

NEWS RELEASE

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Commercial Alert Asks Emory University to Halt Neuromarketing Experiments

Commercial Alert and prominent psychology experts sent a letter today to Emory University President James Wagner, requesting that Emory stop conducting neuromarketing experiments. These medical experiments on human subjects are unethical because they will likely be used to promote disease and human suffering.

If Emory University is found to have violated federal ethics rules regarding experiments on human subjects, it may lose its federal research funding.

Neuromarketing is a controversial new field of marketing which uses functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) – a medical technology -- not to heal, but to sell products. A BrightHouse Institute for Thought Sciences news release issued June 22, 2002 explains that it uses fMRI “to identify patterns of brain activity that reveal how a consumer is actually evaluating a product, object or advertisement. Thought Sciences marketing analysts use this information to more accurately measure consumer preference, and then apply this knowledge to help marketers better create products and services and to design more effective marketing campaigns.”

The BrightHouse Institute’s neuromarketing experiments are conducted in the neuroscience wing of the Emory University Hospital.

The letter to Emory University President James Wagner follows.

Dear Mr. Wagner:

The realm of marketing and market research has never been a model of ethical scruple. But recent developments there are truly macabre in their implications. The hucksters have enlisted research labs to map the brain’s activation responses in order prod desires for particular products.

This new field is called “neuromarketing.” It seeks, in the words of *Forbes* magazine, to “find a buy button inside the skull.” It sounds like something that could have happened in the former Soviet Union, for the purposes of behavior control. Yet it is happening right here in America, at a major university – your university. “The neuroscience wing at Emory University,” the *New York Times* reports, “is the epicenter of the neuromarketing world.”

That is a dubious honor. Universities exist to free the mind, and enlighten it. They do not exist to find new ways to subjugate the mind and manipulate it for commercial gain. Emory’s quest for a “buy button” in the human skull is an egregious violation of the very reason that a

university exists. It also likely violates the principles of the Belmont Report, which sets out guidelines for research on human subjects in the United States.

Emory's descent into neuromarketing is a project of something called the BrightHouse Institute for Thought Sciences, which is the leading neuromarketing research firm. (The name itself is Orwellian: the whole point of neuromarketing is to bypass thought, not encourage it.) The Institute in turn is part of BrightHouse, an advertising agency whose clients have included Coca-Cola, Pepperidge Farm, K-Mart and Home Depot. BrightHouse uses the Emory University Hospital's Magnetic Resonance Imaging machine to conduct its neuromarketing experiments.

The BrightHouse website boasts of having the "most-advanced neuroscientific research capabilities and understanding of how the brain thinks, feels and motivates behavior." This knowledge of the brain enables corporations to "establish the foundation for loyal, long-lasting consumer relationships," the website says. Loyalty through brain mapping, in other words.

The founder and chief executive officer is Joseph Alden Reiman, an adjunct professor at Emory University's Goizueta Business School. According to the BrightHouse website, Reiman is also Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Emory University School of Medicine. The "chief scientist" at the Institute is Clinton D. Kilts, professor and vice-chair for research in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences.

Dr. Kilts is an expert in addiction. He has published such articles as "Neural activity related to drug craving in cocaine addiction," and "Imaging the roles of the amygdala in drug addiction."

Dr. Kilts's research interests include "drug craving induced by mental imagery of drug use-related scenes," according to his Emory University School of Medicine web page. Is Dr. Kilts now using his knowledge of addiction to sell products such as Coke? Is he working on mental mapping to induce product cravings through the use of product-related scenes? Dr. Kilts has declined to respond to repeated calls regarding his neuromarketing research.

The Belmont Report requires a systematic assessment of risks and benefits in research on human subjects, and that the benefits outweigh the risks. The risks of this research are obvious, as is the moral repulsiveness. The benefits are more questionable, except to corporations such as Coca-Cola.

