



The fine points of feelings: Why discrete emotions matter and how to reveal them

| By Paul Conner

Imagine asking 1,000 people, “Are you feeling good right now or bad?” A certain percentage will say good and a certain percentage bad - probably more good than bad. Interpreting this, would you say that all those who said good were feeling the same way and all those who said bad were feeling the same way? Probably not. So let’s get more specific and imagine asking these 1,000 people, “Are you feeling happy right now or not?” Again, a certain percentage will say yes; but would you say all these happy people were feeling the same way? Probably not.

Your “probably not” responses recognize that people’s emotions can be very subjective. But these fine distinctions are not often recognized when emotions are assessed in consumer research and applied in marketing.

Not one-dimensional

It’s well-accepted that emotions drive human behavior, including consumer behavior.¹ Emotions provide the value that tells us what to do (Turner, 2000). But it’s important to recognize that emotions are not one-dimensional. At a dimensional level, emotions have valence (positive versus negative), arousal (high intensity versus low intensity) and action-tendency (approach versus avoid) characteristics. However, at the discrete level, emotions have specific situational, neurochemical and behavioral signatures. Furthermore, discrete emotions have specific names like happiness, sadness, fear, anger and embarrassment.

To influence consumer behavior, it may not be enough to evoke emotions at the dimensional level. In other words, simply

increasing positivity or arousal toward your product or service may not produce targeted behavior. Evoking more discrete emotions may be necessary - and more effective.

Behavioral science has shown that evoking discrete emotions with common dimensionality can produce different buying decisions. For example:

- Mogilner et al. (2012) showed that people experience happiness as excitement when they are focused on the future and calm when they are focused on the present. Furthermore, experiencing happiness as future-focused excitement or present-focused calm affected the types of products they chose. People who were future-focused versus present-focused were more likely to choose “Happiness Water” that promised “pure excitement,” while people who were present-focused versus future-focused were more likely to choose “Happiness Water” that promised “pure calm.”
- Using an implicit priming technique, Conner and Payne (2010) showed that subconsciously feeling loving and happy (versus other discrete emotions) differentially impacted share-of-purchase for a frozen-food product. In this case, even subconscious processing differentiated the impact of discrete emotions.
- Kim et al. (2009) showed that vacation products with adventurous appeals were evaluated more favorably when participants felt excited versus peaceful and vice versa with serene appeals and peaceful-versus-excited feelings. This showed that

when the products made specific emotional claims, consumers focused on the exact nature of their feelings to evaluate their preference for them. This specificity also differentially affected product preference. As the authors put it, "... the specific phenomenal quality of the feeling (rather than its global valence) loom[ed] large."

Becomes critical

Accepting that discrete emotions can differentially influence consumer behavior beyond their dimensionality, assessing discrete emotions becomes critical. Many techniques exist for assessing emotions, both at the dimensional and discrete levels. (For an excellent review, see Mauss and Robinson, 2009.) These include self-report; psychophysiological measures of the brain, heart, eyes, face and voice; and implicit associations via indirect, incidental responses to priming stimuli. These techniques vary in their ability to assess discrete emotions.

Self-report directly assesses the degree to which people are subjectively experiencing discrete emotions. However, self-report does not capture subconscious feelings and is subject to conscious biases.

Psychophysiological techniques assess automatic, subconscious, non-biased emotions. However, although these techniques are improving in identifying discrete emotions, they remain much more reliable at the dimensional level. In other words, they're much better at identifying high and low arousal or positivity and negativity than identifying happiness, sadness, disgust, embarrassment, excitement, etc.

Indirect implicit priming techniques that come from social and cognitive psychology provide more effective and efficient ways to assess discrete emotions. In addition, implicit priming techniques can:

- quantitatively measure automatic, subconscious discrete emotions;
- be conducted online and therefore provide large sample scalability; and
- incorporate quantified assessments of feelings into predictive models, identifying those that most drive important outcome

measures like preference, purchase interest or actual purchase.

To summarize, 1) assessing discrete emotions, as opposed to higher-level emotional arousal or valence, is important in understanding and predicting consumers' decisions and behavior; 2) most emotional measurement techniques cannot effectively assess a large variety of discrete emotions, particularly when it comes to their automatic, subconscious (i.e., implicit) activation; and 3) indirect, incidental responses to priming stimuli can effectively assess a large variety of discrete emotions and quantitatively tie them to consumer behavior in predictive modeling.

Be discreet, be discrete

So the next time you want to ask 1,000 people how they're feeling, be discreet because people are sensitive about their emotions. But also be discrete because you'll get to know them a lot better and be better able to impact their behavior. 

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¹ Some reject this notion, which is a debate for another time. The point in this article is valid, even if emotions and feelings are thought to be only partially involved in driving consumer behavior.

Editor's note: Paul Conner is CEO of Emotive Analytics, a St. Louis research company. He can be reached at 314-752-0564 or at paul@emotiveanalytics.com.