

An emotion is not an idea

March 28th, 2011 by [XopheLachnitt](#)

The subjective way in which we think about new information – coloured by our personal experience – is further reinforced by the influence of our emotions.

To quote Antonio Damasio, neurologist at the University of Southern California (USC, Los Angeles): “we are not thinking machines that feel; rather we are feeling machines that think”.

It so happens that, due to another personal project, I became interested by the way the brain functions. It is in fact an extremely instructive area for a communications director, to such a point that I am convinced that we should add sessions in neurology to all training in communication... The fact is, the better we understand how the brain makes sense of the information it receives, the better we can communicate.

The preponderance of our emotions in our system of thought is largely explained by the activity of the limbic system in the brain. This part of the brain can be traced back to our earliest ancestors, 450 million years ago. One of the principal functions of the limbic system was at the time – and still is – to anticipate danger. In the limbic system, the amygdala attaches an emotional significance to each incoming stimulus before we are even aware of its existence. The amygdala also receives and processes large amounts of information coming from the hippocampus, which stores and retrieves our memories.

The amygdala is in effect an emotional brain. To illustrate how it acts without us being aware of it, consider the example of a woman who had been assaulted. One year later she started trembling with fright for no obvious reason in the metro. In fact, her amygdala, working subconsciously, had recognised the aftershave of the man sitting next to her as being the same as that of her aggressor, even though she hadn't consciously noticed this.

We are in fact capable of unconsciously analysing 11 million bits of information per second, while we can deal consciously with “only” 40 bits per second. Our brains contain 10 million subconscious neurones for every conscious neurone. The amygdala analyses all the stimulants entering the brain, whether they are threats or not. It then communicates its emotional diagnosis to the cortex, which decides where to concentrate our attention.

Over and above this example, I have drawn three lessons in communication from my readings on the brain. Before going into details, I would like to apologise to specialists in neurology for the outrageous simplification in the following lines.

1. It is not enough to speak to be heard

The brain is constantly sorting out the stimuli it receives. In fact, it would be impossible to manage them all. The brain can only manage a limited, albeit very large, volume of information. To take only one example, our sense of touch doesn't operate continuously: thus we don't feel the contact with the clothes we are wearing. Our brains separate out the repeated sensations of contact that are not important in order to enable us to concentrate on the other sensations that are, such as those where we touch another person, a dog or a touch screen.

It is the same for the deluge of information and messages (3000 according to some studies) that we are exposed to every day in our modern interrupt-driven world. The Holy Grail in communication is to get the target population to pay attention to the messages being sent. However, it is impossible to pay attention to 3000 messages every day: we do not pay attention without good reason. Adding the 3001st message to those already sent without understanding the factors that could make people pay attention to it is at best a wasted effort. We must know our audiences intimately in order to anticipate what will make the difference between a message that will be ignored and one that will really make a difference. Communication is above all empathy.

2. It is not enough to surprise to be convincing

Our brains classify the stimuli they receive into categories of things that have already been learned. This allows us to anticipate and prepare for events that we will have to deal with. It also allows us to manage an environment which would be overwhelming if each new stimulus was an unknown experience. In order to do this, the brain functions through the use of analogies and metaphors. It links different stimuli together and analyses the similarities, the differences and the relationships between them. In this way, we classify our feelings automatically and unconsciously into categories that we have learned and that we modify over time.

The objective of communication is to create a memory. Studies in neuroscience have shown that, in order to create a durable memory, it is important to link the new information to those that already exist. The brain chooses to manage the information which is the closest to its previous experience: a message that is not coherent with previous messages is more likely to be ignored by the brain than a coherent message that makes sense. One cannot expect people to make coherent sense of messages that were not created coherent in the first place. In order to keep communication on track, one needs to have a clear track to follow.

3. To capture the imagination, we need to create emotions

The amygdala secretes dopamine in the brain when stimulated by an emotion, and dopamine is influential in the management and memorisation of information. For example, speech is better remembered when it is associated with an image. This is why 72 hours after the event we retain only 10% of information presented orally, whereas we retain up to 65% if a photo is added to the presentation (according to experiments done by the applied brain research centre of the University of Seattle).

Other examples allow us to appreciate the extent to which our emotions influence our thoughts and therefore our perceptions:

- We all remember exactly what we were doing when we first heard the news of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, whilst we are unable to remember what we ate three days ago. The emotional charge and the dopamine produced at that moment which engraved the events of 9/11 for ever in our memories are incomparable with those produced by a meal, even if recent.
- We remember practically all of a film that we saw two weeks ago, while we remember at most a few bullet points from a presentation seen just yesterday. A story is much more emotionally compelling than a PowerPoint presentation.

- Adding 15% of yellow to the green logo of SevenUp reinforces the taste of lemon, although the recipe for the drink has not changed at all (experiment reported by Malcolm Gladwell in *Blink*). The emotion generated by the packaging of the product is stronger than the sensation of taste created by the drink.
- Only 5% of our purchase decisions are based on a rational process of thought, and indeed we rationalise our purchases after the fact. This was demonstrated by Gerald Zaltman, professor emeritus at Harvard and “guru” in this area, in *How Customers Think*.

An emotion is not an idea, but it often has a greater level of influence in the formation of our perceptions. Lincoln commented that “the heart is the highway to the brain”.

Following this logic, the clothing brand Diesel released an extraordinary publicity campaign in the United States last year: *Be Stupid*. Unlike other ad campaigns for jeans that feature half-naked models, the aspirational message of *Be Stupid* was not about our idealized body shape but about our emotive spirits.

To conclude, and for those that would like to go further than the preceding rather basic summary, I leave you with the references for some of the books that I have read on the brain.

- Antonio Damasio – *Descartes’ Error* – 1994
- Malcolm Gladwell – *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* – 2005
- Joseph LeDoux – *The Emotional Brain, the Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* – 1996
- Jonah Lehrer – *How We Decide* – 2009
- John Medina – *Brain Rules* – 2008
- John J. Ratey, M.D. – *A User’s Guide to the Brain, Perception, Attention and the Four Theaters of the Brain* – 2001
- Gary Small, M.D. and Gigi Vorgan – *iBrain, Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* – 2008
- Shankar Vedantam – *The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives* – 2010
- Gerald Zaltman – *How Customers Think* – 2003