

# Unlocking the ties that bind

In today's dynamic competitive environment, more and more brand managers are moving their positioning strategy away from traditional value propositions (quality, value, etc.) in favor of more emotionally-charged value propositions. Mega-brands such as McDonalds, Cheerios, Pillsbury and Pepsi are seeking ways to touch consumers' emotions as well as communicate traditional cost-benefit selling propositions.

We have helped many clients use qualitative research to better understand the emotional ties that consumers have with their brands. In our research, we have found that consumers' motivations for purchase often go beyond the rational and spoken dimensions of decision-making. Consumers often are driven to purchase products based on product benefits or attributes that reinforce a specific emotional connection. We define emotional connections as consumer-identified emotions and values that connect the consumer with a product or brand. These connections represent the personally relevant role the product/brand plays in the life of a consumer.

While qualitative methodologies are certainly valid, it would be very helpful for a brand manager if the impact of these emotional connections could be quantified. However, quantifying such dimensions has proven to be a challenge.

## Assessing the impact of emotional connections to brands

In a typical quantitative survey, respondents usually would be asked to reflect their opinions on an X-point scale. However, as argued in Gerald Zaltman's thought-provoking book *How Customers Think*, up to 95 percent of consumer thinking happens in our subconscious. This begs the question: If commercial marketing research relies solely on logical reasoning and rational thought processes to gauge consumer behavior, to what extent are researchers misreading a powerful component of consumer behavior - one's emotional connection to a brand?

This argument is probably especially true for product categories and brands for which consumers express a high degree of emotional intensity. In cases such as these, a traditional quantitative survey, which requires respondents to read the survey questions and provide answers consciously, would not be the best tool to quantify emo-



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tional connections and brand associations. To truly assess consumers' emotional connections to a brand, we need to devise a way to collect respondents' opinions while holding conscious thinking to a minimum.

For several years, our firm has used a technique for understanding – qualitatively – consumers' emotional connections to brands and product categories. In this approach, we explore and identify relevant emotional connections and interrelationships within a category and for specific brands.

The qualitative approach is generally conducted through a series of one-on-one, in-depth interviews with consumers. Prior to coming to the interview respondents are asked to construct a collage of images, pictures and/or words that symbolize their feelings toward an ideal brand/product relationship. Paired with a skilled interviewer, the symbols become a catalyst for the expression of emotionally-driven behaviors. The collage also identifies interrelationships among the images to tell a story of the consumer's relationship and motivations relative to the brand and/or product category.

Using the research tool described above, clients are able to help define the brand by validating current beliefs and creating a future positioning strategy or a product development road map. This research also allows us to understand both the corporate and customer perspectives, which can identify realignment opportunities.

Ultimately, the emotional connections are integrated into all marketing activities. The key to understanding consumers' emotional connections to brands is to make a link between a product/service/brand and the consumer's life. Understanding emotional connections can likely make the difference between a product that looks good on the drawing board but fails on the store

shelf. In the end, client organizations are better able to develop products and services that win the heart and mind (and pocketbook) of the consumer.

Still, even with the insights these qualitative sessions provide, it is difficult for brand managers to move forward with marketing outlays without the support of some type of quantitative measures.

Quantitatively, corporate-level decision makers often seek to:

- assess the impact of emotional connections on traditional marketing research metrics (purchase likelihood, customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, etc.);
- prioritize the relative importance of various emotional connections;
- determine which emotional connections are associated with which brands (which emotional connections does their brand own and which are owned by the competition?);
- pinpoint an important yet unclaimed emotional connection – identify any “white space” in the market that our client's brand can grab.

Knowing clients' desire for this type of quantitative support, a team of researchers at our firm set out to develop a technique that would provide the desired output but stay true to the conceptual framework of Zaltman's work and, by association, our established qualitative approach. With that said, we knew that any technique we were to develop would have to follow the following guidelines:

- use a measurement tool that provides high discrimination but minimal conscious effort on the part of the respondent;
- use visual stimuli to reflect emotional values, replicating the qualitative process whereby respondents use images and words to represent emotional values;
- hinder overly-conscious thinking to ensure respondents react to stimuli in an emotionally-charged

manner.

