; p. 19

help the body's immune system". The company denied there was a connection with the 'flu scare, but they nevertheless bowed to public pressure and withdrew the antioxidant enriched cereal.¹⁸

Companies are aware of people's foibles. Researchers at the University of Bath found that the fear of failure drives consumers far more than the promise of success – the promise of success tends to paralyse us, while the fear of failure spurs us on. The study found that the most powerful persuader of all was giving consumers a glimpse of some future "feared self".¹⁹

Advertisers prey on our fears of our worst selves by activating insecurities that we didn't even know we had - smelly armpits anyone?

They feed on our fears of loneliness, sexual inadequacy, not looking good, being overweight, of being different or left out, or even, in the case of women, of being attacked.

In research carried out by the University of the Basque Country,²⁰ it was proven that women worried far more than men about hurting other people (surprised, anyone?). Men, by contrast, were more self-centred, with their most guilt-inducing experiences simply involving eating or drinking too much, rather than directly affecting someone else. Other scenarios which left women feeling gutted included forgetting a friend's birthday, renegeing on a promise to help someone you love and not stepping in to stop someone from being bullied.

Marketers and advertisers are on to that too.

FEED OFF OUR CRAVINGS

Companies know about our cravings, though they might be loath to admit it. Craving is why we are drawn to that packet of crisps or chocolate bar at midnight, why we wait till the child is in school to wolf into the ice-cream. While cravings seem to come from nowhere, in reality they are often triggered by some physical or emotional cue, often deliberately placed before us by a cunning advertiser. Apparently, Coca-Cola has worked out just how many bubbles they need to put in their print ads to awaken our taste buds.²¹ The snap of a can opening or the sizzle of those sausages are not put into a commercial for nothing.

SELL SEX

And then there's sex in advertising. In general, women tend to be more easily persuaded by ads that are more romantic than sexual, with an emphasis on love, commitment and relationship. Men are titillated by sexual innuendo and near naked women draped over cars, but the jury is out on whether this actually results in sales. What is far more likely is that images of scantily clad, well proportioned people, whether male or female, remind us of who we want to be or to be with - whereby feeding our hopes and dreams.

VANITY SIZING

What about vanity sizing in women's (and apparently men's) clothing? There is a clear reason why I no longer know what size I am. I can try on a dress in one shop and it says I am a 10, then size 12 in the next shop fits me, and lo and behold, I have recently discovered that I am now a size 8 (I might be a bit on the shrivelled side, but I was never and certainly am not that). Apparently, over the past few decades, companies have worked out that people feel better and buy more when they fit into a smaller size, so

¹⁸ Martin Lindstrom (2012) *Brandwashed-tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy*; p. 31

¹⁹ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/11/071127101909.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1246219/Why-men-really-feel-guilt-women.html>

²¹ Martin Lindstrom (2012) *Brandwashed-tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy*; p.62

designers now add extra inches to the waistline without changing the number on the tag. Standardized size charts exist but are disregarded. There is really no such thing as a brand that runs “true to size”.²²

PEER PRESSURE

As we know, humans really are like sheep - we don't want to stand out from the flock. This herd instinct means that we instinctively look to the behaviour of others to inform the decisions we make - keeping up with the Jones and responding to peer pressure informs how we decorate our house, the type or brands of clothes we wear, the car we drive, where we go on holidays.

And this is grist to the mill of marketing executives, particularly when it comes to targeting kids. The dreaded Christmas list is where the results are most felt at home - *I want this, so and so is getting that, I saw it on The Late Late Toy Show*, and the inevitable - *you're so meeean, everyone else has one*. Companies even go so far as to limit production of a favoured toy so that a shortage will create pent-up demand - the demand ricochets onto e-Bay where the toy is then sold at exorbitant prices and parents go broke or the kids are gutted.

Facebook has capitalised on young people's need to belong by encouraging users to “like” their favourite music, books, films, brands, TV shows, etc , and to unwittingly engage in guerrilla marketing. Companies like Nike are renowned for feeding off peer pressure, by, for example, giving pairs of their latest trainers to cool kids in ghetto areas, with the knowledge that before long their pals will want to wear them too (even if they cost a fortune).

