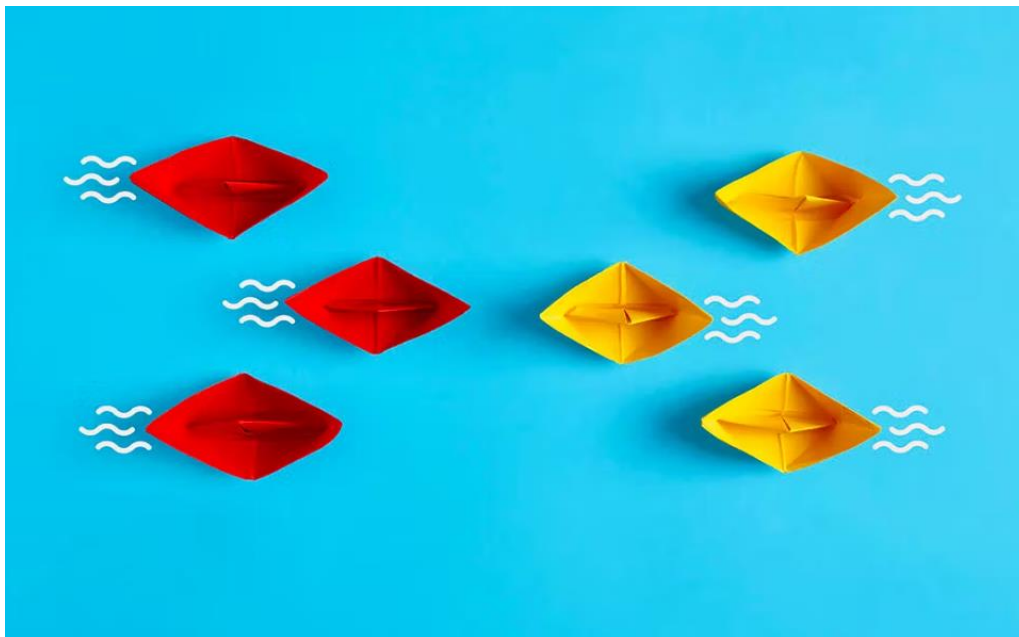


In the battle between salience and differentiation, Bothism wins

Marketers debate over salience and differentiation like they are mutually exclusive, when the evidence shows both in combination will deliver the best results.



“You come at the King, you best not miss.” That’s the advice I offer Professor Felipe Thomaz after his recent interview and entertaining critique of the work of Byron Sharp and the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute.

Sharp was in fine form a month ago Down Under, deriding a range of marketing concepts including the long and the short, attention theory and cross-media synergies, a concept he dismissed as a “bit of a myth”. The comment clearly angered Thomaz, an associate professor of marketing at Oxford University’s Saïd Business School, who had recently published a paper on exactly that topic.

[In an interview published on Contagious.com this week](#), Thomaz noted the published evidence that spreading marketing investments across different media channels does indeed generate significant additional impact.

“We’ve known that these things interact powerfully for a very long time,” the Brazilian marketing academic explained. “Holding the idea that it doesn’t is weird to me. Somebody that knows how marketing works would know that these things exist, at varying levels of strength for different conditions.”

And Thomaz was not done there. Pausing to note that most marketing scholars would not even have heard of mental and physical availability, he went on to claim that Sharp’s How Brands Grow had “selected carefully around existing frameworks and left out important details”. Specifically, Thomaz is uncomfortable with the manner in which Sharp has dismissed differentiation

“By removing differentiation, he’s broken branding,” Thomaz concluded rather dramatically.

According to “100 years” of evidence, Thomaz suggests that the rest of marketing academia believes that differentiation not only exists, but is essential.

“Growth is a function of perceived differentiation. Distinctiveness doesn’t work. There’s work with Google on YouTube looking at thousands of ads, and distinctiveness of assets doesn’t break into the top 10 characteristics that drive performance.”

For marketers, the key lesson is that when they build brands they need to divide their attention and their efforts across both concepts.

Thomaz does have something of a point. For many years, Ehrenberg-Bass has consistently suggested that “differentiation plays a more limited role in brand competition than the orthodox literature assumes”. But the devil is in the differentiated detail.

There is no doubt that 20th-century approaches to brand differentiation were riddled with bullshit and basic impossibility. The ‘unique selling proposition’ (USP) is a nonsensical concept if you step back and think about it for longer than two seconds. Worse than Maslow. So, too, is the idea that a brand can own one or more specific attributes versus its competitors. You just don’t see that in the data, ever. The premise that brands had to differentiate or die shows the degree to which marketers overzealously prayed at the altar of differentiation over the past century.

The impact of Ehrenberg-Bass on ridiculing these extremes should be praised. It was not only good, accurate work but also an essential reality check for addled marketers high on American-written best-selling bullshit. The problem is that Ehrenberg-Bass has the habit of overegging its scientific omelettes

Yes, differentiation does play a more limited role in brand growth. But it does play a role. And adherents of How Brands Grow have taken the theory too far in expounding the absence of all differentiation. Quite clearly, that is a nonsense. Brands are perceived differently by customers and differentiation does matter in brand choice.

‘Bothism’ is the cure for marketers’ fascination with pointless conflict

Professor Thomaz therefore deserves a disciplinary pat on the back for making such a strong case for differentiation. But, like Ehrenberg-Bass, he also overstates and overeggs his response. Suggesting that “distinctiveness does not work” is nonsensical. If there is one empirical gift that Ehrenberg-Bass has given marketers, it is a renewed focus on salience and the important role that coming to mind in buying situations plays in brand growth.

And no, it’s not just the same as the Kevin Keller-derived models of the 1990s that Thomaz refers to in his interview. I know these models.

I taught them for many years – that a brand is built from the gateway variable of awareness, and then the associations that these brands elicit in the mind of the consumer.

Salience is more important than brand awareness. More situational. More fleeting. And it plays a much more important role in driving preference and rationalised preference than the Keller models suggest.

While not wanting to add another appendage to this already virile cockfight, I might suggest that both Thomaz and Sharp could learn a thing or two from my work on [Bothism](#). Clearly this is a perfect example of two marketing concepts at loggerheads with each other, which form a much more complete and potent ideal when conjoined together.

We need brand salience and the associated theories of distinctiveness to build stronger brands. It's clear from System1 modelling, the B2B Institute's work and host of other exemplars that salience must be a prime focus for all marketers. Sharp is correct.

But Thomaz has a point too. The last decade has been salience-obsessed, at the expense of brand image and the equally important potential of brand differentiation. It's not the straw-man argument of a USP, which we all must agree is nonsense, but the potential for relative differentiation across a small but important array of associations. You can promote that belief without belittling the concept of brand salience or the spectacular impact and rigour of Sharp's thinking.

For marketers, the key lesson is that when they build brands they need to divide their attention and their efforts across both concepts. On a single page of paper you need a list of the distinctive brand assets that will deliver distinctiveness. But beneath that list you also need a clear, tight brand position that – if correctly executed – will result in valuable, relevant, relative differentiation.

Thomaz is right. And wrong. So is Sharp. We need distinctiveness and differentiation. Bothism for the win and the win. Once again.

