

It's in the science, stupid!

By [Laurent Marty](#)

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In 2019, a largely commented event shook the world of advertising, albeit in line with a durable marketing trend: business consultancy Accenture acquired arguably the most creative agency in the world, Droga 5.



Photo by [Jo Szczepanska](#) on [Unsplash](#).

On paper, it makes sense: adding the power of **big data** to that of the **big idea**. A match made in heaven. In reality, most of the commentary at the time revolved around its potential pitfalls: from cultural match to integration processes and ways of thinking, advertisers have speculated that it would weaken the creative firepower of Droga 5. Marketers on the other hand would argue that it is the wrong question to ask: will it weaken its effectiveness? The new reverence – if not the worship – for data-driven marketing suggests it won't, on the contrary, a new age of marketing has dawned. Hail to the new king: science-based advertising.

Generally speaking, the last 20 years have seen the ineluctable rise of science in advertising. The insights provided by neuromarketing have helped to better understand the way we think, behave and buy. Behavioural economics has uncovered our biases, while the mining of data has allowed us to quantify behavioural norms. The implementation of research and measurements of all kinds, enabled by technology, has become a powerful new norm, at long last a beacon of light in the darkness of advertising's murky waters.



Understanding the power of behavioural science in marketing

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Strategic planners like myself have embraced these new and fascinating insights wholeheartedly. We have taken them right into the heart of the agency's thinking and used them to inform our clients' strategies, with a newly acquired confidence in our knowledge.

Ay, there's the rub.

"Crisis in creative effectiveness"

According to the IPA's new book *Lemon*, published last year for the EffWeek conference, the author Orlando Wood claims the industry is going through a "crisis in creative effectiveness". The effect of the dominance of left-brain thinking, says Wood, is "extremely damaging for advertising's ability to deliver long-term market-share growth". Orlando Wood shows the correlation between a decrease in advertising effectiveness in the last 15 years and the McGilchrist Index, which has revealed the loss of right-brain features in advertising in favour of left-brain features: within advertising, there are fewer displays of human connection, more monologues and voice-overs that address customers directly, and fewer cultural references.

In other words, the more the industry attempts to be efficient, the less effective it becomes. At face value, it is an absolute paradox. Which fields of human endeavours have not benefited from science-based knowledge?

I'll tell you which: culture, music, poetry, humour, art.

Marketers are artists

One of the key dimensions of advertising is perhaps being revealed as we are learning about ourselves. To Claude Hopkins, one of the pioneers of advertising, who in 1923 claimed that "the man who wins and survives does so only because of superior science and strategy", almost hundred years later Seth Godin responds:

“ Instead of being scientists, the best marketers are artists. ”

We are perhaps slowly discovering that advertising is steeped in humanities rather than science, in metaphysics rather than physics.

That's one way of looking at it. Another way is, ironically, to look at how our brains work.

Bombarded with non-stop information, we are learning that the brain is the best and fastest information filtering system in the world. What gets retained is not only the absolutely relevant, but also the absolutely different. This may go against the grain of what science is precisely trying to achieve, which is essentially to guarantee a level of predictability. If we are indeed hardwired to notice what's different, trying to manufacture predictable patterns may fundamentally run counter to how we think. In other words, trying to find a formula to creativity is essentially a contradiction, an oxymoron.

"System 1 thinking"

As we go along, we are also learning about the staggering complexity of the human brain and that we are only scratching the surface. It's like digging a tiny hole, only to discover there is a mile-deep abyss gaping under one's feet. The total number of synapses in a brain roughly equals the number of stars in 1,500 Milky Way galaxies. One synapse may contain in the order of 1 000 molecular-scale switches. A single human brain has more switches than all the computers and routers and internet connections on earth. In light of that staggering complexity, pretending we can predict the way we think seems vain at best, at worst like an arrogant endeavour.

How do we then deal with that complexity in informing our advertising decisions? Once again, the answer might lie in our brains, and what has been referred to by Daniel Kahneman as "system 1 thinking", a byword for instinct and guts: when confronted with complex information, our brain sifts through all of it, instantly tossing out the less important factors, judging the few big ones in a split second, and presenting you with the solution.



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To bring back advertising effectiveness, we need to go back to trusting our guts. As Jeff Bezos has recently said:

“ *All of my best decisions in business and in life have been made with heart, intuition, guts... not analysis. If you can make a decision with analysis, you should do so. But it turns out in life that your most important decisions are always made with instinct, intuition, taste, heart.* ”

And so it is about advertising.

Bringing magic to logic

The narrative around Accenture's acquisition of Droga 5 might be the wrong one after all: it's not about bringing the logic to the magic, but bringing magic to the logic. Growth depends upon it. Growth depends on left-brainers – strategists, researchers, data scientists, marketers – leaving room for right-brainers to express themselves.

At [Joe Public](#), we call it “plucking magic” and “guarding the creative spark”. Against what? Against the tidal wave of left-brain thinking that has been inundating advertising thinking of late.

And that is coming from a left-brain thinker.

ABOUT LAURENT MARTY

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