

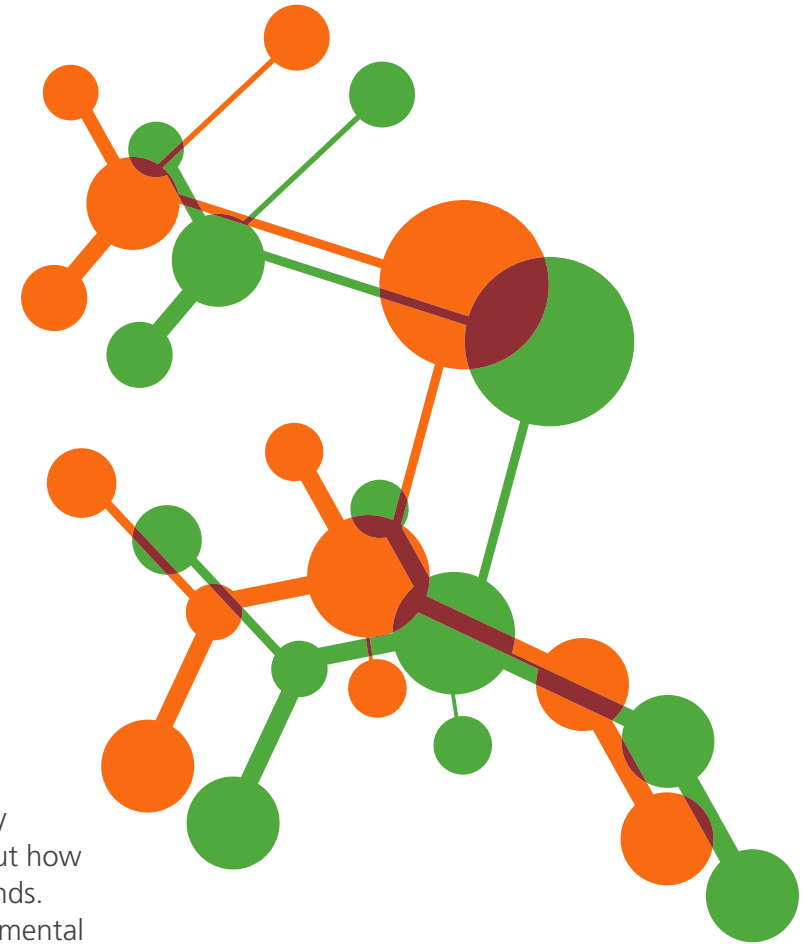
# Brands in the brain

This article was developed by  
TNS Brand & Communication community.

**It is often said that brands are owned by consumers, but more specifically they belong to our brains.**

Brands reside in the networks of neurons that house our memories of them, and their fortunes are shaped by the highly efficient and often unconscious systems that our brains have evolved for making decisions and navigating the world.

As our understanding of neuroscience rapidly expands, we now know more than ever about how people remember, relate and respond to brands. And this understanding needs to have fundamental implications for the way we develop communication strategies and evaluate their effectiveness.



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## How we make decisions

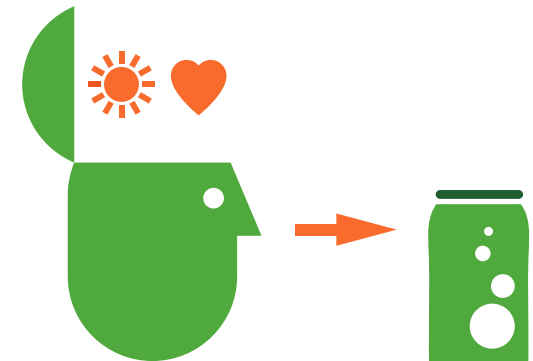
The task of running our day-to-day lives is mostly delegated to our intuitive, unconscious self. We make decisions as efficiently and rapidly as possible using fast and frugal heuristics. Heuristics are the brain's shortcuts, the simple rules of thumb that we use every day to approximate the best course of action and avoid considering options in any more detail than is necessary. This highly efficient, autopilot-driven way of navigating life has been popularised in the work of the psychologist and behavioural economist, Daniel Kahneman as our 'System 1' brain. Only when we encounter a new situation that doesn't fit with our pre-determined approaches to solving problems and getting what we want does our slow-moving, energy-intensive, deeply rational 'System 2' brain get involved.

This is not to say that our rational, deep-thinking mental resources have nothing to do with the way

we respond to brands and make decisions. Many of the heuristics that we follow have been formed consciously, at some point in our past, and they often reflect our deep-rooted attitudes and the way they see the world. However, once System 1 is armed with these rapidly applicable rules of thumb, it doesn't have to get System 2 involved in its day-to-day decisions. And this means that most of the decisions we make about brands are made using the instinctive approach of System 1. People will often purchase the same brand again and again or will buy within an established repertoire. As long as those choices continue to yield the same (essentially satisfactory) results, there is no need for System 2 to intervene and start considering other options.

When we repeatedly follow the same course of action in the same circumstances and get the same beneficial result, our behaviour has the potential to become fully automatic. When habits concerning

**A heuristic is a rule of thumb. They are often applied in problem solving to limit the amount of detailed reasoning required by making decisions based on a limited set of criteria (or heuristics). Heuristics can be useful for rapidly approximating what the best course of action is likely to be in a specific scenario.**



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brands become hard-wired into our brains they remove the need for decision-making completely; we behave in a particular way and it requires a considerable conscious effort to override the habit and behave any differently. Understanding where habits exist, and how to create or circumvent them, can be vitally important when helping brands to grow or protect their market share.

