Brain-wave advertising research

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Advertisers are growing more interested in neuroscience in their never-ending efforts to improve advertising effectiveness.

The ardour of advertisers to adopt the technical tools of biometrics — measuring brain-waves, galvanic skin response, eye movements, pulse rates and the like — is increasing. These methods promise to get below the surface to understand the non-verbal and unconscious responses to advertisements which make these new neuroscientific methods so intriguing to advertisers.

The continued use of these methods is likely to exacerbate the current schism between advertising creatives and advertising researchers by highlighting the differences between two opposing views of human perception. According to the Gestalt viewpoint favoured by creatives, the relationship between the elements of an ad is that which matters most, not the strength or weakness of individual elements of the commercial.

In the view of the creative Gestalt camp, looking at the peaks and valleys of a target audience's brain waves is just another case of researchers seeing trees instead of the forest - they worry that the essential meaning of the advertising experience, seeing each part in the context of the whole, will get lost in the linear, real-time brain-wave data collected. Other pre-testing systems have been criticised on the same grounds, irrespective of whether this research is qualitative or quantitative.

Recent research reported in ADMAP examined the validity of brain-scan research. An EEG based test, using 68 points on the skull, evaluated the brain's response to a high performing VW Passat commercial aired on the Superbowl finals. These results were compared to an on-line advertising testing system which also evaluates each component of the commercial and how this impacts on communication performance.
This research revealed a number of correlations between the results of the two systems; attention is driven by peaks of scene recall, high brain-activity indicates the creation of meaning and relevance.
While these results are fascinating, care must be used when deciding to pursue this method. It is far from fail-proof.

While peaks in brain-waves drive attention, they are not a strong predictor of viewer memory. This is because our brain acts as a filter, and while a scene may peak attention, if it is of little use to the viewer the scene will quickly be discarded from memory.
In order to understand motivation both meaning and emotion must be generated by a commercial. While neuroscience methods are able to capture the flow of emotional response as a commercials unfolds, brain-wave research is incapable of determining whether or not these emotions are positive or negative.
Neuroscience has validity. It predicts consumer response. But so do "traditional" advertising testing systems. Somewhat ironically, neuroscience has validated "traditional" advertising testing.
And we don't have to sample 68 points on the skull.

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