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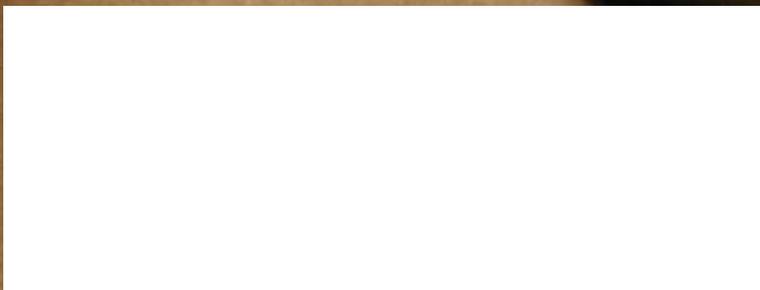
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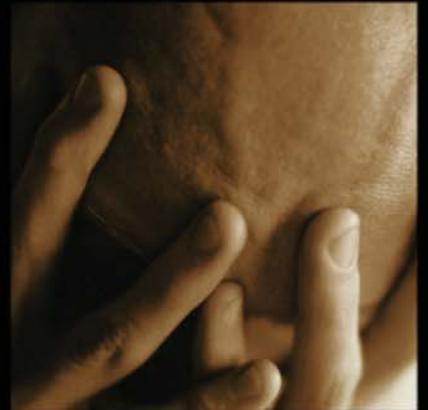
Emotions and Feelings: Drivers of Consumer Behavior

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Emotions & Feelings

Drivers of Consumer Behavior

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Many times we hear people say, “Oh, that was just a rational decision. Emotion had nothing to do with it.” I would respond that emotion had *everything* to do with it. Most people just don’t realize it or don’t want to admit it.

The point is that emotions and feelings (I’ll differentiate them later) are the salient, if not the exclusive, drivers of all our behavior, including our behavior as consumers. I will explain how emotions and feelings bear on techniques for conducting consumer research that support more powerful, emotionally fueled marketing.

What Are Emotions and Feelings?

No one is reaching for a dictionary right now. We all know what emotions and feelings are, at least well enough to follow along when seeing or hearing these words. But if you had to compose an accurate and universal definition, could you? If you could, you would be quite special.

The fact is that even people who study emotions and feelings for a living don’t agree on what they are. Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, biologists, neurologists, and even mystics have their individual interpretations. Theories and factual knowledge extend from Aristotle through Darwin and Freud, and up to the present-day work of Paul Ekman, Richard Davidson, Joseph LeDoux, and Antonio Damasio. Furthermore, much of what has been learned has been effectively integrated into consumer research and marketing by people such as John and Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, Gerald Zaltman, and Dan Hill.



I don't want to present a comprehensive historical review, nor do I want to declare new definitions of emotion and feeling. Rather, I want to discuss emotions and feelings in a way that has value for consumer research and marketing, so I will focus on a robust, flexible, and progressive explanation based on Damasio's work.

Damasio is a neurologist and professor at the University of Iowa College of Medicine. His most prominent books on emotion and feeling are *Looking for Spinoza* (2003), *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999), and *Descartes' Error* (1994). In defining what emotions and feelings are, Damasio makes several fundamental and useful points.

Emotions are complex collections of neural and chemical responses to what Damasio calls "emotionally competent

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stimuli." As such, emotions are "body states" that, once triggered, send messages to the brain and other parts of the body, preparing them to respond (and in some cases making them respond) in order to adapt and survive.

What are feelings then? Isn't "feeling" just another word for emotion? Not technically. Emotions don't become feelings until they are sensed within the body. Feelings are mental sensations of emotional body states responding to emotionally competent stimuli. As Damasio so eloquently puts it, "...feelings are largely ideas of the body in the process of maneuvering itself into states of optimal survival" (*Looking for Spinoza*, p. 140).

Furthermore, it is important to realize that mentally sensing emotional body states as feelings does not mean that we are automatically aware of them. We do not feel our feelings until they are consciously

processed. For this reason, a great deal of our emotions and feelings direct our decisions and behavior unconsciously.

