Big Data and

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Findings from the World’s Biggest Brain Scan (4th–6th April 2014, Toronto, Canada)
For marketers, the promise of Big Data is an unparalleled understanding of consumer behavior at our fingertips. But the proliferation of data and the underlying technologies that power it are also a red herring – giving a sense of security and certainty that really isn’t present.

How can this be?

Mostly, the data that marketers access is the digital exhaust that comes from our interactions with our devices (smartphones, etc.), platforms (social, location-based, mobile wallet, etc.), and the brands and products in question. These data points mostly fall into the “stated” and “behaved” components of consumer understanding (see Diagram 1).

But a growing body of evidence proves that much of our decision-making is actually driven by the non-conscious – the bits of our brains not accessible to our conscious selves.

Daniel Kahneman, the godfather of behavioral economics and a pioneer in the space, has probably contributed most to our understanding of non-conscious decision-making and the opportunity that is there for marketers. And it’s also his saying, “WYSIATI” (What You See Is All There Is) that best encapsulates the risk of Big Data for marketers.

As marketers, we can see more with Big Data, but are we seeing the right things?

Brainsights thinks not – or, at the very least, that we’re not seeing the complete picture. That’s a big risk.

We recently hosted the “World’s Biggest Brain Scan” to lift the lid on the non-conscious drivers of consumer decision-making – those pieces of the puzzle that aren’t readily available by mining existing Big Data streams.

We used EEGs to measure the brain activity of 302 Millennials (ages 19-34) as they watched 60 minutes of video content – ads, but also trailers and other clips of video content. Frame-by-frame, second-by-second data was recorded for every participant, with that data used to assess the non-conscious levels of user attention (engagement), higher-order thinking (consideration), and memory encoding (in other words, which bits people file away in their memories). For each piece of content that was screened – more than 120 spots in total – our team generated 25 content metadata variables, including industry, brand and product, agency, genre, and also whether a spot had celebrities or music.

What we found – perhaps unsurprisingly – flies in the face of our understanding of this generation and of how advertising works.

### Hustle and Hard Work Break Through. Capitalize by Tricking the System.

First, this is not an entitled generation. Despite the perception in popular media that Millennials are privileged, lazy, and entitled, our research on the subconscious says otherwise. Content that contained themes of hard work, hustle, goal setting, and achievement performed as much as five times better than the mean for the entire data set. This was evident across categories – from sports apparel to beverages to packaged goods and politics – and across all metrics we tracked (engagement, consideration, and memory encoding).

A corollary to this finding is that Millennials actually reject entitlement and unearned privilege. Several spots that we screened featured characters that were arrogant and obnoxious, characters who were presumed authorities but for no good or obvious reason. Each of these spots failed to resonate with the audience.

Set against a background of challenging economic conditions (poor job prospects, growing debt, frustratingly high unemployment and underemployment) and dubious authority (defunct and unresponsive government, sinking corporate trust) the findings shouldn’t be too surprising. But what’s the best way to act on this insight?
Of the spots featuring themes of hustle and hard work, the best performing ads were united by another common theme: hacking – or tricking – the system.

Jameson’s “Hawk of Achill,” for example, was one of the top performing ads in the beverages category for the 19 to 25 year old male. The ad features a frustrated John Jameson, who sets out against all odds to tame the Hawk of Achill, a huge Loch Ness monster-like creature that keeps stealing barrels of his whiskey. But instead of setting some clever trap, the enterprising Jameson hides in a whiskey barrel and takes advantage of the Hawk’s greediness to ‘hitch a ride’ to its nest and slay the beast. Diagram 2 breaks the spot down by second into its key moments. The spot is paced very well, engaging the audience at both the critical points in the story and the instances when the brand is featured prominently on screen and in voiceover. Diagram 3 shows our memory encoding.

**Messages of Female Empowerment Resonate with Women – and Men**

In a recent *AdWeek* article, Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook called for a paradigm shift in how companies market to women. Citing GoldieBlox, Dove, and others, she urges advertisers to embrace empowerment as a communication pillar and counteract the negative stereotypes the media perpetuates about women.