The major goal of our quantitative approach is to allow respondents to reflect their responses with minimal conscious effort. In other words, we want them to let us know what they feel – which should only involve minimal conscious thinking. To accomplish this, we rely on three specific techniques:

- use extremely simple paired-comparison choice tasks to minimize the amount of cognitive effort needed to respond;
- use pictures collected from qualitative research as stimuli to reflect the emotional connections (by eliminating as much verbiage as possible, the conscious thinking should then be minimized);
- use elements of a psychological concept known as negative priming to inhibit conscious thinking.

#### **A case history**

In 2001, automaker Saturn wanted to better understand how its customers connect with its brand and product offerings. The research used our qualitative emotional connections technique described previously. A series of IDIs were completed with Saturn owners as well as owners of competing makes. From this research, we were able to identify the following emotional connections relevant to the Saturn brand as well as the product category:

- success/accomplished;
- independent/self-reliant;
- comfortable/relaxed/happy;
- peace of mind;
- smart/practical;
- care for others/family;
- fun to own;
- Saturn family/community.

Given the amount of qualitative research we had already completed, we felt Saturn would be an ideal client for which we could develop our quantitative survey instrument. Armed with the results of our qualitative research and the guidelines we had established, we set out to design a quantitative survey instru-

ment that would meet our research objectives.

A key component to the approach involved the selection of the competitive set. In this case, we selected three competitive, yet distinctive, vehicle brands: Honda, Volkswagen and, of course, Saturn. Selection of the competitive set is critical since an underlying assumption is that each brand has a certain level of emotional intensity.

After some initial screening questions, our instrument begins by presenting respondents a series of vignettes. These vignettes were, more or less, actually built by the IDI participants during the qualitative phase. Each vignette included a photograph along with a story as written/described by the IDI participant. For each emotional value, the respondent identifies the vignette to which they most strongly relate. One respondent-identified vignette is used to represent each emotional value being tested. The images associated with the vignettes become proxies for the specified emotional connection later in the survey. Once the respondent-specific stimuli are established, the respondent is taken through the negative priming exercise and then onto the two choice exercises.

Perhaps the most provocative component of our approach is where we use specific elements of negative priming. Priming is a facilitated cognitive process that produces a faster reaction time or higher recall rate, due to the cues provided by the primer. Suppose, for example, you are asked to pick out breakfast items from the following list of words: butter, bread, paper, orange juice, phone, and computer. To prime you, before entering the lab you are kept in a waiting room that is infused with the scent of freshly-baked pastries. While you are waiting your mind is focusing on all these bakery items, such as bread and butter. In theory, your reaction time to the experi-

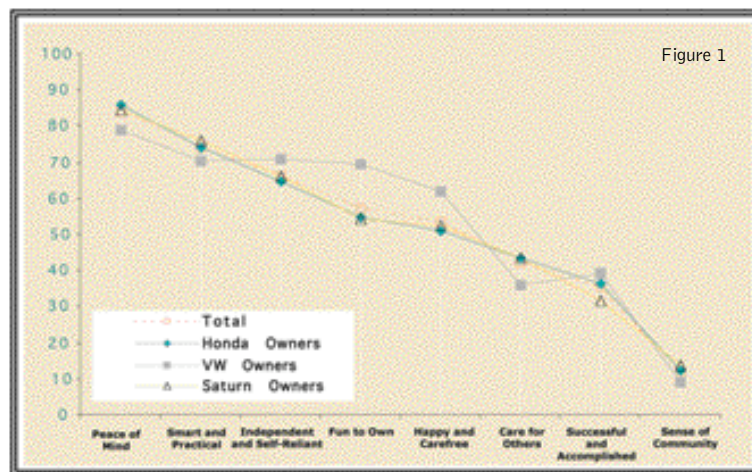


Figure 1

mental task would be much faster than that of a respondent kept waiting in a scent-free environment. The discrepancy between the unprimed and the primed respondent would be referred to as a priming effect.

Negative priming refers to the interference of irrelevant stimuli on the processing of the relevant stimuli. While some argue that the interference slows the processing of relevant stimuli, this is actually what we seek to accomplish. That is to say, we show irrelevant pictures to interfere with respondents' ability to cognitively process the relevant pictures (those the respondent associates with the emotional connections).

In our specific application of negative priming, respondents were challenged to remember various innocuous details from a set of 12 pictures. Respondents were told there would be a quiz at the end of the survey in which they would be asked to recall as many of the details as possible. In theory, respondents would be distracted by the irrelevant pictures, which should effectively suppress them from thinking too much about the stimuli presented in the choice tasks.