For example, let's say someone is walking in the woods and a snake crosses his path. The snake is likely an emotionally competent stimulus. Before the walker is even aware of the snake's presence, the emotional-feeling process begins. His perceptual mechanisms (e.g., vision) detect the snake and send neural and chemical signals to the emotional-processing systems causing changes in the body state. He might begin to sweat, his heart might race, and his muscles might tighten. At this point, he would be in an emotional state, but he is as yet unaware of it. At the same time, body mechanisms would form an image of this emotional state to communicate it to other body parts and systems. When this composite emotional-state image is mentally sensed (*vis-à-vis* memorized images of past experiences with snakes), the feeling of fear would likely result. Finally, the walker would feel fear after images of the emotion and feeling were consciously processed. It is also important to realize that the stimulus-emotion-feeling processes take the form of images in the body that are memorized for future reference (i.e., the memorized images of past experiences with snakes).

How Do Emotions and Feelings Affect Our Decisions and Behavior?

Emotions and feelings work with our reasoning to make sure our decisions and behavior help us adapt and survive. Without guidance from our emotions and feelings, our decision-making would be impaired because our reasoning would be caught in an unguided loop. Damasio and others have proven this by observing that people with physiologically impaired emotional systems either cannot make decisions or else make decisions that are dysfunctional.

Damasio's work on emotion and decision-making has led him to his landmark somatic-marker hypothesis. This hypothesis refers to how emotions and feelings aid, if not determine, decisions people make (which can be generalized to decisions about what people buy). The somatic-marker hypothesis states that, when triggered by emotionally competent stimuli that require a decision, emotions and feelings start as somatic (i.e., body) states. They then become associated with (i.e., mark) anticipated decision outcomes. As we imagine possible responses (i.e., mull over our possible decisions), somatic markers continuously guide

us toward decisions that are best for us. Negative emotions and feelings mark imagined decisions that will lead to negative outcomes. Positive emotions and feelings mark imagined decisions that will lead to positive outcomes.

So What's Important Here?

Four points are critical when we apply Damasio's insights to consumer research and the marketing it supports.

1. There is no such thing as a strictly rational decision. In non-emotionally impaired people, emotions and feelings are always operating to guide the decisions we make, including decisions about what we buy. This process is in our nature.
2. Emotional processing precedes reasoning and sometimes even ignores it. The real order for the process that drives our decisions and behavior is increasingly considered to be sense-feel-think-do, rather than sense-think-feel-do. In fact, many researchers point out that most of our decisions and behavior are determined before reasoning takes over, and that reasoning serves to make sense of decisions that have already been made.
3. Most emotional processing, including feeling, happens unconsciously. This results in people often deciding things and doing things without being fully aware of why.
4. We do things to achieve an optimal state of feeling. Damasio claims that our decisions and behavior strive to obtain a state of balance, homeostasis, or fluidity in the body. But I think our motives are much more directly related to emotion and feeling. In short, I think we ultimately do what we do to feel as good as we possibly can.

What Does This Mean for Consumer Research?

Although this all may sound fascinating, and although it may advance our knowledge about emotions and feelings, a light bulb does not automatically turn on in terms of how it relates to consumer research. Until we realize that traditional research techniques like focus groups, telephone interviews, and online surveys do not naturally take into account how emotions and feelings produce consumer behavior, we will continue to miss the most compelling insights.

To improve consumer research so that it best captures emotion and feeling, we must first do more emotional research. Virtually all consumer research has something to do with consumer

behavior, and virtually all behavior is guided to some degree by our emotions and feelings. But what percentage of consumer research even makes an attempt to measure emotion and feeling? If we really want to understand what's behind consumer behavior, we have to study emotions and feelings better.