Sandberg makes specific reference to Pantene’s “Labels Against Women” as epitomizing this movement. But these messages of empowerment from beauty advertisers that target women actually resonate more deeply and more strongly with males.

**Diagram 2**

**Diagram 3**
Brainsights screened five beauty ads with varying degrees of female empowerment messaging. We then segmented the data by age, gender, and ethnicity to get a deeper understanding of how each spot resonated with the audience. Overall – especially with men – the best performer was CoverGirl’s “#GirlsCan” spot, scoring the highest on all three measures of neural activity. The best performer among women was Dove’s “Evolution,” ranking first in engagement and consideration and third in memory encoding. The Pantene spot, on the other hand, ranks a distant fourth among women on all three metrics, ahead of only Dermablend. Chart 1 shows how each spot performed split by gender.

What’s perhaps surprising is that the Pantene ad hailed by Sandberg performs much better for males than it does for females. In fact, the three spots that convey the most empowering messages for females (either explicitly or implicitly) – CoverGirl, Pantene, and Dermablend – actually perform better with males than females. Is it that males are just responding to attractive women in these ads? One might be inclined to believe this, but the evidence suggests not. In frame-by-frame analyses of the spots, males were far more responsive to messages of empowerment (“I just learned you have to be yourself” or “You have to just be courageous”) than simple imagery of females.

And when Pantene’s brand tagline “Be Strong and Shine” was revealed, males exhibited higher consideration and memory encoding activity than did females (the latter showed higher levels of engagement).

But these Pantene results disguise a much less positive finding – at least if you’re Sheryl Sandberg. The messages within the Pantene ad that resonated most deeply with males were actually the ones that spoke to male strength, not the female labels that were intended to illuminate and educate.

On a brighter note for Sandberg, males – particularly 19 to 25-year-olds – were the segment most moved by the empowering messaging in the second half of the CoverGirl #GirlsCan spot, when Queen Latifah, Ellen DeGeneres, and others talk about achieving against the odds. Being told you can’t do something, and then defying those expectations, is a universal motif, and these moments connect us all.

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The Importance of the ‘Soft Sell’ – and the Even Greater Importance of Story

An epic battle has always raged between marketing and creative, between functional and emotional, between product and brand. On the one hand, marketers need to feel as though they have all the information required to sell the functional benefits of their product. On the other hand, creatives emphasize the need to articulate the emotional attributes of the brand. Finding the right balance is essential to creating the most engaging and effective ads.

By tracking the frame-by-frame subconscious response of audiences, we can identify the appropriate real estate mix to allocate to creative and marketing. Unfortunately, this varies considerably based on the target audience, the product’s life cycle, and the competitive landscape.

What is clear, though, is the effectiveness of the soft sell for the Millennial; in other words, making the marketing elements more creative was found to be a strong strategy.

To illustrate, consider the Dos Equis “Handball” spot (see Diagram 4). In line with the finding about unearned privilege or authority, the famous brand tagline of “He’s the most interesting man in the world” fails to resonate with the target. They’re just not buying it (see seconds 20-23).

However, the cool sales pitch of “I don’t always drink beer, but when I do, I like to drink Dos Equis” delivered the highest instance of memory encoding across the spot. The played-down pitch resonates well, implicitly understanding the desire of Millennials not to be sold to.

Of course, this approach won’t work for every brand, as not every brand has such a tagline.

But the soft sell can be accomplished by virtually any brand. How? Branded content.

Integrating your brand meaningfully into a story has proven an effective way to drive engagement, consideration, and memory encoding. Jameson’s “Hawk of Achill” is one such effective example.

The operative words here are meaningful and story. If the integration is inauthentic or trivial, or if the story is disjointed, the audience simply will not respond.

Conclusion: Big Data ≠ Right Data

The rise of Big Data has led marketing departments to embrace more fact-based strategies and tactics, and this shift is largely a good thing. But risks exist, and chief among them is the belief that because we have all that data, we have a complete picture of our customer. This is nonsense.

Whether we’ll fully be able to understand people is a question for philosophers to figure out. But as marketers, without neuro data, it is impossible for us to truly understand the motivations of people and how they relate to our brands and businesses. Our data models must evolve to include this data in order for us to make better ads, better products, better brands, and to drive better results.