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How Personality Makes a Difference

Joseph T. Plummer

ABSTRACT
This paper is one of 18 selected by the Editorial Review Board of The Journal of Advertising Research to be a 'classic' - an article that has withstood the test of time. First published in 1984, Plummer develops the theory that it is the brand personality (the part of a brand image that is not purely physical or functional) that determines its appeal - and that measuring and adjusting consumer perceptions of brand personality can really make a difference. He uses Dr Pepper as a case study.

As consumer researchers we are all probably pleased about some of the recent progress in the area of understanding and researching consumers. A variety of approaches and methodologies are now available that examine the consumer from every conceivable angle. To my mind, however, no approach has been more enigmatic or has been held with such high expectations as that of personality research borrowed from the field of psychology.

The whole concept of personality and its relationship to how consumers respond has always had a lot of intuitive appeal to consumer researchers. If - as this feeling goes - we can only isolate and understand the basic driving force that predisposes consumers to act in certain ways, and personality traits must be one of those driving forces, then our jobs, of course, could be made much easier.

It is understandable, also, that personality researchers in psychology and in consumer behavior have devoted much time and attention to developing a whole array of tools: theories that identify important personality characteristics; scales that classify personality traits; and multivariate techniques that systematically relate personality traits to behavior. In some cases, the fervor of these endeavors would even pale the search for the Holy Grail.

Why, then, has personality research as applied to people and their behavior as consumers, failed to live up to such high expectations? Why hasn't all of this effort had at least some impact on our working models of consumer behavior and the day-to-day decisions we make based on these models?

Once we step back away from the particulars, we begin to get a sense that personality research as it is generally conceptualized and undertaken has several flaws that limit its utility.

Conceptually, one of the biggest problems that has to be overcome is how to define personality and, importantly, how this concept as defined relates to people's lives. One popular working definition is that personality is the way individuals react fairly consistently to a variety of environmental situations. However, no researcher can ever 'observe' a person in all relevant situations to make sure that person is reacting in a consistent manner across the board. Furthermore, we could question whether in fact certain personality traits can be all that stable over time. It is entirely possible that people could exhibit some traits when they are young - and simply outgrow them as they mature.

Apart from the problem of defining what personality means, the mere proliferation of personality batteries and scales points to the fact that we simply do not have one 'best' way of measuring it within human beings in a valid, reliable way.

This dilemma presents a real 'catch-22' for personality researchers. 'Purists' in the field insist on using scales in which the validity and reliability have been established and documented - and they administer the scales exactly as prescribed. Unfortunately, these kinds of scales and batteries tend to be developed under 'laboratory' conditions - and may not be the best survey tool for understanding and segmenting people as it relates to consumer purchasing and consumption.

'Pragmatists' in the field believe that the personality measures should address people as consumers, so they tend to develop their own scales and batteries. But many of these researchers would be hard-pressed to demonstrate that their scales are really measuring the personality traits they claim the scales are measuring, and - probably due to cost and time constraints - just do not bother with the proper reliability checks.

If defining and measuring personality are not insurmountable barriers, then research designs that incorporate personality variables make the utility of personality research questionable. Many studies either implicitly or explicitly assume that somehow certain personality traits can lead people to behave in certain ways.

Many empirical studies have been completed based on this premise. Yet in the final analysis - when all of the methodological and statistical geegaws are stripped away - we have, at best, a 'direct line' relationship that amounts to about 10% of the variance in behavior. Obviously, the other 90% reflects the vast complexity of people, and the sum total of their being, of which personality is only one part.

Major efforts over the years to profile buyers versus non-buyers, such as the classic work by Evans in the early 1960s where he attempted to profile Chevrolet owners versus Ford owners on numerous personality traits, or the recent personality scales in the Simmons media and market surveys, have met with mixed results, at best, primarily for two reasons: First, they were never based upon any strong theoretical consumer model - they were merely research profiling exercises across accepted personality traits. Secondly, most researchers and almost all marketing or advertising decision-makers were unsure how to interpret or translate the results into action.

