WBA

WHOLE BRAIN THINKING AND BRANDS

Some years ago, my business partner Mike Beckerleg and I bought into the idea that the best way to understand a brand is to think of it in human terms.

This humanisation of brands is not a new idea. It’s been around for a while.

But the more we thought about it, the more sense it made. After all, brands behave in very human ways and seem to have very human motivations.

Ask yourself this question: What does a brand want?

Well, obviously it wants you to notice it and to like it. But more than that it wants you to trust it and be loyal to it. And it would like you to say nice things about it behind its back. To act as an advocate.

And isn’t that what you want too? To be noticed, liked, trusted and praised, even or especially when you are not in the room?

So, bearing in mind these parallel universes, we asked ourselves, ‘Is there a tool that is good at understanding human behaviour that we could adapt and use to understand brand behaviour?’

So, we explored a range of psychometric profiling systems, things like Myers Briggs and DiSC, LSI and so on, and hit upon one that was a perfect fit for our needs.

The Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument. Otherwise known as the Whole Brain Model.

This tool has been popular since the late seventies and explains human behaviour by understanding human thinking. It looks at how we think. In fact, it deconstructs how we think and identifies four different thinking ‘styles’ and then measures which and what combination of them we prefer to use in our everyday lives.

Research over the years has proven it be extraordinarily accurate and stable, by which I mean that it is very consistent in how it determines and presents these results, unlike some of the other systems which can vary unpredictably.

So, before we look at how the Whole Brain Model can give us insights into a brand, let’s understand how it works, how it evolved, and what it might have to say about you.

As you’ll see, it’s a tool that leads to very easy self-diagnosis. Over the years, Mike and I have found that people easily use the concept to recognise their own thinking processes and preferences.

So, let’s start with this guy:

(Picture of Roger Sperry)

Roger Sperry. He won a Nobel Prize back in the early 80s for explaining the different thought processes that are favoured by the left brain and the right brain.

The idea that the two hemispheres of the brain worked differently was by no means new. Way back in Roman times it was observed that soldiers who sustained injuries to one side of their head suffered very different symptoms and disabilities to those that were wounded on the other side.

(Insert picture of Roman Battle)

But Sperry, by observing the effects of corpus callosotomy, an operation that severs the nerve channel that connects the two hemispheres - an operation that was designed to help epileptics - he was able to determine how each side was operating.

Essentially, he told us this.

The left-hand side of the brain is more involved in analysis and step-by-step systematic thinking, while the right-hand side is more attuned to creativity and holistic thinking.

(Insert picture/diagram of left and right side of brain)

This proved to be such a popular explanation that we’ve absorbed his concept into language. We talk of right brain people, left brain activities and so on.

However, there were those who took issue with this analysis.

Namely, this guy.

(Insert Picture of Paul MacLean)

Paul Maclean.

A similarly eminent neuroscientist and contemporary of Roger Sperry, he proposed a different model. One he called the Triune theory.

Instead of left to right, he worked from top to bottom as he believed that is how the human brain evolved.

We started with a reptilian brain. When we first slithered out of the primal ooze, this brain was dedicated to our survival. It controlled blood flow, breathing, temperature and our fight or flight system. It wasn’t a thinking brain, it was an instinctive brain. And for that reason, even though it’s still there at the top of your spine, we’ll ignore it from this model we’re going to build today.

(Insert image of man from earliest evolution. Tetrapod fossil)

But, as the brain evolved on top of the reptilian brain, we developed an emotional brain called the Limbic System. This gave birth to our feelings which in turn led to us forming communities, nurturing our young and protecting one another. We became social creatures.

(Insert image of primitive man in communities)

This was not a quick upgrade. It took around 1-2 hundred million years for the limbic system to fully develop.

But then the brain continued to evolve. And over the next 1-2 hundred million years, we developed a Neo Cortex on top of our limbic system. Actually, it’s the last 2-3 million years that really count as this is when the neo cortex became our thinking system.

This top part of our brain is where consciousness resides. Here we handle logical and abstract thinking, planning and decision making, language and sensory perception.

