

How brands really grow: Brands in the brain

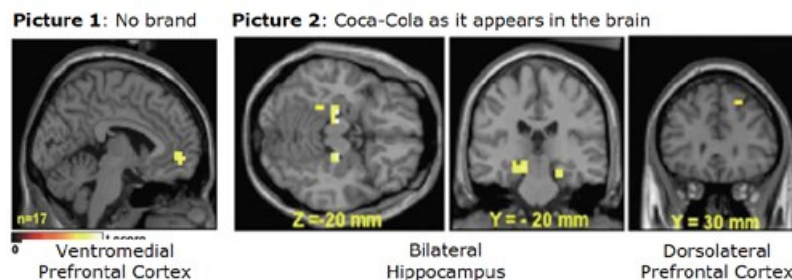
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In my second article, I argued that a business or brand cannot grow unless people's minds are changed. More precisely: a brand increases its chances of being used by laying down tracks of a certain kind in people's brains. Those tracks make the brand **'mentally available'**. Mental availability, in turn, helps drive use by, for example, increasing consideration among non-customers for a subscription service like banking; or driving the next purchase of a packaged good like tea.

So what needs to happen in the brain for a business or brand to be mentally available?

A lot. Let's unpack this by looking at a historically important set of pictures.



On the right: the first pictures in history of a brand in the brain. They were taken by neuroscientists in about 2004 using an MRI machine (See McClure and colleagues, *"Neural Correlates of Behavioral Preference..."*, *Neuron*). When people tasted Coca-Cola, knowing it was Coke, the bilateral hippocampus and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex lit up.

On the left: what happened when people didn't know what they were tasting.

Understanding the function of each of these brain parts helps us to understand how brands work in the brain. Obviously what follows is a very basic summary, but it will give you an idea.

The ventromedial prefrontal cortex (**vmPFC**): this registers **liking**. The stronger the signal, the greater the liking. It correlates strongly with what people choose when they don't know what they're tasting. In other words, it drives preference, untainted by branding.

The bilateral hippocampus (**BHC**): when people know what they're tasting, this lights up. It's a part of the brain that plays a central role in the formation of **affective memories**; in other words, memory + feeling. Drink a Coke - or walk into a hotel room - or pay for a purchase by waving your iPhone across a sensor; and the BHC will capture a combination of how it feels (from the vmPFC) plus the cues that are present. When brands are part of the mix, they get embedded in the resulting affective memories.



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The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (**dIPFC**): this connects memories (feelings + cues) to a person's needs, goals, and values. It generates a **behavioural bias** in favour of (or against) 'doing that again' in the presence of a similar set of cues. To the extent that a brand is a positive part of the mix, it will become the preferred brand in the situation. Obviously, the reverse is true if the brand has negative associations.

So there are three neural pieces to branding: emotional valence (like - dislike); affective memories (feelings + context cues + brand cues); and preferences in relation to needs, goals, and values.

How does all of this result in mental availability?

In his book *"On Intelligence"*, Jeff Hawkins describes the brain as a **memory-prediction engine**. What the brain sees

together, it links. It then uses the resulting, massive networks of memories together with feelings, to guide action. Hawkins points out that there is a bigger network of nerves carrying information outward i.e. from the brain; than into the brain. In other words, the most minimal of cues are enough to trigger a response based on affective memories and embedded biases. **That's mental availability.**

To create it, the brain uses multiple kinds of information.

First - there is sheer use. Nothing trumps a person's direct experience of a product, service, or brand. Second - there is what trusted or credible people say and do. These can be friends, relatives, experts, admired celebrities, whoever. In this regard an important heuristic used by the brain is 'what are most people doing?' In a world in which you don't have the time, or the money, or perhaps the inclination to test everything, a brand's popularity isn't a bad guide to a good choice.

Finally, of course, there's 'paid for' information - the things that marketers do. These may include giving people a chance to use the brand; driving recommendation in some way; simulating popularity; or simply, old fashioned creative advertising.

By all these means, neural tracks form to drive preference. We may develop habits as a result; and so it may seem that our minds can't be changed. In fact however, the brain is infinitely plastic. Whether consciously or unconsciously, **our brains are modified whenever information passes through them.** And so preference is dynamic, not static. If we want our businesses or brands to grow, then we have to [leverage this dynamism](#).

In my next few articles I'll give examples of how to leverage the brain's dynamic character.

Summary: mental availability involves a neural process in which the brain pushes out a brand in response to internal and external cues. The brand gets linked to these cues through the formation of positive affective memories. The choice can look automatic, thoughtless, or habitual. No matter, it requires the creation of the above kinds of neural tracks. In my next article I'll give practical examples.

A brief footnote about measurement: although it's a complex neural construct, '**mental availability in a context**' turns out to be surprisingly easy to measure - just ask "*what's your favourite brand in context x?*" A person's single-mention response tells you which brand has lodged in their minds for that context. We call this the brand's [situational equity](#).

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