

Marketing with metaphors in mind

 By [Werner van Zyl](#)

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When we are asked where thinking and decision-making happens, we are tempted to say, 'in the brain, of course!' And sure enough, it does happen in the brain...

Changes in the structure of the nerve cells (neurons) and neurochemicals in the brain dramatically change moods and motivations. A lack of the neurotransmitter Serotonin or Norepinephrine, for example, in the brain correlates with depression, whereas a faulty pituitary gland makes people depressed or irritable. Depending on how engaged thinking is, different brain waves display vastly different patterns. When we are solving problems, the brain's beta waves are more prominent, whereas in a meditative, creative state alpha waves* are more prominent.

But decades of research has shown that mental processes (i.e. thinking) are embodied. In other words, a person's senses, body and environment form an integral part of how people think, feel and behave. Behaviour does not only start and end with the brain. The brain uses the body and the environment to guide what it cannot explain easily. Concepts that convey emotion, experiences and ideas are abstract and therefore hard for us to fully explain or comprehend. It is metaphors in language that allow us to compare one thing in terms of another- to colour in that which our brains cannot. Metaphors link the psychological with the physical.

Your brain on metaphors

When we are born, billions of neurons are already in existence. The initial pathways are intricately linked with each other. Areas in the brain that specialise in sight (visual cortex at the back of the brain) might be connected with neurons that specialise in hearing (auditory cortex on both sides of the brain). The pathways that do not receive enough stimulation, in time, die in a 'use-it-or-lose-it' fashion.

In people with synesthesia this pruning of superfluous neurons does not happen as it should, and strange things start to happen: they can hear colour!** Wednesdays might be black, while they perceive Fridays as yellow. Ordinary people still retain some of this synesthetic ability. Doubtful? Take a look at the two figures below:



Which one of these figures would you associate with the word 'Bouba' and which one with 'Kiki'? We most often associate Bouba with the figure on the right and Kiki with the figure on the left. The sound of the word (speech) modulates what you see (vision).

The application for marketing is everywhere. Gerald Zaltman, a professor at Harvard has identified fundamental metaphors that people (and consumers) have been shown to use over and over again to describe their thoughts and feelings about products and services. The metaphor of social balance is described in his book *Marketing Metaphoria*. One customer inadvertently hinted at a need for 'social balance' metaphor when she described a loyalty program "like we are mercenaries in a marketing war rather than volunteers." A couple of years ago, Procter & Gamble did a consumer study and found the metaphor of 'transformation' (changing from one state to another) to be most vital to consumers - of the meaning of becoming clean and germ-free.

Consumers of Campbell's Soup a couple of years ago decided to redesign their packaging, because consumers said that the redesigned packaging where the steam rises from the soup made the soup seem warmer and that they felt more emotionally connected with the product. Once again, the abstract, psychological feelings towards the product are made more physical by the presentation of the steam.

Marketing research is especially affected by this embodied thinking. Filling out surveys on heavier clipboards can lead to better ratings by the consumer than filling it out on a lighter clipboard. When participants were asked to think of moments they felt socially excluded or included, they rated the room temperature as colder or hotter respectively.

The nature of the environment people find themselves and the way their senses interact within the environment deeply influences how consumers see the world. Next time consumers talk about 'cold people' or 'warm personalities', pay attention to what they're holding.

** The a steady stream of alpha waves coming from the right hemisphere are what precedes a 'creative insight'. Their meditative nature is why insights often happen with relaxing activities, such as taking a warm shower.*

***There are many other types of synesthesia, such as people that can taste words, apply personalities to words, tastes or even days of the week or numbers that follow specific forms.*

ABOUT WERNER VAN ZYL

Werner van Zyl is the founder of Neuromind Marketing and applies psychology and neuroscience to marketing and strategy. He has a passion for knowing how the brain works and to better understand human behaviour. Contact details: email info@neuromind.co.za | LinkedIn

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