NOSTALGIA MARKETING

Nostalgia marketing is making a comeback, now that many of us are cash-strapped and stuck at home. Apparently our brains are wired to recall our past experiences as having been far better and more pleasurable than we actually experienced them at the time - the rose tinted glasses effect. This can help us to erase unpleasant memories, which is of great importance to women who want to have more than one child!

Our parents are forever telling us that life in their day was much better, safer and happier. Anyone, like me, who has delved into their family history and looks at the lives of women in yesteryear, knows this is not true. But, regardless, we will say the same things to our children and so will they to theirs.

Studies have shown that we are so determined to remember the past favourably that we even make up some of our happy memories (unconsciously, of course), and even knowing that a memory simply can't be true doesn't make it any less meaningful or enjoyable.²³

Our brains like to live in the past, we like to think we are younger than we are. And clever companies know that the older we get the more intense our longing for the past becomes, and they also know that the films, music, clothes, trends, food we enjoyed in our young and carefree days remain with us all our lives. And as we move out of our twenties our willingness to try new experiences wanes. And thinking back can cheer us up. Hence nostalgia marketing booms during recessions and hard times. It did well during the upheaval of the Second World War. It is doing well now as we face recession, bank collapses, job shortages, and climate extremes. Note the success of shows like *Mad Men* and *Downton Abbey*, listen out for Golden Oldies being played on the radio, and look at how sales of rice pudding, Angel's Delight and Jammie Dodger's have shot up.

²² <http://yourlife.usatoday.com/your-look/story/2011/06/Brands-use-vanity-sizing-to-boost-self-esteem/48743476/1>

²³ Martin Lindstrom (2012) *Brandwashed-tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy*; p.129

SELL FAME

These days, it's nearly impossible to surf the web, open a magazine, or watch television without seeing someone famous selling something, whether it's perfume, cars, phones, face cream, jewellery, clothing or even crisps.

Using celebrities for promotion is hardly new. But over the last decade, corporate brands have increasingly turned to Hollywood celebrities, musicians and sports stars to sell their products. Celebrities showed up in nearly 14% of ads in the US in 2007, and they appeared in 24% of the ads in India and 45% in Taiwan!²⁴

And these film stars, aging sports heroes, reality show contestants, chat show hosts, former business people, weather presenters and even "experts" (there is no limit to who can now become famous) are likely to continue peddling products, because the simple fact is that it works - if consumers believe that their hero uses the product, they want it too - they want a piece of a lifestyle they can't have, they want to hope and to dream.

The rise in the use of celebrities is partly due to the emergence of magazine articles, web sites, blogs and tweets that give blow-by-blow accounts of the mundane, routine activities of stars around the clock. An insatiable public keen to gawk at celebrities, is also watching what they wear, who they wear it for, what they eat, who they eat it with. Before long, the public is wearing and eating the same things. A trend has been set.

According to Barry Schwartz,²⁵ people today are faced with too many choices - decision paralysis can set in and people are befuddled. In the past there weren't too many options. In a world of scarcity, people asked, "should I take it or leave it?" But distinguishing between good and bad is far easier than distinguishing good from better and best. Enter the celebrities again. With consumers facing so many choices on the shelves, a friendly nudge from their superhero could make the difference between whether a shopper's hand picks up one product or moves on to the next.

TAP OUR BRAINS

Advertisers and marketing companies are now using neuroscience, the study of the brain and nervous system, to test the effectiveness of their marketing strategies and to help them to hit us with pinpoint-targeted information. By probing our brains, neuromarketing promises to tell manufacturers which particular stimuli actually lead people to pick one product over another. In 2008 in the US, there were 90 neuromarketing consultancies working for major corporations such as Procter & Gamble, GM, Coca-Cola and Motorola.²⁶

SUBLIMINAL EXPOSURE

Thanks to worldwide bans on tobacco advertising many cigarette companies now channel a large percentage of their marketing budget into subliminal brand exposure. Philip Morris, for example, pays bar owners to fill their venues with colour schemes, specially designed furniture, ashtrays, suggestive tiles designed in shapes similar to the Marlboro logo, and other subtle symbols, that when combined convey the essence of Marlboro and the iconic Marlboro Man. Marlboro also markets rugged, collectible outdoor cowboy clothing, including gloves, watches, caps, scarves, boots, jackets and jeans. The Dunhill store in London sells leather goods, timepieces, menswear, accessories and even a fragrance meant to underscore the luxurious image of the brand. In Malaysia, Benson & Hedges has even sponsored brand-themed coffee shops selling products emblazoned with the cigarette's gold logo.

²⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/22/business/media/22celeb.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

²⁵ Barry Schwartz (2004); *The Paradox of Choice-why more is less-how the culture of abundance robs us of satisfaction*; p. 128

²⁶ John Naish (2008) *Enough- breaking free from the world of more*; p.20

In 2004, Martin Lindstrom,²⁷ the global branding expert began a three year study, using fMRI and SST technology comprising multiple experiments with over 2,000 subjects from the US, Germany, England, Japan and China, to reveal the “hidden truths behind how branding and marketing messages work on the human brain, how our truest selves react to stimuli at a level far deeper than conscious thought, and how our unconscious minds control behaviour.”

One experiment, using twenty smokers in the UK, was to put subliminal tobacco ads to the test, looking at whether or not the information which the brain has summoned from beneath our level of consciousness, necessarily informs our behaviour. Are smokers affected by imagery that lies beneath their level of consciousness? Can cigarette cravings be triggered by images tied to a brand of cigarette but not explicitly linked to smoking?

All subjects were asked to refrain from smoking for two hours prior to the test. First, they were shown subliminal images that had no overt connection to cigarette brands, like western-style scenery, including iconic cowboys, beautiful sunsets and arid deserts. Next, to establish a comparison, they were shown explicit advertising images associated with cigarette commercials before such advertising was banned (but which are still prevalent online and through viral marketing), such as Marlboro Man and Joe Camel on his motorbike, as well as Marlboro and Camel logos and clearly marked packs.

Not surprisingly, when the smokers viewed the actual cigarette packs, the fMRI scans revealed a pronounced response in their nucleus accumbens, associated with reward, craving and addiction. When the smokers were exposed to the non-explicit images, over a period of less than 5 seconds, there was an almost immediate activity in the craving regions of their brains as well. And this activity was more intense than when the smokers viewed the overt images. The logo-free images associated with cigarettes triggered more cravings among smokers than the logos or cigarette packs themselves, a result that was consistent for both Camel and Marlboro smokers.

One explanation about why the subliminal advertising worked is that, as the smokers’ weren’t consciously aware that they were viewing an advertising message, they let their guard down. Another is down to the choice and care taken by the companies to associate their product with innocent appealing images. In 1997, prior to the advertising ban in the UK, Silk Cut began to position its logo against a backdrop of purple silk in every ad it ran. After the ban, the company simply created billboards showcasing logo-free swathes of purple silk. Shortly after, research revealed that 98% of consumers identified those billboards as having something to do with Silk Cut.

Another experiment, again with twenty smokers in the UK, Lindstrom aimed to assess why, despite graphic health warnings on packets, people still continue to smoke. Most of the smokers, when asked, said yes, warning labels worked. This could be because they thought it was the right answer, or what the researchers wanted to hear, or that they felt guilty because they knew the negative effects of smoking on their health. Yet the results from the fMRI were quite different:

Warning labels on the sides, fronts and backs of cigarette packets had no effect on suppressing the smokers’ cravings at all. Once the results were analysed further, cigarette warnings - whether they informed smokers they were at risk of contracting emphysema, heart disease, or a host of other chronic conditions - had in fact stimulated an area of the smokers’ brains called the nucleus accumbens, otherwise known as the “craving spot”. This region is a chain-link of specialised neurons that lights up when the body desires something - whether it is alcohol, drugs, tobacco, sex, or gambling. When stimulated, the nucleus accumbens requires higher and higher doses to get its fix.

