MAGAZINE

Left brain, meet right brain

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Everyone knows data is powerful but, as Jasmine Presson explains, the best ideas are fuelled by a combination of analysis and empathy. Brands of the future will employ such left brain, right brain thinking.

The brain: a connected system The concept of 'left brain vs. right brain' seems logical to a human. Our bodies are largely symmetrical, with matching parts on both sides, and we are accustomed to using each side independently without much thought. We use one hand to open a door, one leg to kick a ball and so on.

Then there's the fact that 'left brain vs. right brain' is an accepted kind of shorthand we use when trying to describe different types of tasks, skills, or even people. A 'left brain person' is logical, rational and analytical, while a 'right brain' one is likely to think in more creative,

abstract ways. At the risk of pigeonholing anyone, people do seem to lean one way or the other.

When applied literally, however, the concept of 'right brain vs. left brain' is, well, fake news. A person may be more right or left-brained in terms of her preferences and talents, but neuroscientists tell us that healthy brain activity is never seen on just one side. Our brains are connected systems that leverage regions across both hemispheres.

Even as children, the most hardcore math geeks learn to apply symbols and metaphor to the world around them. The childhood fairy tale 'Jack and the Beanstalk', for example, is not a literal instruction guide on how to deal with magic beans and giants; it's an allegory that teaches morality and empathy. It takes both sides of the brain to rationally consider the story and then grasp its life lessons.

Successful creative ideas are formed the same way

The marketing world is awash with research, opinion and fears about data. Data is the future! We're being replaced by robots! Aaargh!

It is, of course, true that computers are faster and more accurate than humans at identifying factual relationships between phenomena, particularly when there are large data sets involved. Algorithms applied at the University of Nottingham in England were more accurate than doctors at identifying patients at risk for heart attack, and research by Centerstone Research Institute found a 30-35% improvement in patient outcomes when computer modelling was used to aid diagnosis. Unreliable, inconsistent humans benefit from the use of data that can find connections at scale and find the proverbial needle in a haystack.

As marketers, data enables us to see facts and diagnose the problem we need to solve. Fact: household penetration is flat. Diagnosis: shall we guess? Of course not. The data can tell us whether we are failing to recruit new customers or losing the ones we have. It helps us identify the relationships between ad and channel spend, search volume, footfall,

holidays, competitive activity, etc. – connections unseen by the human eye – and then model the optimal scenario to course correct.

But data alone can't solve all our marketing problems. Data is 100% rational, while humans are not. Indeed, people develop strong, often unchangeable opinions in ways that could never be measured or predicted. How many times have you heard (or said) something along the lines of "My mom insisted on buying Kenmore appliances, so I do, too" or "My neighbour tried that brand and her kid got sick, so I'll use something else".

Algorithms will never find such unknowable connections. They're also pretty bad at storytelling, and arguably incapable of empathy. Data doesn't understand how to deal with contradiction, and humans are inherently irrational. We're simultaneously consistent and contradictory in what we say, what we do and what we feel.

Our job as marketers is to apply the unique mix of the measurable and the creative that's right for each brand over time: to dig behind the numbers in order to empathise with irrational, contradictory consumers and create stories that help them imagine themselves using our brands.

Revlon, for example, had been losing share for years in a sea of me-too brands and newcomers. Traditional methods of advertising, celebrities and promotion were not working. When the company announced its new 'Love is On' global positioning, we knew we had to do and be something different.

A random YouTube clip sparked an idea about the unconscious triggers that cause women to feel more or less open to love, and we tested our idea by conducting a research study with more than 700 women. A mix of data, empathy, and systems thinking subsequently became the basis for 'Love Test', an inspiring film that portrayed eight real-life couples in various stages of their relationships. A supporting distribution system reframed the role of Revlon's products (and lifted sales).

Einstein had the answer (obviously).

So my message is, forget about either/or and left vs. right. Today we have the advantage that reams of data can provide, but in future – as long as humans are our target customers – it will still take humans to interpret that data and then go beyond in ways that only a feeling person could. It turns out that Albert Einstein's genius may be linked to the biological fact that the left and right sides of his brain were extremely well connected. A study conducted in 2013 found him to have had "more extensive connections between certain parts of his cerebral hemispheres compared to both younger and older control groups." We wholeheartedly agree that in marketing, as in all things, the balance between the rational and irrational, the factual and the emotional, is the answer to finding solutions that will resonate with consumers. We think Einstein – who once said, "Logic will get you from A to Z; imagination will get you everywhere" – would concur.

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