Key to our research is the use of paired comparisons in the choice tasks. Paired-comparison questions have been shown to better allow respondents to make distinctions

between many similar items.

Our approach uses two sets of paired-comparison questions. The first set explores the "importance" dimension. Here we present respondents with a choice of two emotional connections and ask:

How do you want to feel about a vehicle? After completing the first choice exercise, respondents are re-primed.

To measure the second dimension - brand association - each respondent is randomly assigned a brand from the competitive set. Respondents are then asked: Which image do you associate more with Brand X (Saturn, Honda or Volkswagen)?

#### Our test

As noted previously, our primary objective was to develop a quantitative survey instrument to assess the impact of emotional connections previously uncovered in a series of qualitative interviews. It is important to note that the process we lay out should be considered a follow-up to thorough qualitative research and not a stand-alone approach.

The survey was administered over the Internet and sample was drawn from an online consumer panel. A total of 1,662 Honda, Saturn and Volkswagen owners participated in this study. Respondents were screened in such a way as to match the demographic composition of the qualitative phase.

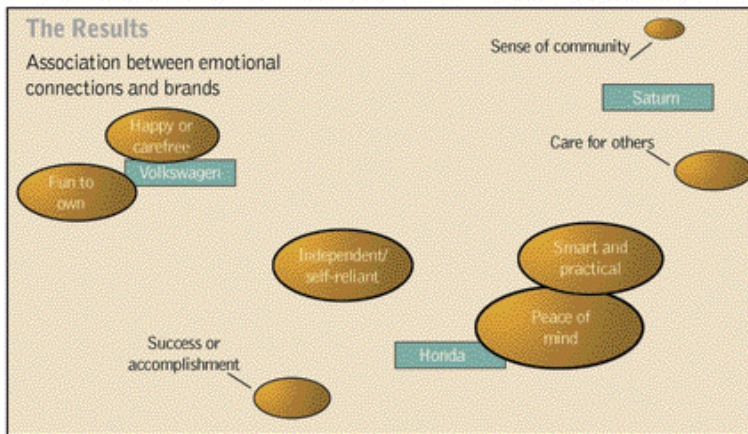


Figure 2: The perceptual map shows which brands are associated with which emotional connections. The size of the bubble reflects the relative importance of the value.

From each set of paired comparisons we are able to derive performance scores for each of the two dimensions studied: importance of the emotional value and brand association with the emotional value.

From the importance scores, we are able to assess the relevance of eight emotional connections for automobiles among our client's target market. The emotional connection "peace of mind" is shown to have the most impact while "sense of community" has the least (Figure 1). These findings confirm what was hypothesized in the qualitative phase.

Using the brand association scores, we are then able to build a market map to help pinpoint which brand "owns" which emotional connection. While Volkswagen owns "fun to own," Honda owns "peace of mind." In addition, the results also reveal the unoccupied market

niche, should a brand wish to reposition to gain better customer appeal and/or avoid competition. For example, an opportunity may exist with "independent/self-reliant." We are also able to incorporate the importance dimension into the map by varying the size of the elements (where the size of the bubble reflects the importance of the emotional connection). It should not be surprising to see Honda, the market leader, strongly associated with "peace of mind," the most important emotional connection (Figure 2).

Our final analysis uses a metric we call emotional congruence, which refers to the extent to which the brand satisfies one's emotional needs. Emotional congruence is a derived measure based on the gap between a desired emotional connection (importance score) and the perceived emotional associations

with the brand (brand association score). A match between the respondents' preferred emotional connection and the perceived brand-specific emotional connection would result in a high emotional congruence score.

By correlating emotional congruence to purchase consideration of a brand, we can measure the impact to which emotional connections drive brand consideration. In our case, we observed significant correlations between emotional congruence and purchase consideration, suggesting that emotional connections do, in fact, drive purchase consideration.

Overall, we were quite thrilled that each of the analyses provided our client a sound quantitative measure upon which they could build their brand strategy.

### Informed decisions

Through our work, we have demonstrated a quantitative approach that allows one to better gauge the relevance of various emotional connections for a product category. Further, by adapting this approach as a follow-up to a robust qualitative study, we show how the impact of emotional connections on purchase consideration can be established using sound quantitative methods. This will allow marketers to make confident, informed decisions regarding brand essence, positioning/re-positioning, new product development and advertising, etc. | Q