

How advertisers seduce our subconscious

August 24 2016, by Robert George Heath



The advertising Don. Credit: Sky Atlantic

In 1957 [Vance Packard's](#) book [The Hidden Persuaders](#) shocked the world by revealing that messages exposed subliminally, below our level of perception, were able to increase sales of ice cream and Coke. The experiment he cited was later shown to be a hoax, but one of Packard's other assertions, that advertising can influence us below our level of awareness, is absolutely true.

In fact, rather scarily, the vast majority of advertising's influence on us is subconscious. My own [research](#) has shown how the emotive content of

advertising enables it to break almost all the rules which we believe govern our own susceptibility to adverts.

For example, we believe that ignoring ads stops them working, oblivious of the fact that [emotive content requires no attention at all in order to be effectively processed](#). We also think that if we can't recall an advert's message, we cannot have been influenced by it. However the truth is that [emotional influence lodges deep in our subconscious](#) and is almost impossible to recall.

Above all, we believe that our brand choices are logical, and driven by our rational thinking, whereas the greatest driver of brand decisions is actually our emotional predisposition.

Consider this example. In 2001 the struggling communications network, Cellnet, [was relaunched as O2](#) using a campaign with the vacuous message 'O2: see what you can do.' The advert featured blue water with bubbles bubbling through it, people flirting and floating around, fluttering doves, a dog catching a ball, and some lilting music in the background.

There was absolutely no mention of the network quality or coverage or tariffs or handsets, because O2 was no better than anyone else on these. Yet despite being a failing brand, and having absolutely no performance advantage, O2 went from last to first [in the market](#) in just four years.

More importantly, an [industry analysis](#) of this launch concluded their success was entirely due to the ads, which had encouraged people to feel that O2 was "calm and serene, the antithesis to clutter and chaos, a contrast to the often frenetic world around mobile phones".

How can advertising do this? It's very simple. Our brains have a primitive defence mechanism called the [limbic system](#), which is

permanently alert, perceiving stimuli and assigning meanings to them. It is this system which wakes us if our baby cries, or makes us jump back onto the pavement if we see an approaching car in the corner of our eye.

The limbic system works regardless of whether we are paying attention, and works at a far greater speed than our thoughts. And unfortunately for our consumer selves, it is the system that processes emotional stimulus.

So when we perceive an ad for a brand, we make an instant judgement of its [emotional value](#) and store this subconsciously as a marker for future reference. If the emotional value is positive (kind, warm, sexy, cool, successful and so on) we are subconsciously "conditioned" to invest the brand with this positivity. We are not aware this happens, which means we can't argue against it. But when we come to making a decision involving the brand, we find ourselves "seduced" in favour of it, and provided there is no strong reason not to, we buy it.

Of course if someone then asks us why we bought it, we invent all sorts of rational reasons for ourselves to do with price, features, performance, of the item in question.

Gorilla marketing

In the last ten years I've conducted several experiments which prove this is what happens. In 2005 I showed that [ad recall doesn't correlate with ad effectiveness](#); in 2006 I discovered that the message in advertising has [hardly any influence on brand favourability](#), which is driven almost entirely by emotive content; and in 2009 I demonstrated that ads high in emotive content, despite being shown to be consistently more effective, [are invariably paid less attention than ads with evident messages](#).

Why is this? Well, we tend to like ads that are emotive and creative, and so we don't see them as a threat. Because they are not a threat we don't

feel the need to pay attention, and because emotion operates subconsciously, paying less attention actually makes the ad even more effective.

My research has led [me to conclude](#) that brands as diverse as Renault, Andrex, Nike, Stella, McDonalds, Audi, Bosch, Coke, BMW, VW, Tesco, M&S, British Airways, McDonalds, and, most controversially, Marlboro, have all employed subconscious seduction to create huge business successes.

But perhaps the best example of subconscious seduction came from a [famous advert](#) which had no message whatsoever, didn't even show the product, yet managed to achieve a 10% increase in sales across the firm's entire range. That's millions of chocolate bars sold to customers – all subconsciously seduced by a gorilla playing the drums.

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