

satellite design
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hey lizard-man, wanna buy a watch?

Right brain, left brain, reptilian brain—
who am I supposed to sell to anyway?

From economists to anthropologists, everybody's got a theory about why we buy what we buy. Unfortunately, no two seem to agree about what's really going on in consumers' minds. In this article, we'll look at past attempts to solve the puzzle and a handy little messaging model we call "Lustify and Justfiy."

Anyone who's shopped for new shoes knows that buying decisions are more complicated than comparing features and prices. Evaluating products for purchase is an often uncomfortable mix of emotions and rational thinking. It reminds us that we're all a funny combination of opposites: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, David Banner and the Incredible Hulk, a little bit country and a little bit rock & roll.

For marketers, appealing to both sides of this consumer split-personality is the key to attracting and converting potential customers. But crafting messages to influence both the emotional and rational mind is a tricky business. Our jobs would be a lot easier if we had a clear picture of what consumers want and how they go about transferring those desires into actions.

the science of guessing

In middle of the last century, researchers developed consumer decision-making models based on a mechanistic concept of consumer cognition. Recognizing a need, the consumer would step through research and evaluation phases before selecting the appropriate product. These models became more complex as researchers began to factor in social and marketing influences. Later, attempts were made to allow for both rational and emotional product evaluation.

More recently, models of consumer behavior have abandoned the rational altogether. Clotaire Rapaille, who's about as close to a rock-star as you can find in a market researcher, has become a media darling for his method of divining consumer desires.

It doesn't hurt that he has crazy hair and a French accent.

For Rapaille, simple archetypes are fixed deep in our unconscious in early childhood. The first time we encounter the concept of "mother" or "love" or "coffee," it sticks. Characteristics of how that concept is framed upon imprint then subconsciously influence our thinking for the rest of our lives. These concepts are stored in what Rapaille calls the "reptilian brain," the basic pre-rational chunk of grey matter that's a carry-over from our early evolutionary ancestors. (Think fish with legs.)

Despite the high-falutin' language, Rapaille's conclusions aren't too hard to grasp. People want Hummers because they make them feel powerful. The French like stinky cheese; Americans don't. Coffee is associated with the comforts of home. While his research methodology may have more in common with psychoanalysis than market research, Rapaille does a good job of positioning brands to appeal to basic human desires.

But a consumer's progression from wanting to buying is more than a pre-conscious activity. Though Rapaille's mantra is "the reptilian brain always wins," it clearly doesn't. People buy Hummers. But they also buy Minis. And they also buy Corollas. Part of our motivation is emotional. But part of it is rational. Always. Well, maybe with the exception of the guys that buy Hummers.

the mind-body problem

The trick for marketers comes in figuring out when to talk to the reptile and when to talk to the human. Given the absence of definitive research on how consumers think, this sometimes takes a little ingenuity. We use a very simple model to help us divide rational and emotional messages. We call it “lustify and justify” and it’s based on a very familiar phenomenon.

Often, especially when it comes to high-priced or high-status items, the desire for a product comes first. Unlike the old decision-to-buy model where we move from recognizing a need, through considering alternatives, to a decision, we often start with a specific brand or product in mind. This desire for a BMW or a new iPod or an Abercrombie sweatshirt appears fully formed in our minds. It’s an emotional need and can come about for any number of reasons: a desire to fit in or to show off or just to own a beautiful thing. It’s a form of lust.

But like strong desires in other aspects of our lives, the lust for things is countered by rational self control. When it comes to food, for example, we may want that second piece of chocolate cake, but with consideration and a little will power, most of us are able to stop after one piece. What happens is that the desire is momentarily placed on hold while we consider the consequences of its fulfillment.

What’s more interesting is what happens when we end up deciding to eat the cake. We justify the decision by making a rational argument to ourselves. “I can have this cake because I had a small lunch today.” Or, “If I refuse it, it will embarrass the host.” The case we make need only be good enough to justify the thing we have already decided to do.

market to seduce.

market to justify.

To take advantage of this sorry human fallibility, marketers need to understand that product evaluation is both emotional (lustify) and rational (justify) and that, for most discretionary purchases, both modes have to be addressed before we will commit to a buy.

The lustify stage is the milieu of brand marketers and product designers. Inducing the sort of lust that makes us crave a Kate Spade handbag or a Watermark pen is a slow, cumulative process. It’s heavily dependent on brand positioning, advertising, buzz and the very design of the products themselves. Why brands like The North Face, Timberland or Harley Davidson jump from relative obscurity to cult status remains a mystery. But it’s fairly clear that the pull of those brands, and many others, is closely tied to emotions of self-perception and non-rational feelings of affinity with the brand personality.

The justify stage, while easier to influence, is no less important. The deal isn't closed until the consumer reaches for his or her wallet. Because justification happens late in the game, the most effective justification media are packaging, POP, sales associates and information sources like the web and consumer magazines.

To take control of the justify stage, marketers become enablers, feeding consumers the "facts" they need to make a case for the purchases they already desire.

Lust engenders uncertainty. It creates a tension between the pain of wanting and the fear that consummating the desire will have negative implications. Justify marketing is all about helping consumers explain away those fears.

anatomy of the argument

While different products require different messaging strategies, most good justification messages have a few traits in common:

1. They focus on facts rather than claims. Marketers include claims in an overt attempt to frame a potential buyer's opinion of a product. While this can be useful early on in the buying process, by the time the potential buyer is at the justify stage, they are beyond being sold to. They are focused inward, in a conversation with themselves. Properly chosen and presented, the right facts give buyers the raw material they need to justify the purchase of a product they already want.
2. While the focus of a justification message is on facts, a little emotional content to reinforce the desire helps strengthen the sell. Often, the visual design and the copywriting tone can remind the buyer of the emotional brand space that attracted them to the product.
3. The messages rise above product attributes. Facts aren't limited to product features. Often, the facts that will be most useful to a justifier are those that address the social, financial or cultural concerns that are causing the buyers to second guess their desires. Value comparisons and messages that directly address pricing can often counter the voice that says "this is just too much to spend." Celebrity or athlete tie-ins can evaporate fears that the product isn't authentic. Product development or company history messages can work against doubts that the product won't perform as expected.
4. The message hierarchy mirrors the justification. Providing facts means more than trotting out the old features and benefits list. Content should be organized to facilitate the justification process. That means leading with the facts you think will help counter the most likely rational objections to the purchase and grouping messages that may work well together.

and now the warnings

The lustify/justify model isn't right for every brand or product. Some products are simply commodities, bought on price with very little emotional processing. Like any strategic tool, lustify/justify strategizing often raises as many questions as it answers. As you apply it to your marketing challenge, you may find that you know even less about the consumers you're targeting than you thought. Getting a handle on consumer perceptions of the brands and products in your category can help you decide when to switch from an emotional to a rational pitch, what the potential rational roadblocks are and what sort of facts best play into the justification process. Access to research and the willingness to put yourself in the shoes of your audience go a long way towards teasing out the dynamics of the internal struggle between desire and reason.

In the end, "lustify and justify" is only an approximation of what really goes on in our minds. But until we know for sure how consumers think, it's a useful tool to remind marketers that good messages can influence consumers on both sides of the reptile-rational divide.