At the most basic physical level, neurological marketing research relies on the use of Magnetic Resonance Imaging on human subjects. Strong magnets can harm human subjects if they have metal in their bodies (e.g. cardiac pacemaker, aneurism clips, intrauterine devices, some dental work, body piercings) or are carrying metal, such as coins or jewelry. Such harm is not likely but the possibility does exist. Research subjects occasionally report dizziness or nausea when their heads are moved within the bore of the magnet.

That's on top of any unknown adverse effects of placing a human subject in the intense magnetic field required for an MRI. It is hard to believe that this procedure is helpful when not medically required.

But such potential physical harms are secondary. The real risk of neuromarketing research is to the people – including children – who are the real targets of this research. Already, marketing is deeply implicated in a host of pathologies. The nation is in the midst of an epidemic of marketing-related diseases. Our children are suffering from extraordinary levels of obesity, type 2 diabetes, anorexia, bulimia, and pathological gambling, while millions will eventually die from the marketing of tobacco. Such illnesses affect also the population at large, as does chronic debt that people incur to support the consumption that the marketing industry encourages.

Neurological marketing is a tool to amplify these trends. It is hard to think of a single benefit that could result from teaching corporate marketers how to press a “buy button” in the minds of individual Americans. Is there really a person in America who is insufficiently impelled to eat more Pepperidge Farm cookies or drink more Coke? Where would you rank the task of increasing this impulsion on the list of the nation’s pressing needs?

Some might protest that neuromarketing research could be used to shut a buy button off as well as on. Conceivably. But it is not clear why corporations would support research that will cause people to buy less of their products. If the university and the researchers involved were to sign written statements promising that this research would be used only for such purposes, on pain of stiff financial penalties, the argument might become remotely credible. But even then, the prospect of behavior control at that level has totalitarian implications that require much more discussion than has occurred to date.

Given the prospect of dubious social benefit and almost certain social harm, it is hard to see how Emory’s neuromarketing research meets the ethical standards of the Belmont Report for experimentation on human subjects.

As you know, if Emory University has run afoul of the Belmont Report, it may lose all federal research funding. If necessary, we may ask the federal Office for Human Research Protections to investigate whether Emory University’s neurological marketing research violates the principles of the Belmont Report.

But more importantly, it is hard to see how neuromarketing research meets the ethical standards for university research, especially a university such as Emory.

Emory was founded by the Methodist Church in 1836 upon a core of ethical and religious values. Its mission is to “create, preserve, teach, and apply knowledge in the service of humanity.” Last year, Emory’s Board of Trustees affirmed that this includes a “commitment to use knowledge to improve human well-being.”

The Emory School of Medicine has a particular responsibility under that declaration. Its own mission statement commits it to “advance the detection, treatment and prevention of disease processes.” Emory Medical School exists to eliminate disease, not encourage it. It certainly does not exist to produce research that can – and predictably will – be used to for marketing that tends to increase disease and human suffering.

If Emory University takes its own mission seriously, it should challenge this abuse of medical knowledge and technology to manipulate people for commercial purposes.

At this time, we ask that you immediately:

- 1) Forbid the BrightHouse Institute, or any other entity, from using any Emory University property, equipment, office space or facilities, including its MRI, for the purposes of conducting neuromarketing research; and,
- 2) Publicly release Emory University's Institutional Review Board reviews of the neuromarketing research.

Sincerely,

Rev. Tom Grey, Executive Director, National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling
Jane M. Healy, PhD, author, *Failure to Connect* and *Endangered Minds*
Susan Linn, EdD, Instructor in Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School; Co-founder, Stop
Commercial Exploitation of Children
Jonathan Rowe, Director, Tomales Bay Institute
Gary Ruskin, Executive Director, Commercial Alert
V. Susan Villani, MD, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Johns Hopkins Medical School

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For more information about neuromarketing, see Commercial Alert's neuromarketing web page, at: http://www.commercialalert.org/index.php/category_id/1/subcategory_id/82/article_id/202

Commercial Alert is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to keep the commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children and subverting the higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy.

Commercial Alert has more than 2000 members, representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. For more information, visit our website at <http://www.commercialalert.org>.