

Neuromarketing: strategies to manipulation disguised as scientism

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The term “neuromarketing” has spread in the last years until becoming a “trendy” discipline, alternative to traditional marketing. Given the breakthrough of the neuroimaging techniques, it seems to be possible to **“see” the thoughts, reactions and emotions of consumers**. And companies are drawn by using this possibility to increase their profits.

Neuromarketing is based on applying **the neuroscience techniques to analyse the brain and physiological processes of consumers**, specially those related to their buying decisions. With this aim, neuroimaging techniques like electroencephalography, magnetic resonance and magnetoencephalography are used, together with others like electromyographic, measure of the electrical conductivity of the skin, electrocardiogram, tracking eye movements, etc.

However, if the contents of publications about neuromarketing are analysed, we may notice that they are related to subjects which are already studied in Psychology of the Consumer, like perception, making of decisions, attention, influence of all senses on shopping, etc. Since Psychology of the Consumer also included the use of the techniques above mentioned, we must ask ourselves what makes neuromarketing different. **The answer lies in the interests and the orientation which are behind the word “marketing”**: its aim is to use these techniques to improve the consumers demand, and to drive it toward certain products or services.

Some of the criticism to neuromarketing has focused on the validity and reliability of its data, and on the artificial situations in which its experiments are carried out. **But, in our opinion, the most important criticism is its interested orientation and the image of the consumer, being this covered is scientism**, who is presented as **emotional, irrational and impulsive**: *“so as the marketing of the 21st century to become effective must answer the needs, aspirations, frustrations and feelings of the consumer-actor, who usually makes their decisions in an irrational, unconscious and impulsive way”¹*. Before this consumer, the main strategy is to **manipulate their emotions**.

It is true that neuromarketing empathises a fact: primitive brain structures, of emotional and instinctive nature, which we share with “inferior” animals -what is sometimes called as “reptile brain”- coexist in human beings with an evolved, rational and more strictly human brain. This is not new. From the last century, the rationalist standpoint of the traditional economy has been overcome. Nowadays,

1.- Roberto Álvarez de Blanco. Neuromarketing: Fusión Perfecta. Editorial Pearson Madrid 2011

we analyse the irrational aspects which are essential to understand our consumer behaviour. It is also true that, in many occasions this “reptile brain” is the one that makes our buying decisions and our cerebral cortex only justifies the decisions made afterwards. **But this does not mean that consumers might be always “scientifically manipulated”** by commercial and advertising strategies. They are also able to face rationally these attempts of manipulation, and to behave in a responsible way, or led by ethical and solidarity principles.

The research of rational thought -which has also neurological basis- is not interesting to companies which, instead of convincing consumers that their products are the best ones, want to control their behaviour. In this process the consumers are not supposed to be aware. Because of this, companies struggle to research if a change of colour in packaging, or the use of an appealing image in advertising could modify a rational answer into another emotional one. Thus, consumers would not buy better quality or cheaper products, but more expensive and worse ones, drawn by their advertising image or their brand.

In this way, the objective of a big part of neuromarketing research **is not actually to know how the consumer brain works but search for strategies of emotional deceiving, by means of neurological techniques.** Considering consumers to be irrational beings, and therefore manipulable, drives to design neither rational nor informative advertising, but an emotional and based on brand image one.

We suspect that **this image of consumers transmitted by neuromarketing - presented as irrational beings who make their buying decisions in an irrational and impulsive way- is more an objective than a perception.** Current consumers bear a wide side as consumerist and irresponsible, which has been effect of the advertising and commercial strategies, maintained for many years. Because of this, an ethical marketing should transmit truthful information to consumers, and should promote rational and responsible behavior.

One of the most important characteristics of the human brain is its plasticity. **If current consumers are so emotional and impulsive it is due to socialization and learning processes that they have received to be this way.** Learning other models and values would change their behaviours. Critic and well informed consumers have the same brain function and structure, but they do not show the same emotional and impulsive behaviour.

It cannot be denied that all human behaviour has emotional components. But consumer decisions should be made in a rational way and keeping in mind the ethical, environmental and social consequences of these decisions. Therefore, **we must be warned about any attempts of manipulation** derived from marketing and, even more, facing the neuromarketing techniques which can affect us in a darker and more unconscious way.