is it more effective to hit low-attention viewers?

If Robert Heath is right, a large part of every dollar spent on advertising-related marketing research is a waste of money.

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There are few fence-sitters when it comes to the ideas of UK communications specialist and academic Robert Heath. Heath believes that television advertisements are more effective if they are processed with low attention; he calls this concept the 'Low Attention Processing' (LAP) theory. This theory states that ads are more effective if they are largely processed unconsciously, which raises doubts about stated conscious awareness as a measure of effectiveness. On the tenth anniversary of Robert Heath's LAP theories, it is timely to revisit his views.

Advertisements that are disruptive and score well on traditional marketing research measures such as awareness are considered by Heath to be less effective than ads that are processed below a conscious awareness threshold. One justification Heath offers for this is that ads that are processed unconsciously avoid the conscious brain's seemingly ever developing cynicism filter.

Being a Heath fan is the antithesis of believing in the 1889 hierarchy of effects AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) model. For LAP supporters, it is considered unhelpful to be measuring awareness when determining the effectiveness of a campaign. Indeed, LAP proponents point to studies that have shown television commercials with high emotional content to be significantly correlated with lower levels of attention and therefore weaker unprompted awareness.

For some years, neuromarketing has been telling us about the imperative of emotional content in communication. Ingrained in many practitioners' thinking is the idea that higher levels of emotional content equal greater outcomes for brand favourability.

Accepting for a moment that high emotional content is correlated with low attention processing, it follows that awareness of effective ads may be lower than awareness of less effective ads. (Yes, that is counter-intuitive.) According to Heath, an ad that is mediocre in awareness may be highly effective in bringing about behavioural change. So, where does that leave the marketing research fraternity and just about every brand tracker that purports to measure advertising efficacy?

To go one step further, Heath has argued that ads can be effective even when someone has claimed not to have seen the ad.
Given that around 90% of our brain's activity is unconscious and 95% of our vision is peripheral, perhaps that is no surprise.

And yet the AIDA model is perpetuated by just about every pre-testing marketing research brief, which regularly call for assessment of items that indicate high levels of awareness such as **message take-out, saliency** and **persuasion**.

It is not just pre-testing. When marketing research examines advertising, it is largely focused on cognitive thinking rather than feelings. How could it be otherwise? No matter how many times focus group moderators ask 'how does this ad make you feel?' the participants cannot delve into their own unconscious to answer. So the participants' replies are shallow cognitive responses that tap into perhaps 10% of the brain's processing – thoughts – rather than a reflection of their unconscious feelings.

So what if Heath is wrong? No trouble – despite the advances in neuroscience, research practice has largely ignored him anyway and continues to apply techniques first developed in the 1970s. But insight into unconscious processing of communication remains the elusive horizon. Asking respondents to say how they feel about advertising is equivalent to asking Neanderthal man to tell us about his rational thoughts.

Unquestionably we have one thing to thank Robert Heath for: he has reminded us that consumers pay little attention to advertising and while sitting passively on the couch people are not ordinarily reconsidering their shopping behaviour.