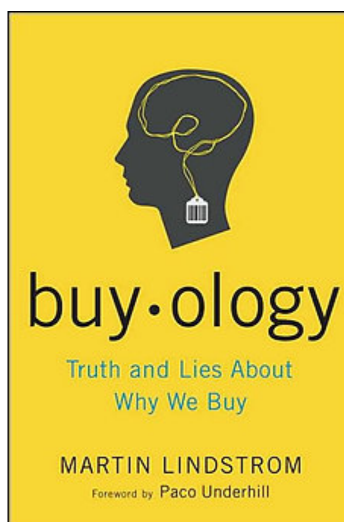
Advertisement

Advertisement
Advertisement

Buyer, Beware

By Jonah Lehrer,
author of "Proust Was a Neuroscientist," and "How We Decide," to be published in February
Thursday, October 23, 2008



Enlarge Photo

BUY-OLOGY

Truth and Lies About Why We Buy

By Martin Lindstrom

Doubleday. 240 pp. $24.95

When the scientists of the future look back at the advances of recent years, they'll be most impressed by what we've learned about the brain. The incarnate soul has been reduced to an intricate network of cells, speaking an obscure electrical code. The question, of course, is what to do with all this new knowledge. Doctors hope that it will lead to medical breakthroughs; philosophers are revising old theories of objectivity; political scientists are updating their models of voter behavior. And now, in a turn that's both inevitable and disconcerting, the tools of neuroscience have entered the world of advertising. In "Buy-ology," marketing guru Martin Lindstrom argues that the ad campaigns of the future should tweak their messages to manipulate the brain.

This isn't a new idea. In 1958, he writes, television networks banned subliminal advertising after reports surfaced of movie audiences consuming much more Coca-Cola and popcorn when exposed to fleeting images of "Drink Coca-Cola" and "Eat Popcorn." (The images were reportedly flashed for three-thousandths of a second, far too fast for conscious awareness.) Although the whole thing turned out to be a hoax and subsequent research found that subliminal advertising was rarely effective, the point had been made: The public had been forced to consider the possibility that many of our decisions are shaped by forces beyond our control.

Advertisement

Lindstrom wants to reinvent subliminal advertising for the 21st century, finding new ways to bend the unconscious to the corporate will. The fancy name for this approach is neuromarketing, and he argues that the endeavor is entirely benevolent, just another tool to help us "better understand ourselves -- our wants, our drives and our motivations."

It's hard to judge Lindstrom's optimism, since neuromarketing is largely a phenomenon of the private sector, which doesn't publish in peer-reviewed journals. Much of "Buy-ology" is based on brain-scanning research funded by "some of the most respected companies in the world," which paid Lindstrom and colleagues millions of dollars to investigate the effects of advertising on the brain.

If "Buy-ology" itself is any indication, these companies got ripped off. It's not that the book doesn't have interesting moments: I enjoyed learning about how slices of lime got indelibly associated with Corona beer and why the logos plastered on race cars are so effective at getting consumers to buy particular brands. However, what makes these stories interesting is that, unlike the rest of the book, they aren't shackled to pseudoscientific explanations meant to encourage larger advertising budgets.

Take mirror neurons, a much-hyped circuit of cells in the pre-motor cortex. These cells have one very interesting property: They fire both when a person moves and when that person sees someone else move. In other words, they collapse the distinction between seeing and doing. That's an exciting idea, but Lindstrom isn't content to stick with the

science. Instead, he uses mirror neurons to explain everything from the atmospherics of an Abercrombie & Fitch store (the "large blow-up posters of half-naked models" make your "mirror neurons fire-up") to the smell of coffee in the morning, which causes these cells to "see a cup of Maxwell-House." Lindstrom cheapens the mirror neuron hypothesis by turning it into a justification for almost every successful marketing campaign: Even the triumph of the iPod is merely mirror neurons at work.

He also oversimplifies his explanations of brain-scanning experiments. He describes his own research in breathless prose as "the largest, most revolutionary neuromarketing experiment in history," but his data rarely hold up to closer examination. For instance, he thinks it's incredibly profound that images of well-known brands, such as Harley-Davidson, trigger the "exact same patterns of brain activity" as does religious iconography. These data, however, clearly say more about the limitations of brain scanners and Lindstrom's experimental protocol than about brands or God. After all, motorcycles typically trigger very different feelings than pictures of nuns and church pews. If these things all look the same in a scanner, then you've missed something important.

When he's not trying to sell his own research, Lindstrom can be a charming writer. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of advertising history and an abundance of real-world business experience. Unfortunately, in "Buy-ology," he gets seduced by the explanatory power of brain science. Perhaps his next experiment should look at why those pictures of the cortex produced by brain-scanning experiments can make people believe such silly things.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company