The most vivid example of which I am aware in the area of personality segmentation research was conducted by Procter and Gamble in the early 1970s. As you would expect, P&G approached the research with care, diligence, and some of the best research minds in and outside the company they could utilize. After three years of effort, it was finally abandoned because the brand and advertising managers could not effectively deal with results. A valiant but unsuccessful effort.

But do not lose hope - there is an area of personality research which we (and I am sure others) are working with that *is* useful and can make a difference. It is the personality of brands - not individuals. At Young & Rubicam we have been examining the issue of brand personality for a number of years. There are in reality two different faces of brand personality. It is necessary to understand both faces in order to better grasp the totality and power of this useful strategic concept.

We found initially that there was some semantic confusion and differences in terminology to be cleared up, not least of which is the difference between brand image and brand personality. Let us talk about brand image first. A brand presents itself to the world in many ways - through the product itself, through its packaging, its name, where it is sold. A brand sold in a supermarket is communicating something.

The world, on the other hand, interprets the brand through many different filters; through experience, through perceptions, misconceptions, the value systems of the individuals out there in the world, and, of course, all the noise in the system. Because if there is one thing we know, it is that transmissions are rarely clear and unambiguous.

The two faces of brand personality therefore are input, that is, what we want consumers to think and feel, and out-take, what consumers actually do think and feel. These two perspectives on brand personality can be expressed in two forms. The first is the brand personality statement, that is, our communication goals for the brand which have been in use at Y&R for many years as an important part of creative strategy. And the other is the brand personality profiles, which are consumer perceptions of the brand.

As we all know, any brand can be described in terms of three different classes of characteristics. The first consists of its physical attributes. Tang is an orange powder that comes in a jar and costs 69 cents. These physical attributes of the brand are independently verifiable. That is, an individual can see for him or herself exactly what the characteristics of the brand may be. The second way of describing a brand is in terms of its functional characteristics or the consequences of using a brand. Lemon-freshened Pledge polishes your furniture. It repels dust. These kinds of consequences of brand use are also objectively verifiable. However, if you use lemon-freshened Pledge, it may also have the consequence of communicating to you or to others that you are a good homemaker or a careful shopper. Thus, the functional consequences of using a brand are in some cases external functions and in other cases have internal effects on the head of the person who is using the product. The third way of describing a brand is characterizational. That is, a brand may be characterized as modern or old-fashioned, or lively, or exotic. These characterizational aspects of the brand are what we call the brand's personality. The characterizational aspects of the brand or its personality are purely the result of communications because there is rarely anything intrinsic to a brand that makes it lively, or exotic, or sophisticated.

There are a lot of different ways of describing how advertising works, and there are all manners of complex models that various people have advanced to objectify this process. My rather simplistic view is that the consumer who favors or uses any particular brand most often has looked at all this information and communication that we have, as advertisers and marketers, put out about the brand. And somewhere inside his or her head he or she has said, I see myself in that brand, or I see that brand in myself. A non-favorer, on the other hand, has looked at all this information that is out there about the brand and concluded that that brand is not for him. He does not see himself in that brand or that brand in himself and, consequently, he is a non-favorer of that brand and a favorer of some other brand. Brand personality can play a key role in the 'for me' choice.

So then, to recapitulate, there are three primary components to a brand’s image, three aspects of the brand's description. There are its physical elements or attributes, the functional characteristics or the benefits or consequences of using a brand, and the way the brand is characterized, or its personality. These elements, mediated by whatever the viewer brings to the interaction, are in some way transformed into the viewer's head into 'appropriate for me' or 'not appropriate for me'; or possibly, 'me for it.'

The brand personality statement is primarily a strategic tool for the creative. It is written by the creatives and is used by them. It is used to some degree as a mirror to hold up to their work, to see whether the ads or commercials that are produced are consonant with the personality as expressed in the brand personality statement. It is an articulation of what we would like consumers out there in the world to feel about our brand over time.

The brand personality consumer profiles are quite different. Their role and function is different. The way they are written is different, and the way they are measured and evaluated is different. While brand personality statements have been in use at Y&R for over 10 years, the profiles are a recent research development.

