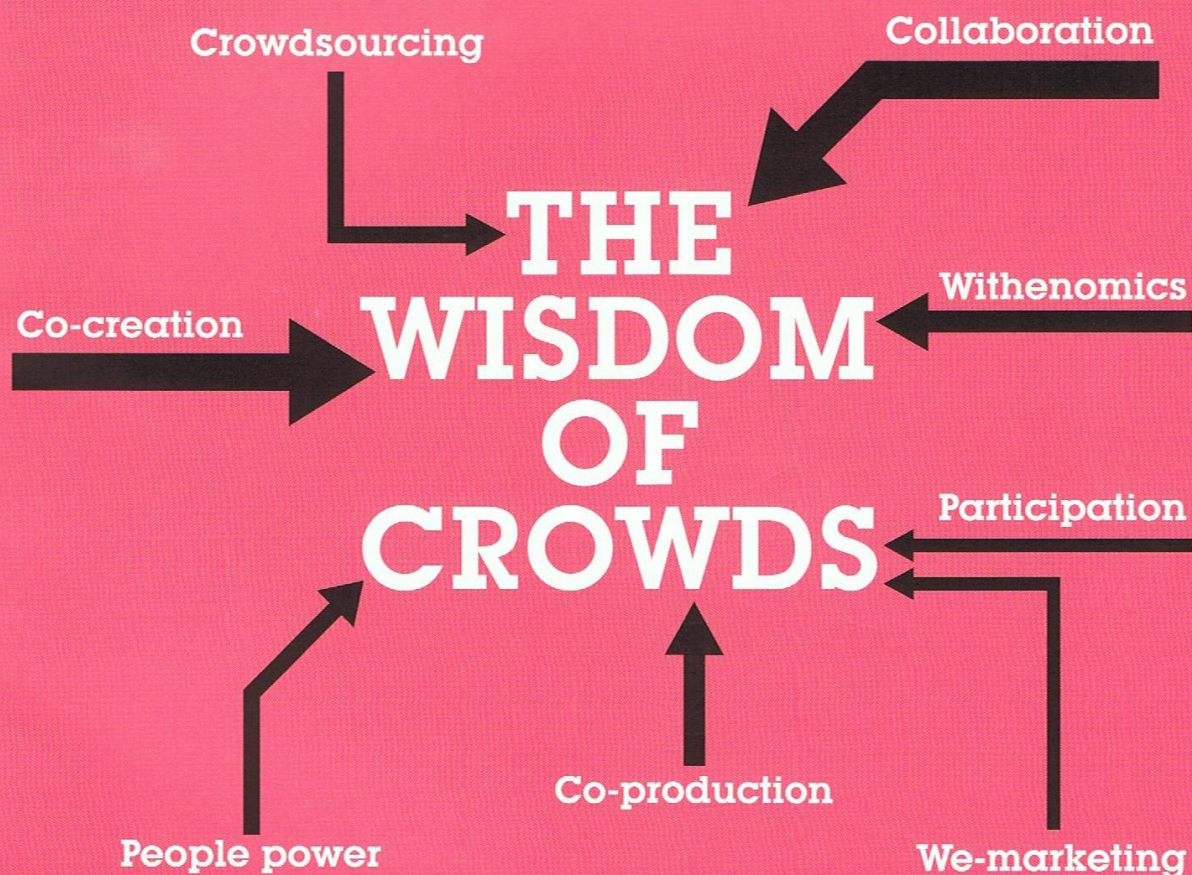


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Nuclear energy to atomic power

Put energy into your communications by replacing static, linear planning models with fluid, dynamic ones that allow consumers to participate with their insight

By Justin Gibbons, *Work*

Models of thinking help us to structure our thoughts and ideas. The best ones, like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, provide an enduring encapsulation of the human condition. Others are more fleeting in their ability to capture a core truth but still provide an anchor for the mind (and often a good finale to a presentation).

As we emerge from the credit crunch, it seems that more has changed than simply our attitudes to money and the bankers that control it. In the world of marketing we have been through a period of revolution; digital media, connected consumers, neuroscience, freakonomics and the economics of free have all disrupted the received wisdoms of marketing convention. Welcome to the new world and the new models of thinking that make sense of it.

The term 'nuclear' is often used to describe something that is stable, static and constant; think of the nuclear family. This seems to work as a metaphor for the old models of thinking which assume linear processes, recipient consumers and predictable outcomes. By contrast, the term 'atomic' describes something that is fluid, chaotic and dynamic, a much better description of the marketing world we now live and work in.

Over the past year, we have been working at the cutting edge of media and communications with companies such as Facebook, Orange and Google. Our research,

and the consumers who sit at the heart of it, have caused us to question many of the easy assumptions made about brands, decision-making and communications. This paper describes the shifts that have taken place and outlines the new models of thinking that replace the brand onions, customer funnels and AIDAs of old.

The way we look at brands fundamentally affects how we manage them. The systemised disassembly of brands into their constituent parts allows marketers to supervise each aspect of the brand's delivery; turning up the emotional heat, reinforcing the brand's values and returning to the core product truth.

The symbol of this thinking is the brand onion and whether it's actually an onion, a pyramid, a diamond or a temple, the paradigm remains the same: structured, rigid and largely rational. The brand management model is to create and then transmit this brand onion to its chosen recipients.

"Successful campaigns are treated differently by consumers; they talk about them, decode them and play with them"

Adventures in the world of neuroscience tell us that things aren't quite so straightforward. People's brains don't coolly receive what is sent to them, the processing journey is more complex and works in many dimensions. Brands are stored in the brain as networks of associations. Some associations are hardwired and fire up whenever the brand is mentioned, some associations are strong and need only a nudge to be fired up, and some associations are new and need to be established before they can even be called part of the brand.

