

How Consumers Think:

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The growth of neuromarketing and the measurement of consumers' brain responses to products and services

Saïd Business School, University of Oxford

A new research project will critically explore the growing interest of market researchers and neuroscientists in neuromarketing, a relatively new field of consumer and market research, which uses brain imaging and measurement technology to study the neural processes underlying an individual's choice. Neuromarketing claims to reveal how consumers assess, deliberate and choose in a variety of contexts.

According to neuromarketers this growing industry has the potential to significantly increase the effectiveness of advertising and marketing campaigns.

They claim that neuromarketing will provide detailed knowledge about customer preferences and what marketing activities will stimulate purchasing behaviour, to maximise the effectiveness of promotional campaigns, informing the placing and pricing of advertisements, and reducing the failure rate of new products.

In the experts' view neuromarketing offers the promise of "objective neurological evidence" to inform organisations' marketing campaigns. As such neuromarketing techniques challenge the value of traditional market research tools such as focus groups.

But if neuromarketing is set to revolutionise marketing, what are the social implications of this development and what effects will the rise and pervasiveness of neuromarketing have on consumers? The study will cast light on the "neuro-turn" in marketing by examining in depth the developments in neuromarketing through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and documentary analysis. In addition a critical, historical assessment will consider and compare how different market research techniques contribute to differing views of the consumer and consumer behavior.

The neuromarketing project is led by Professor Steve Woolgar of the Saïd Business School and is located within a larger collaborative study of the "Neuro-turn in European Social Sciences and the Humanities: Impacts of neurosciences on economics, marketing and philosophy" (acronym: NESSH) with colleagues from the Netherlands, Germany and France funded by an ESRC "Open Research Area" grant.

"This three year project will be the first large scale study of this important emerging area. It is the first empirical study of how emerging neurological knowledge about human decision-making is transforming the techniques of marketers and others who seek to influence consumption behaviour. Neuromarketing potentially has far reaching implications for what we know about how humans make their choices, the role of the brain and the factors at play in the every day decisions we all take" said Professor Steve Woolgar.

"In our study of neuromarketing practices we reflect on how this new knowledge is used for commercial purposes and its impacts on society. A thorough understanding of these transformations is therefore quite urgent".

Dr Tanja Schneider, researcher on the project said:

"For a number of years, research has been going on with brain imaging centres. This is now moving out of the laboratory and into practice. The research we are doing will cast light on what is already happening in this area, and will explore what is likely to develop in the near future. We know this will impact society in a major way, so it is critical to understand these developments better".

About the project

The Saïd project is part of a larger research project "The Neuro-Turn in European Social Sciences and Humanities" (NESSH) funded by the Open Research Area Scheme (ORA), which is jointly funded by the ESRC and the Research Councils of Netherlands, Germany and France.

The project, which has received a grant of 1.24 million Euros over three years, will start on 1 June 2011. Other partners in the NESSH project are: Dr. Anne Beaulieu (University of Groningen), Dr. Sacha Bourgeois-Gironde (Institut Jean Nicod, ENS, Paris), PD Dr. Elisabeth Hildt (University of Mainz), Professor Ale Smidts (Erasmus University Rotterdam) and Professor Paul Wouters (University of Leiden).

About Professor Steve Woolgar and Dr Tanja Schneider

Professor Steve Woolgar is a Chair of Marketing at the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford. He was formerly Professor of Sociology, Head of the Department of Human Sciences and Director of CRICT (Centre for Research into

Innovation, Culture and Technology) at Brunel University.

He has since held Visiting Appointments at McGill University (Sociology '79-81), MIT (Program in Science Technology and Society, '83-84), Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Mines, Paris (Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation, '88-89) and UC San Diego (Sociology, '95-96).

He is the winner of a Fulbright Scholarship, a Fulbright Senior Scholarship, and an ESRC Senior Research Fellowship. From 1997-2002 he was Director of the ESRC Programme Virtual Society? - the social science of electronic technologies comprising 22 research projects throughout the UK. He was named winner of the J D Bernal prize in 2008.

He has published widely in social studies of science and technology, social problems and social theory. His books include Laboratory Life: the construction of scientific facts (with B Latour, Princeton, 1986); Science: the Very Idea (Routledge, 1988); Knowledge and Reflexivity (Sage, 1988); The Cognitive Turn: sociological and psychological perspectives on science (with S.Fuller and M.de Mey, Kluwer, 1989); Representation in Scientific Practice (with M. Lynch, MIT, 1990); The Machine at Work: technology, organisation and work (with K.Grint, Polity, 1996) and Virtual Society? Technology, cyberspace, reality (Oxford University Press, 2002).

An edited collection (with C. Coopmans, D. Neyland and J. Mouritsen) Does STS Mean Business? (a special issue of Organization) appeared in 2009. His work has been translated into Chinese, Dutch, French, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish.

His main current research projects include governance and accountability relations in mundane technical solutions to public problems (manuscript in preparation: with D. Neyland Mundane Governance: technology, ontologies and accountability); the social dynamics of provocation and intervention; and the uses of visualization and evidence in eScience.

He additionally works on innovation and organisational change, branding and brand evaluation, marketing in practice, the social and organizational dimensions of futuring, and the rise of ethics in organizations.

Dr Tanja Schneider is Research Fellow in Science and Technology Studies (STS) at the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford. Tanja's research focuses on the social implications of marketing practices with a particular interest in food marketing.

Her current research addresses the "neuro-turn" in marketing research and investigates the conditions of its emergence as well as the social and political implications of these developments.

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