The goal of the brand personality profiles is to describe perceptual reality from the consumer perception. That is, they should reflect the way consumers actually feel about the brand rather than simply being an expression of the way we would like consumers to feel about the brand. The profiles should identify salient components of the brand's personality. That is, they should indicate which dimensions are strong and which dimensions are weak. The profiles should be used to compare population subgroups because if there is one thing we know about any number that we get through research, it is that that number alone is wrong and often misleading. If we do a piece of research and get something that says 35%, we know that in reality it isn't 35%. It is more or less 35% or around 35%, but not precisely 35%. In order to understand what that 35% means, we have to compare it to something else. If 35% of the population says that a brand is modern, this has a different meaning if it is examined in the context of a 55% for old-fashioned than in the context of a 15% for old-fashioned.

Brand personality profiles tend to be portrayed or written in graphic form because it is easier to understand relationships when you see charts rather than an array of numbers. But still, you've got to have some numbers to back up the charts so you know what the charts refer to, and, finally, as indicated, they should be written in terms of comparisons; comparisons between relevant subgroups, or comparisons of the profiles of one brand to those of another.

The brand personality profiles are measured through consumer surveys in most cases. We have developed some relatively simple checklist procedures to give the actual measurement.

I'd like to briefly share with you the R&D we went through to make the profiles an operational tool at Young & Rubicam. We did some early developmental work on brand personality, intending to see whether simple checklist procedures could discriminate between brands. We started off with a relatively easy task. That is to say, if the procedure could not differentiate between some well-known brands like Miller High Life, Holiday Inn, and Oil of Olay, we'd have to go back to the drawing board and find some other procedure. So we developed a 50-attribute checklist from previous research on personality and in-depth interviews. We asked respondents to indicate which of the words and phrases on our list they would use to describe each of the brands we were interested in. When we looked at the data it was clear that this procedure did indeed discriminate.

Taking a look at the first attribute which was 'cheerful,' we found that 39% of the sample said Holiday Inn was 'cheerful,' while only 6% said Birds Eye was 'cheerful.' Forty-two percent described Atari as 'youthful' and only 3% described Holiday Inn as 'youthful.' Thirty-nine percent described Oil of Olay as 'gentle' and 0% described Miller High Life as 'gentle.' Thus it was clear that this checklist did discriminate by looking at the data horizontally from brand to brand. Looking at the profiles of the different brands, they also seem to make sense. Holiday Inn was described as 'cheerful','friendly,' 'ordinary,' 'practical,' 'modern,' 'reliable,' and 'honest.' Oil of Olay was described as 'gentle,' 'sophisticated,' 'mature,' 'exotic,' 'mysterious,' and 'down to earth.' So the procedure that we were using at least met the relatively simple criterion of being able to differentiate between some major brands across different product categories.

Since brand personality is largely symbolic, we thought it would be interesting to play around with some symbols. So we asked respondents to play a game with us. You have all played the game which goes: 'If you were a vegetable what kind of vegetable would you be? If you were an animal, what kind of an animal would you be?' We asked the respondents to describe the brands in these terms. We gave them a list of 29 animals and said: 'If each of these brands was an animal, what one animal would it be?' We also showed them 25 different activities, 17 fabrics, 35 occupations, 20 nationalities, and 21 magazines. When we had finished this process, each respondent had created his or her own unique symbol for each of the brands. That symbol was a particular animal, a particular activity, a fabric, an occupation, a nationality, and a magazine. We then asked the respondents to describe this complex symbol that they had created by means of the same list of 50 attributes that we had used to describe the brands. Indeed, respondents were quite able to do this test.

When we take a look at the average symbols that were created, that is, the most frequently mentioned animals, countries, occupations, and so forth, a rather interesting picture emerged. For Oil of Olay, for instance, the animal was mink, the country was France, the occupation was secretary, the fabric was silk, the activity was swimming, and the magazine was *Vogue.* It does sort of bring to mind the picture of someone’s secretary on the Riviera, by the swimming pool, in a silk bathing suit, reading *Vogue,* with her mink coat on the adjacent chair. This was quite different from the symbol for Kentucky Fried Chicken, which was a Puerto Rican zebra, a housewife dressed in denim, camping, and reading *TV Guide.* When we looked at those data we said, 'Zebra, why should Kentucky Fried Chicken be a zebra?' We didn’t know. So we went to the product group and said, 'Why is Kentucky Fried Chicken a zebra?' And they said, ‘Look at the package, look at the stripes.' So it seemed apparent that there was indeed some reasoning behind the characteristics that the respondents were ascribing to the brand, at least in these symbolic terms.