Here are five critical improvements we should make:

- 1. Mine the Unconscious.** As we have learned, the vast majority of emotional processing occurs unconsciously. But when we interview people over the telephone, online, or in focus groups, what parts of their brains are operating? The conscious, rationalizing parts that either inhibit or filter emotional goings-on. This leads to superficial, inaccurate, and/or deliberately deceptive data. To correct for this in emotional research, we have to more effectively mine respondents' unconscious processing. Hypnosis interviewing and projective techniques are two approaches for doing this.
- 2. Study Nonverbal Indicators.** As much as traditional data-collection techniques rely on rational, conscious thinking, they also rely on language. We predominantly collect and analyze what people tell us. But experts have found that we express most of what is going on inside us nonverbally. Our facial expressions, body posture, voice qualities, breathing patterns, and pupil dilations all indicate how we feel about what happens to us. Language, which is evolutionarily undeveloped, often falls short of expressing how we really feel. We often say we can't put into words how we feel. To correct for this in emotional research, we have to more effectively observe nonverbal indicators. Studying facial expressions, formalized in large part by Paul Ekman, is one way to do this.
- 3. Collect Data at the Moment of Experience.** Another characteristic of the sense-feel-think-do model that we violate with traditional techniques is the timing of our data collection. How often do we ask people to remember how they felt? Emotional reactions are more or less immediate, and even though they are captured in our memory, our memories are faulty and selective. The longer we wait to inquire about the actual consumer behavior we are interested in, the less accurate our memory is, including our emotional memory. To correct for this, we have to conduct more naturalistic observation. Ethnographic research tools offer effective ways to do this.

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4. Use Physiological Measurements.

Damasio and others make it clear that emotions are “body states.” They are physiological reactions to emotionally competent stimuli. But how many consumer-research studies directly measure these physiological reactions? Coupled with imperfect verbal accounts of how we are feeling, physiological measures can improve the accuracy with which we discover true emotional responses. Furthermore, physiological responses are most often unconscious, so measuring them can help us detect an emotion or feeling that we would have otherwise missed by relying only on a verbal or an externally observable nonverbal reaction. To be more confident that we have truly captured an emotion in our research, we should use physiological measurements whenever possible, such as measuring electrical changes in the skin, heart, facial muscles, and brain. They also include more recent and more sophisticated measures of chemical changes in the brain with FMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and PET (positron emission tomography) scans.

5. Don't Forget Experiences, Those Emotionally Competent Stimuli.

Finally, traditional consumer research often de-emphasizes the inducing stimuli. Some research only surveys people's demographics or attitudes, while others measure people's feelings and behavior. But the ultimate purpose of our craft is to help marketers apply our insights, and that almost always requires us to make experiential recommendations. We have to tell our clients what they should do to consumers' experiences to create desired behavior. Without effectively investigating the experiences people have, we can't effectively make those recommendations. To correct for this, we have to make sure that the emotionally competent experiences that consumers have are sufficiently examined.

How Can This Produce More Powerful Marketing?

In *The Marketing Power of Emotion* (2003), John and Nicholas O'Shaughnessy say, “Emotion drives motivation and explains why building emotion into all aspects of marketing is the most effective way of fixing attention on the brand” (p. 101). This is an

effective way of saying that emotion is marketing cost-of-entry. To rise to what is essential for powerful marketing, emotionality must be a deliberate part of marketing strategy and execution.

But stopping here risks only paying lip service to the marketing power of emotion. Many marketers nod their heads without examining whether they have made serious attempts to include emotion in their plans. Many have not examined the effectiveness of their consumer research in discovering the true emotional drivers of the behavior they desire. They rely on techniques that draw from consumers' rational minds or imperfect memory, or they merely count consumer behavior without exploring more deeply how it came about. Conducting qualitative research that follows the guidelines mentioned earlier will help marketers have what they truly need to produce more powerful marketing.

Additionally, even if they have effectively conducted emotional research, and even if they have deliberately included emotions in their plans, marketers must still evoke the proper emotions and feelings. For instance, if their goal is to reduce cancellation of a service, maybe they should get their target to feel cared-for as a person, rather than amazed with their new technology.

One mistake marketers make in advertising is to strive only to make their ads entertaining. As long as they are funny, they are deemed effective. But emotions triggered by being entertained may have little to do with the emotions that create the desired behavior. Do I want to have fun when I send a package overnight, or do I want to feel secure?

Knowing about emotions and feelings can produce more powerful marketing because it helps marketers understand how essential they are in producing desired behavior. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, it can help marketers conduct consumer research that more accurately discovers the specific emotions and feelings that they must trigger. Finally, deliberately incorporating this information into their marketing will create stronger brands that produce more engaged consumer responses, ones that arrive faster and stay longer because they are in fact emotionally fueled. 



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