## Creating and reinforcing brand memories

The heuristics that we use to make decisions are shaped and reinforced by memories, which take the form of networks of neurons within our brain that 'fire' together to recall experiences and bring associations to mind. The stronger these neural connections are, the more rapidly and repeatedly they fire up when we encounter a relevant trigger.



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The strongest memory structures within the brain are 'affective memories', which are aligned with deep personal feelings and motivations. When brands are able to form and consolidate such memories, they become powerful influences on our behaviour, springing rapidly and readily to mind, reminding us of positive experiences and associations and biasing our choices in the direction of the brand in question.

Creating potent brand memories is therefore key to success. In fact, studies show that these memories are powerful enough to influence our actual experience of brands, not just our attitudes towards them. The presence of a powerfully affective brand memory doesn't just promise enjoyment, it can cause us to experience that enjoyment as well.

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All forms of brand exposure have the potential to create and reinforce brand memories. In addition to paid activity (own-brand and competitive messaging), the experiences of others help to form stronger affective patterns, attaching considerable value to word-of-mouth and endorsement. But the most powerful force for creating neural connections is personal experience. The impact of strongly positive personal experience is highly likely to bias consumers towards choosing the same brand again.

## Updating the brand narrative

When our memories are contradicted by present experience, our brains may respond by updating or reshaping them. When the unexpected experience is negative or contradictory to the brand narrative, this represents a potential threat. However, marketers can also use the updating process to freshen, strengthen and evolve their brand memories. Balancing novelty and consistency in brand messaging is the most effective means of staying



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in control of the brand narrative in this way. Novelty alerts our brain to the possibility of connecting up our memories differently; aligning with our existing affective memory structures through consistency helps to convince the brain that this particular brand memory is important enough to invest in updating.

And in today's complex media environment, where cutting through the clutter and getting noticed is in itself a challenge, the balance of novelty and consistency is also one of the most effective strategies for capturing and holding attention.

## Capturing and holding attention

Attention exists because the brain needs a means of focusing its finite resources and ensuring that we capture, process and encode the information that is most important to our survival and success. The brain is constantly and swiftly selecting the things that we will pay closer attention to at the expense of others. In general, these things have a greater likelihood of

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engaging our attention if they surprise us, if they generate an emotional reaction, or if they align with our existing motivations, priorities and sense of self.

Our awareness mechanism reacts very quickly to movement, the appearance of something new or to objects that contrast with their surroundings, but it also jumps quickly into gear when confronted by something novel that contradicts our expectations. If something stands out from the way that we expect the world around us to be, then our brain makes sure we know about it. Ads such as Cadbury's famous 'Gorilla' have made highly effective use of the unexpected or initially bewildering to ensure an audience's attention.<sup>1</sup>

A stimulus that triggers an immediate emotional response is another effective tactic for capturing attention. Emotion, brought about by the release of specific chemical signals within the brain,

signals to our brain that something requires urgent attention – and so stimuli that are associated with powerful emotions such as fear, loss or the promise of reward, are swiftly promoted up the queue for being consciously noticed. Well aware of the value of emotion in ensuring attention, many brands create campaigns around events such as Christmas, Ramadan or Chinese New Year, and train consumers to anticipate the rich emotional hit that these deliver.

The third characteristic by which a stimulus increases its chances of being noticed, is alignment with our existing motivations, priorities and sense of self, or with existing memory structures. In these situations, the stimulus is working with our world view rather than seeking to interrupt it, and this can be particularly important when we are seeking to capture attention in environments where the target audience is likely to be consciously focused on a specific task.

1



For the neuroscientific explanation of this ad's effectiveness, see 'The story of attention in three primates' on [page 37](#).

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## The brain in context

Being noticed is an essential starting point for any brand communication, but it is only a starting point. Our expanding understanding of the human brain makes it increasingly clear that marketers must seek to do more with human attention once they have captured it. They must seek to build strong brand memories and effective brand narratives that can exert a dependable influence over consumer choices. And they must invest in understanding how those memories will interact with our brain's heuristics and habits when it comes to day-to-day decisions. Creative and media strategies that can capture prolonged attention put us in control of the way a brand is represented within the brain of the consumer. However an equally important conclusion of the latest neuroscience is that it is not only the structures within our brains that determine our actions, but the way these systems, memories and heuristics interact with the contexts we encounter. A complete marketing strategy takes account of these contexts as well. ■



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You can find more of our thinking on the real drivers of human behaviour and how brands can learn from this work to develop strategies that build business in 'The brain game' >

As one of the world's best-established and most recognisable brands, Coca-Cola has created many of marketing's most powerful affective memories. Here are two powerful examples of those memories in action.

The 'Hilltop' ad featuring the lyric 'I'd like to buy the world a Coke' aligned powerfully with the yearnings of many Americans during the divisive Vietnam era. In an age before social media, many called radio stations asking them to play the commercial and called TV stations to find out when the ad was scheduled to air. The affective memories created by the ad mean it is still one of the most recognisable commercials of all time, and has asserted powerful influence over Coke's subsequent appeal.

The power of such memories was demonstrated in a famous taste-off orchestrated by the neuroscientist Samuel McClure in 2004, tasters were first asked to sample Coke and Pepsi in a blind test. When they did so, preference was split roughly equally between the rival colas. However, when they were then served the drinks from branded containers, Coke became the favourite. Interestingly, fMRI scans of the tasters' brains showed significantly different brain activity when knowingly drinking Coca-Cola than when consuming it blind. Knowing the brand triggered affective memories, which changed the actual experience of the product.

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