I said earlier that our simple model of the advertising process is one which says that consumers see all the information about the brand that we are putting out and either do or do not see themselves reflected in that brand. When we take a look at who consumers thought the stereotypical user of Oil of Olay was, that is, how they would describe a woman who uses Oil of Olay rather than some alternative facial moisturizer, that woman was described as 'mature,' 'down-to-earth’ 'calm,' 'honest,' 'practical,' and so forth. In short, the stereotypical user of Oil of Olay is a pretty down-to-earth, solid female citizen. Whereas the personality of the brand was somewhat more upscaled and aspirational. This is probably quite appropriate for a cosmetic since, at least to some degree, women buy cosmetics to reflect what they would like to be rather than what they actually are.

I would like to share a recent case history where brand personality and the brand personality profiles played a major role in advertising development. The brand is Dr Pepper. But to fully appreciate the case, we need to take a step back in time.

During the 1960s Dr Pepper's rate of growth had been better than double that of the industry and of its major competitors. In 1969, it was in fifth place nationally in case sales behind Coke, Pepsi, 7-Up, and Royal Crown. Its growth had stemmed obviously from increased availability nationally, but of equal importance was its continued share growth in the Southwest.

Consumer research undertaken at this time indicated that there was a high degree of awareness (on an aided basis) that Dr Pepper was indeed a soft drink. However, there were the following misconceptions about the brand: It is made from prune juice; it contains peppers or pepper sauce; it is medicinal; it aids regularity; and so on. Even in the Southwest, where the brand was second only to Coke in sales, some of these myths persisted. These misconceptions made many people reluctant to try Dr Pepper. Also, first-time triers were often disappointed because they had not been properly prepared for its taste difference (because of its brown color, many expected it to taste like a cola). Lastly, Dr Pepper was heavily outspent in media by Coke, Pepsi, and 7-Up. As a result brand perception, power, and recognition were low. Based upon analysis of this research, along with other market data, the advertising objectives that followed seemed obvious: convince young experimental prospects that Dr Pepper is a deliciously different-tasting soft drink. However, the 'how' was more difficult.

The campaign that emerged has since become a part of advertising history. The slogan that was created was: 'Dr Pepper - America's Most Misunderstood Soft Drink.' The copy initially met the misconceptions head-on and used them as a handle in explaining that Dr Pepper is a good-tasting, unique soft drink - Originally, 'misunderstood' commercials positioned Dr Pepper as an underdog fighting to gain awareness and used company spokesmen setting out to dispel the misconception and gain new 'triers' - in fun, and at times, irreverant and larger-than-life situations. Over the years. the campaign evolved so that the company spokesmen were replaced with recent converts attempting to convince - 'hold-outs' to try Dr Pepper. It was successful not only in building a bright new characterization for Dr Pepper, but also in terms of adding to sales increases. Dr Pepper, from 1969 to 1974, grew at a rate better than double that of the industry. In 1973 it passed Royal Crown in sales, moving into fourth position nationally. By 1974, top-of-mind awareness had increased dramatically. The brand was in fourth position in sales and moving up on third place.

In truth. Dr Pepper was no longer misunderstood. It had come into its own, As successful as the 'misunderstood' campaign had been, it was time for a change. With the change in market position, the misunderstood stance was no longer appropriate; it was time for Dr Pepper to behave and talk like the contender that it had become. It seemed only logical that the new advertising should be more positive and even more aggressive.

However, many of the factors that originally made Dr Pepper misunderstood were what had made Dr Pepper unique. No matter how understood it had become, Dr Pepper still had the most distinctive taste of any soft drink, the most distinctive name of any soft drink, and the most individual personality of any soft drink. In the soft-drink spectrum, it stands alone as a true original. In the words of the Y&R creative supervisor at that time Dr Pepper was-' 'The Most Original Soft Drink Ever.' And that, of course, is the way that the new advertising positioned this unique drink: as 'The Most Original Soft Drink Ever.' Naturally enough it was hoped that 'The Most Original Soft Drink Ever' should have the most original advertising ever

An effective medium for telling stories with music is the Broadway musical. Accordingly, the agency creative team created five mini-Broadway productions for the television campaign, and productions are what they were. Even though they were all subsequently filmed on a theater stage, they were all different. Each in its own right was a story about Dr Pepper.