As marketers trying to work with these associations, we have to acknowledge that the playing field is uneven and all sorts of processing is going on outside of our control. The other factor to add to this is the brain's emotional system, which 'tags' brands with an emotional like/dislike response. This emotional starting point colours all experiences and touchpoints with a brand.

PROCESSING BASED

So what does this mean for brand management? The new model of brand understanding has to be processing-based rather than send/receive-based. The brand still has its constituent parts but they exist within a context of processing; what associations are firing up, which ones can I work with and which ones am I working against, what emotional tags are colouring the picture?

As an example, both McDonald's and Innocent might want to create a strong association with health to draw in young, female consumers; one has unhealthy hardwiring, and is tagged as 'not for me', the other is associated with fruit and has only a short hop to get to healthy, and is tagged positively. A processing-based model is a 'what am I working with' model and helps shape objectives and strategy in a more insightful way than a static 'what have I

got' brand onion. At the heart of marketing communications is consumer decision-making; how do people make choices and where can I most effectively influence them?

Decision-making models are, on the whole, linear descriptions that track a customer journey from inactivity through to active sales prospect. Typically organised as a funnel, the model offers opportunistic on-and-off ramps for communications to prod and cajole consumers downward to point-of-purchase.

So what's changed? For a start, most people now live in much more highly networked information environments. Only fifteen years ago, our networks were limited to people we met on a regular basis or who we phoned, typically, in the evening on our landlines. Since then the network we live in has exploded; Facebook friends are competitively acquired, our email contacts bulge (digitally) and our mobiles have liberated conversation.

And the effect goes beyond volume; decision-making exists in a fluid, interactive environment of review and re-review, not a static point on a customer journey.

We also understand a whole lot more about decision-making than ever before. The social sciences have taught us the power of the nudge, the blink, and the tipping point, while behavioural economics has begun to open up the true(er) nature of things under the bonnet of the sales figures. What these theories share is an acknowledgement of complexity. And this is the way we now need to think about decision-making; as a complex, circular model with three types of factors impacting upon it: social forces, strong forces such as price and availability, and weaker forces such as promotion.

It is in the worlds of advertising, media, PR, experiential and DM that the models of old have become most disrupted. The SLAB (sat, listened, absorbed, bought) and AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action) approaches have been looking dated for some time, but still seem to provide islands of safety for those developing communications.

If brands are understood in a new way, and decision-making has taken on a new shape, then the communications that sit at the heart of it will have to develop. The assumptions behind the old model are twofold. First, the aim of communications is to influence; it's top down, controlled by us, not them, and it affects people in a linear way.

FIGURE 1

Brand onion versus a processing-based model

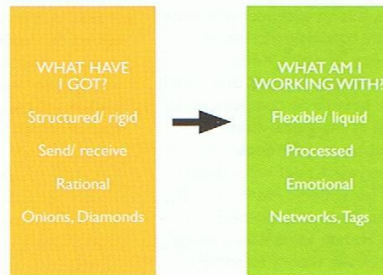


FIGURE 2

From the linear to the nuclear model

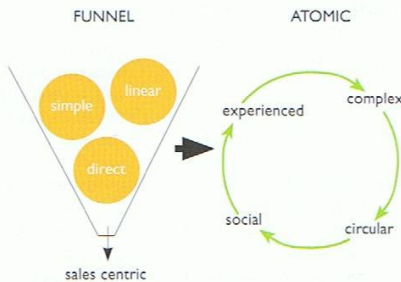
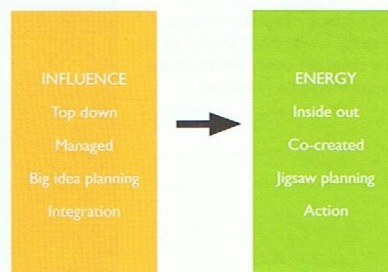


FIGURE 3

From ideas to energy



Second, it's all about the big idea; we create it, it can be tested, it can be integrated across media channels.

The new model of communication is about energy. Successful campaigns are treated differently by consumers; they talk about them, decode them and play with them. The old adage 'ask not what your advertising does to consumers, ask what they do to your advertising' has never rung so true.

Putting energy into your communications is about a different type of creative development. Research has long been held the dampener of all things creative, but it now has a new role to play. The research paradigm has shifted from Q&A to co-creation, which in real terms means that we can now engage consumers much more deeply in the branding process. Nowhere is this more keenly felt than when working with teenagers, a group who react strangely and often erratically in focus groups. We recently set up a Teen Board for a brand, inviting them into the company, spending a day allowing them to guide the process and to edit the outputs. The result was energy plumbed in from beginning to end.

The emphasis necessarily moves from a focus on one big idea, to a marketing team capable of marshalling many brand ideas across many platforms. Integration is something of a noble goal but it feels that it may be a stepping stone en route to a more sophisticated, active kind of jigsaw planning where brands provide the energy, and communications ideas radiate outwards.

It is only in this kind of world that a meerkat can tweet, a chocolate bar can be reborn on Facebook or that mobile coupons can become playground conversation.

Many of the core approaches will endure; positioning, differentiation, segmentation. But our toolkit needs to get bigger and better.

The world of neuroscience keeps offering up rich explanations of consumer perception and we need to engage with psychologists to bridge their thinking into ours. We also need to take part in the new digital media landscape to see firsthand how phenomena start and develop and grow. Lastly, we need rich, current consumer insight plumbed into our organisations; this doesn't mean that we leave consumers to write the ads but that we let them into our world to take part.

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