(Insert image of digital brain)

Putting it simply, you could think of it as our brain’s computer.

So, in Paul MacLean’s scheme of things, we now have an upper and lower brain that looks like this:

(Insert graphic of brain where the hemispheres are on top of one another – upper one blue, lower one red)

Given that both these concepts were being proposed in much the same decade, it would appear that we have conflicting theories, a battle of the brains!

However, interestingly, this apparent contradiction was resolved by man who was both a scientist and an artist. A man who used both sides, and the bottom and top of his brain. He used his Whole Brain!

(Insert shot of Ned Herrmann)

Ned Herrmann studied both Physics and Music at Cornell University and went on to become the head of Management Education at General Electric. There, he had a massive workforce on which he could experiment and test his ideas.

In 1978, he had a resounding ‘Aha!’ moment when considering Roger Sperry and Paul MacLean’s models of brain activity.

He decided that they were both correct!!

The apparent contradiction was easily resolved if you superimpose one model on top of the other and create not two halves, but a four-quadrant graphical representation of how the brain works.

It looks like this:

(Insert the slides that reveal how each quadrant is formed by combining the two theories.)

If we combine, or overlay the neocortex onto the left brain, we get an upper left quadrant that has a preference for facts, numbers and analysis. It offers a view of the world that is rather scientific. It likes measurable certainties. Think of it as a lens through which we can choose to look. All of us are capable of viewing the world this way, but for some people it’s very much their preference. Scientists, financiers, mathematicians would favour this lens.

Ned Herrman gave this quadrant the colour blue.

Now, if we go down to the limbic system and combine that with the left brain, we get a quadrant that prefers to think in systems and process and has an emotional need for safety. People who prefer to look at the world through this lens value predictability. They make excellent managers and organisers. They get things done on time and on budget. They believe process will ensure a good outcome.

Ned made this quadrant green.

Then, if we skip over to the right side of the brain but stay down in the limbic system, we get a quadrant that combines feeling with creativity. People who favour this combination of thinking modes tend to be very intuitive, they’re ‘people-people’, and judge a situation more by feeling than analysis. That makes them very different from the diametrically opposed people in the blue quadrant and we’ll discuss the implications of that a little later.

And then lastly, if we stay on the creative right-hand side and go up into the rational neo-cortex, we find a quadrant that likes Ideas, concepts and newness. People who favour this yellow quadrant are very different from those in the green. They enjoy risk and uncertainty, they value difference over conformity.

(slide build now reveals all four quadrants)

If you’re wondering what all this has to do with branding, bear with me. As you’ll see, the filter we use to view a brand shapes our perceptions of it.

Interestingly, in terms of preference our population is divided quite equally. So roughly a quarter of us have a preference for each quadrant.

But two things are very important to stress.

Firstly, this is about preference, not competence. We can all choose to look at the world through these different filters. But, over time, we do develop preferences. But that doesn’t mean that accountants lack empathy or artists lack process.

Because the second important point to make is that no-one looks through just one lens!!!

It’s about balance and combination. To a greater or lesser extent, we tend to use all of the lenses, all of the quadrants. True, some people do actively avoid a quadrant. I myself am very low on blue. But, that said, I can divide a restaurant bill by four and still make allowances for whoever drank the expensive cocktail!! I just wouldn’t make a very good financial advisor!!

So, take a moment to look at this concept and ask yourself about your own thinking preferences.

You can get a very accurate assessment by filling out the Herrmann Questionnaire at their website.

But, over the years, Mike and I have debriefed hundreds of them, and we always start by asking people to guess their profile. They are usually very accurate. It seems, in respect of how we think, we actually know ourselves quite well.

So, this is the Whole Brain Model and, in the next module, we’re going to use this concept as a means to deconstruct and understand brands.

And in later modules, we look at the many ways you can use the Whole Brain Model to improve communication, design presentations, develop strategies, think creatively, build better teams, talk more persuasively, negotiate more effectively.

As you’ll see, the Whole Brain Model is the Swiss Army Knife of psychometric profiling tools and has a host of useful applications to people working in marketing.

But, for now, let’s focus on how it can help us deconstruct and understand a brand.

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