Dr Pepper continued to see consumer response and growth. The launch of Sugar Free Dr Pepper, to capitalize on the rejuvenation of the diet segment in the mid-seventies, also provided additional growth. With its newly found status of a major factor in the soft-drink industry, Dr Pepper began to close in on the third-ranked brand 7-Up, and a strategic change was made in 1979. The strategic shift was designed to capitalize on Dr Pepper's perceived mainstream position and to focus on its popularity. After all, the long-term goal was to double its size by 1985, the company's 100th year. The agency created a new campaign featuring David Naughton meeting 'Peppers' everywhere he danced across the USA. The 'Be A Pepper' - original like a Pepper was launched. But then David decided to become a werewolf in London and new management from the world of package goods arrived in Dallas. The new management requested a retrial strategy for Dr Pepper and a completely separate positioning and campaign for Sugar Free Dr Pepper.

In the midst of the Coke-Pepsi war, the launch of Sunkist, Mountain Dew, and a slew of other brands targeted against the Dr Pepper youth franchise, growth for Dr Pepper had come to a screeching halt! Several of us believed that beyond what was going on competitively, we had inadvertently walked away from Dr Pepper's major strength - its unique brand personality. That was what really set it apart for certain consumers as an alternative to Coke and Pepsi and fruit flavors. The problem was how to convince Dr Pepper's management of this matter. What we decided to do was do small-scale brand-personality research on our own.

In the Dr Pepper research we concentrated on the brand-personality gap between favorers and nonfavorers to add support to our original hypothesis about the 'Dr Pepper problem.' We could see from the results that the personality of the brand that was in the heads of these two drinker populations was quite different. There was really very little relationship between these two images. The question that we asked ourselves was: Is this simply a characteristic of the product category, that there is no real similarity in the way these two different categories of consumers perceived the brand?

When we look at the image of Coke, as held by favorers and nonfavorers, we see that by and large they match very closely. There is a difference in level, but for most items the brand is perceived very much the same by favorers and nonfavorers.

We also examined the image of the stereotypical user of the brand, and once again we found that people's perception of the kind of person who uses Dr Pepper is quite different when you look at the perceptions of favorers and nonfavorers of Dr Pepper. For Coke, once again, the image is exactly the same. Both favorers and nonfavorers have the same perception of what are the characteristics of the typical 'drinker.'

We concluded from this, and the client concurred, that our loyal users still retained the original, fun, off-beat, and underdog personality the advertising had built up over the years. But other consumers exposed more recently to the newer advertising with changing campaigns, multiple messages, and a more mainstream personality perceived Dr Pepper differently. We had to get back to the real brand personality in our advertising, but express it in a radically fresh way.

In summary, we have the brand-personality profiles, the brand-personality statements, and the procedure that we use to integrate the two in order to know what we want to maintain, what we want to change, and how best to go about doing it. Therefore, while the success of personality segmentation on consumer populations to create personality typologies or unique user profiles using survey methodology has not proven very useful to marketers and advertising people, we, at any rate, are very encouraged by our work with brand personality. It is in this new arena of brand personality that research does make a difference!

NOTES & EXHIBITS

Joseph Plummer

Joseph T. Plummer is executive vice president and director of research services at Young & Rubicam USA, and is a member of the board of directors. He is based at Young & Rubicam New York.

Prior to becoming Y&R's research director in March 1979, Mr. Plummer had been with the Leo Burnett Co. in Chicago where he was senior vice president and research director.

Dr. Plummer holds a B.A. degree from Westminster College (PA) and both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in communications from Ohio State University. He is on the editorial boards of the Journal of Marketing, Journal of Advertising, Journal of Advertising Research, Journal of Broadcasting, and Journal of Business Research. He is a frequent contributor to these and other research and marketing publications.

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