

Zaltman or Kahneman: who's right?

 By Sid Peimer

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Processing of advertising (or any message) by consumers has been the battlefield for many client-agency relationships. The client wants the benefit, product, and price; the agency wants to tell a story they'd be proud to claim as their own. But how do consumers process information that they don't actively seek out?

Get clarity on this enigma and much more on the upcoming course ['Essential Strategic Planning for Client Service and Creative'](#) to be held in Johannesburg on 18 July.

There are two theories that I think everyone should know. By 'everyone' I include client service, creative, clients and those on anxietytics or antidepressants (which I am told includes 90% of 'everyone' in marketing)[1].

As Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel Prize for economics, I'll let him go first.

Through his research, he discovered that we have 2 modes of attention; he calls them system 1 and system 2 (abbr as S1 and S2). S1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort (and is largely involuntary); S2 allocates attention and requires effort. [2]

What's it cost?

I will use the same example to illustrate both:

If a bat and ball cost R1.10, and the bat costs R1 more, what does the ball cost?

As there is really no consequence to your answer (other than your internal pride), you probably answered 10c. That's S1 in action. However, if I put you in front of a firing squad and the correct answer means life and death, you would ask for a pen and paper, work it out carefully, and answer with the correct amount of 5c. That's S2 in action. So there you have it in a neat box: decide if you want S1 or need S2, and plan your message accordingly.

But real life does not fall into neat little boxes. Gerald Zaltman's theory is somewhat less definitive, but no less enlightening. [3] He proclaims that once the message catches our attention everything kicks in - what you think of the brand, your personal history, how you feel and everything else that can be linked to the brand message (called a consensus map if you really need to know). When the message hits your brain, it goes in one of two directions: the amygdala or the cortex. Here you have no choice: the amygdala gets the message first and reacts accordingly. So, if you see a beautiful women in the street, your amygdala will arouse you to turn and look, however your cortex will quickly involve itself to curtail the activity and prevent your wife giving you 'that' look. I believe this be to be true of both sexes.

It's not a linear process

However, Zaltman does not stop there - it is not a linear process, but a constant dance between the involuntary actions of the amygdala and your conscious thoughts occurring in the cortex. Think of sitting around a campfire listening to a ghost story. Our cortex listens to the sequence of events that 'actually happened in this forest', as your amygdala gets the odd jolt from the eerie sounds of nature. Hence the dance between conscious thought and involuntary response to give you the end result: a sleepless night.

Whether S1, S2, the amygdala or cortex, a good ad is one that the agency is proud to produce for a client who is proud to produce his sales results at the end of the quarter.

You can get more insights on strategy on the upcoming course '[Essential Strategic Planning for Client Service and Creative](#)' to be held in Johannesburg on 18 July.

References:

Ref 1: I made this up.

Ref 2: D Kahneman. Thinking fast and slow. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York. 2013.

Ref 3: Gerald Zaltman. How Consumers Think. Harvard Business School Press. 2003.

ABOUT SID PEIMER

A seasoned and insightful executive with multisector experience in roles as diverse as senior management, strategic planning and copywriting. I am a qualified pharmacist with an MBA from UCT. I am also an accomplished keynote speaker and presenter.

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