27 M. Lindstrom (2008) *Buy.ology-how everything we believe about why we buy is wrong*; p.12

In short, the fMRI findings showed that cigarette warning labels not only failed to deter smoking, but by activating the nucleus accumbens, it appeared they actually encouraged smokers to light up. And Lindstrom couldn't but conclude that those same cigarette warning labels intended to curb smoking, reduce cancer, and save lives had instead become a killer marketing tool for the tobacco industry.

In another test, Lindstrom's team showed a group of American volunteers one of the antismoking TV ads - opening with a group of people sitting around chatting and smoking, having a great time, except, instead of smoke, thick greenish globules of fat are pouring out of the tips of their cigarettes, splattering over the ashtrays, across the table, onto the floor. Like with the warning labels, viewing this ad stimulated the smokers' craving spots. Rather than being put off by the gruesome images, the mirror neurons of their brains latched onto the convivial atmosphere and the socialising and they just craved a smoke!

THE STORY OF NAURU AND EXCESSIVE CONSUMPTION²⁸

Nauru is the world's smallest republic, consisting of one island of about 8 square miles, about halfway between Fiji and Australia, with a population of approximately 10,000 people.

In 1888, the island was colonised by Germany. At the turn of the century, it was discovered that 70% of Nauru was rich with phosphate, used in fertilizer, as a result of centuries' worth of bird droppings. The Pacific Phosphate Corporation was established and the export of guano began. After the end of World War I, the Germans handed the island over to Australia who, along with Britain and New Zealand managed the island in a League of Nations trusteeship. The phosphate extraction and export developed under the British Phosphate Corporation.

The island won its independence in 1968. The British Phosphate Corporation was nationalized, becoming the Nauru Phosphate Corporation with profits filtering through to the population, transforming their standard of living. In the 1970s and 1980s, Nauru had the distinction of being the world's richest per capita country, and during its heyday, earned the name, "the Kuwait of the Pacific".

The government bought property (mostly hotels) in Los Angeles, Honolulu, London, Auckland, Sydney and Melbourne. The country established its own national airline, Air Nauru, which transported people all over the Pacific. The islanders bought VCRs, ate western food and drove new cars on the 22km long ring road which circles the island. Nauruans became the most obese people in the world, with a 90% obesity rate and high levels of diabetes, heart disease and renal failure.

Unfortunately, Nauru is a small island and phosphate is a finite resource and the process of strip-mining left the land barren and infertile. The government put aside a percentage of the earnings into the Nauru Phosphate Royalties Trust so that the island would remain prosperous once the phosphate was exhausted. However, the public sector expanded, with nearly 1,500 employees on the government payroll out of a population of 10,000 and the government spent extravagantly. To keep the budgets in balance, they borrowed heavily. The Trust itself, whose value at one point reached AUS\$1.3 billion was badly mismanaged - AUS\$4 million was spent on the production of a musical on the life of Leonardo DaVinci which closed after a disastrous week's run in London.

The mining went into decline in the early 1990s and ceased operations in 2002. The Trust was by that stage insolvent. The government defaulted on its debts and was forced to sell its properties. Air Nauru's planes were repossessed by creditors in 2005 cutting the island off from the rest of the world for a year until the Taiwanese offered a plane in exchange for diplomatic recognition.

²⁸ Ronan Kelly; *The Curious Ear*; podcast available on www.rte.ie

The government tried to turn Nauru into an offshore banking centre but was blacklisted by the United States for money laundering. They also became involved in passport scandals. Then from 2001 to 2007 Nauru was used by the Australian government to detain asylum seekers.

The Nauruans blew about a billion dollars. The island's per capita income is now lower than that of many African countries. 90% of the workforce is unemployed, most of the remainder work for the government. Nauru now relies on aid from Australia and New Zealand. 80% of the island has been destroyed by strip mining and few tourists visit. The lush interior of the island is now uninhabitable, it's a haunting landscape of coral spires, lined with dust and rubbish, and so the islanders live in slum-like conditions in a narrow band at the perimeter. Their cars are rusted wrecks. There are daily power cuts, and communications are intermittent.

As one of the islanders put it *"It was an easy life - spending money freely, we stopped caring about the future, we didn't expect that life would end up like this, hard and very difficult....I can't say what the future holds...whatever the Lord provides."*

