The crossover between human sciences and marketing

By Claire Denham-Dyson

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Historically, academia and marketing have remained distinctly separate domains. But over time, marketing as a commercial discipline has increasingly made use of human sciences such as psychology, sociology and anthropology to inform market research and strategy.

The reason, in my opinion, is that marketing is largely based on psychology anyway.

At the turn of the 20th Century, people like Sigmund Freud began to use psychological knowledge to help tap into and understand people's emotions. But at some point, people realised that psychological insights weren't just effective in shaping ideologies and getting people to think a certain way – they could also help to sell things too.

A good example of this was how tobacco companies began to tie smoking in with the women's liberation movement of the late 1920s and early 1930s, referring to cigarettes as "torches of freedom" and equating them with a symbol of independence.

Using psychology to make a business offering relevant

But the use of psychology in marketing quickly extended beyond this to enabling the creation of demand for a product in the first place. A case in point is inventor Richard Rohwedder, who developed the patent for a bread slicing machine back in 1917.

Sliced bread. © Pixabay.

However, it was only 11 years later in 1929 that the Chillicothe Baking Company in Missouri took a chance on his machine to slice the bread they were producing. It was a gamble that paid off handsomely for the company: bread sales skyrocketed by 2000 percent. Before sliced bread was available, people never even considered it to be something they'd want. Once it

was available pre-sliced however, people realised the convenience of it, and the demand was born.

From here, new waves of insights emerged about how marketing plays a role not just in getting people to do and buy things, but to make other parts of business relevant where they weren't necessarily before.

The psychology/marketing relationship has remained highly effective, and through my own experience, today the marketing function is still largely dominated by clients asking for research into psychologically oriented concepts such as drivers, motivators and barriers.

An evolution from marketing to anthropology

Towards the end of the 1970s however, statistical capabilities improved to the point where marketers realised that they could measure the sales process more precisely through numbers and trends. It was also around this time that anthropology also became as popular as psychology when applied to the business world.

As opposed to things like focus groups and surveys used to discover underlying psychology, anthropology is less clinical, as it's all about observing and participating with real people while they're doing certain things in their natural environment. In psychology, a marketing company may serve thousands of surveys, but responses almost always come with some level of bias. That is usually because people don't actually consciously know what they're doing – or they'll just tell you what they think you want to hear.

In contrast, anthropology lets a brand test whether the message or positioning they are advertising is true, as it observes the target market's interaction with that brand in their everyday lives. For example, if your brand positioning is to say your product is easy to use, anthropologists can sit in the field with people using the product and find out if that sentiment was true. And if it isn't? Then the brand has data to justify changing their offering to connect more authentically with their target market.

The key difference between the two

In this way, you see a key difference between anthropology and psychology – with psychology, you're trying to get into the target market's mindset, in anthropology you're more focused **around the lived experiences of the target market**.

While psychology can be useful at looking at what drives people, anthropology is ideal for mining 'thick data'. As opposed to big data, thick data looks at the granular detail in a particular area and is highly descriptive, taking into account things marketers or business owners would normally ignore. Anthropologists are trained not to ignore these details, nor to make stereotypical judgements or be cognitively biased.

It's clear that both psychology and anthropology have become increasingly useful to inform marketing strategy. While psychology is helpful for things like drivers and motivators more focused around emotion, anthropology helps businesses understand what people are saying about their brand, who those people are, and then how to marry the two.

ABOUT CLAIRE DENHAM-DYSON

Claire Denham-Dyson started studying anthropology at the university currently known as Rhodes and then moved to UCT. After finishing her Honours degree she moved back to Johannesburg and through fate or luck she found that Warren Moss (CEO of Demographica) was looking for an anthropologist. Claire had never dreamed of using anthropology in advertising but loved the fact that it enabled her to meet so many people and learn about the culture of so many businesses.

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