

INSIGHTS & INSPIRATION

The Most Powerful Touch Point Of All: The Subconscious

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Marketers are on such a treadmill—publishing reams of content, monitoring clicks and impressions, and segmenting target groups—that their attention is often distracted away from the most powerful mechanism for accelerating growth: making their brands the instinctive choice for consumers.

When your brand is the instinctive choice, customers are relatively immune to the beck and call of competitors. You are their go-to. At a time when CMOs are expected to be chief growth officers, this is the closest you can get to fostering continuous growth. It's the marketing equivalent of a financial annuity.

Where does instinctive choice come from, and how can you help your brand achieve it? As Nobel Prize-winning behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman explained in his book "Thinking: Fast and Slow," people have subconscious mental shortcuts that override their rational or considered choices. These shortcuts drive snap decisions.

In the world of marketing, a subconscious mental shortcut can manifest itself as a strong brand preference. And, according to Harvard Business School professor Gerald Zaltman, 95% of purchase decisions are [made in the subconscious](#).

The Brand Connectome

What lies inside of these subconscious shortcuts? Networks of positive and negative associations about brands that have accumulated over time in customers' memories.

Wharton neuroscience professor Michael Platt and I call each network a "[brand connectome](#)"—a mini-network of associations composed of every memory a customer has of the brand, often going as far back as childhood. Your brand, and that of your competitors, has a connectome in the subconscious of every consumer. That's where you're fighting over mindshare. So while some marketers may be focused on brick-and-mortar or e-commerce, the far more important marketplace—the one CMOs should be focused on above all else—is the subconscious.

The key to becoming the consumer's instinctive choice is to have the most robust network, comprised of the most positive—and the fewest—negative associations and memories. As marketing leaders add new positive associations, they help the brand connectome develop new, positive branches—we call it "brain branching"—that spread across more memory territory and grab more mindshare. Your brand becomes more salient to the buyer. It becomes their dominant instinctive choice.

Here are three steps to get started.

1. Probe beyond what people think: Focus groups and quantitative surveys have limited value in revealing the drivers of instinctive choice because people can only share their conscious thoughts about a product. To understand the nature of your brand's subconscious associations, you need to delve deeper—into people's memories. For example, chocolate lovers may associate superior quality with flowing, melted chocolate being stirred with a wooden spoon, perhaps evoking a memory from childhood. M&M's [capitalized on this idea](#) with a successful Super Bowl ad starring Danny DeVito with images of smooth, swirling, creamy chocolate.

2. Replace negative associations with positives: You can't convince people to give up their negative associations with a brand through rational arguments. Instead, you need to replace the negatives with positives. For example, McDonald's set out to change perceptions of its food as highly processed by having its marketing focus on quality ingredients, fresh cracked eggs, and burgers on the grill, reminding people that they actually cook on the premises, something many consumers had likely forgotten.

3. Connect your brand to things the customer already cares about: Doing this makes the brand network take root and grow more quickly. For a great example, watch the Dollar Shave Club's [famous launch video](#), set in the company's barebones warehouse. At one point, founder Michael Dubin wheels around one of his workers in a wagon. To the casual observer, the scenery and antics were part of the humor. But it went much deeper than that. Dubin instantly linked his brand to people's values—treating employees with respect and putting money into quality products instead of fancy offices. With that one video, the brand managed to create several positive associations.

While the rest of the C-suite is focused on plenty of other data, it's up to marketing teams to take ownership of the brand's subconscious network. CMOs need to challenge their teams to think beyond short-term surface matters and move toward this deeper measure of success—becoming the consumer's go-to choice.



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