

The Science of Engagement

An exploration into the true nature of engagement - what it means and what causes it. Grounded in science, not fiction.

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Foreword

For a while now, we at Weber Shandwick have been evolving our business to adapt to what is generally perceived to be a paradigm shift in the communications landscape – a shift that has redefined the role of public relations and has given us cause to pause for thought about the kind of agency we want to become.

From our earliest origins right up to the present day, Weber Shandwick has always been about one thing – engaging people with compelling ideas and powerful campaigns.

Whilst this truth has never and will never change, in a world where the lines between channels, disciplines and stories are increasingly blurred, where there is no ‘off’ button and where everyone is a potential influencer, the ways of engaging people have changed.

We are about media and stakeholder relations, yes, but we are also about digital communications, social media, brand experience and content creation. We are, above all, about engagement – across all channels, at all times, in all manner of ways. Our mission is to be an agency that operates 360, 365, 24/7 – the agency that is “engaging, always.”

And, whilst engagement is a familiar word, oft-used by marketing experts, research houses and marketing agencies as a byword for deeper audience involvement, very few have really sought to explore it in a way which makes it truly practical and applicable to those who promote businesses, brands, issues and causes.

To this end, we have collaborated with the behavioural insights practice Canvas8 and developed *The Science of Engagement*, in which we turn to genuine scientific experts in the fields of neuroscience, psychology and anthropology to help us understand the mechanics, biology, chemistry and physics of engagement so that we can better advise clients on how to build reputations, brands and campaigns.

Whilst this report outlines the first phase of the initiative, our work does not stop here. We have already started building our findings into the way we plan and measure campaigns, and in the coming months we will be exploring specific categories in more detail. We will also continue to write our own thought pieces and white papers on how science can lead us to the most engaging communications campaigns.

We hope you enjoy reading it.



Colin Byrne

CEO, Weber Shandwick UK & EMEA

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Overview

Communications have evolved from the 'one-to-many' relationship towards the 'many-to-many' relationship. In this hyper-connected world, where everyone with a smartphone is a reporter and anyone with internet access is a publisher, we are all media – simultaneously receiving, broadcasting and participating. On social media, brands and organisations are being investigated, hacked, dismantled, remixed and shaped by audiences worldwide, whether they choose to acknowledge it or not.

In the UK, there are more Twitter users than newspaper readers. More video is uploaded in 60 days on YouTube than the three major U.S. networks produced in 60 years. As Facebook nears one billion active users, it is clear that people are hugely engaged with each other – but are they really engaging with brands and businesses (and the causes they hold dear) as much as they could be? What drives people to spend time, effort and energy on some things but not others? Why are we more engaged with kittens on YouTube than uprisings against dictatorships in the Middle East?

An engaged audience is a must for any organisation. But engagement starts with people. People choose to engage. Their choices result in advocacy, shares, attention, likes, follows and purchases. We know this because we're becoming more skilled at measuring engagement. We understand its effects. But do we really understand its causes?

Working alongside anthropologist Dr. Grant McCracken, psychologist Dr. Olivier Oullier and neuroscientist Dr. Thomas Ramsøy we have uncovered *The Science of Engagement*.

Through an understanding of this science, we have identified the 10 common characteristics of engagement (the "Principles of Engagement") and its 19 constituent parts (the "Elements").

The Principles include the science of reciprocity, the importance of immediacy, the marrying of experience and expectation and the clear distinction between capturing and building engagement. The Elements range from 'Aesthetics' and 'Belonging' to 'Respect' and 'Newness'. The Principles underpin the theory behind *The Science of Engagement* whilst the Elements provide the practical building blocks for successful engagement.

Understanding *The Science of Engagement* means organisations can amplify and direct their communications for maximum effect.

Methodology

Brands and organisations have traditionally borrowed engagement cues from people's relationships with others. Brands often try to mimic people's personal relationships. Anthropologist Dr. Stefana Broadbent argues that this limits our understanding of engagement and the effectiveness of our strategies. We engage with more than just people. Amongst many other things, we engage with media, objects, hobbies, culture and religion. Each of these have unique cues for engagement – cues that brands and organisations may learn from and borrow.

To better understand these cues, we have drawn together a global panel of leading academic minds with expertise spanning anthropology, behavioural economics, neuroscience and psychology.

The Science of Engagement expert panel



Dr. Grant McCracken

Dr. McCracken holds a PhD in Anthropology and has authored numerous books including *Culturematic*, *Culture and Consumption* and *Transformations*. He is a member of MIT's Convergence Culture Consortium and was previously the director of the Institute of Contemporary Culture and a senior lecturer at the Harvard Business School.



Dr. Olivier Oullier

Dr. Oullier is a Professor of Behavioural and Brain Sciences at the Aix-Marseille University where he applies research in complex systems, social neuroscience and psychology into a field he calls 'emotionality'. Currently completing a second PhD in economics, he is honoured as a Young Global Leader for the World Economic Forum and has advised on behaviour change for governments and corporations worldwide.



Dr. Thomas Zoëga Ramsøy

Dr. Ramsøy is an expert in neuromarketing and neuroeconomics, and holds a PhD in Neurobiology as well as an MA and certified MSc in Psychology. He is currently Head of Research at the Decision Neuroscience Research Group at the Copenhagen Business School, a multidisciplinary collaboration converging economics, psychology and neuroscience.

The 10 Principles of Engagement

Taking input from our panel and extensive research, we define engagement as:

The intensity of an individual's connection or participation with a brand or organisation.

Engagement requires an emotional connection between a brand or organisation and an individual. This emotional connection leads to action, whether purchases, shares, Likes or Tweets, which are measured as participation. Because engagement is relative, its intensity can be measured by the strength of an individual's connection or participation. This varies depending on time, context, personal and environmental factors.

"From the customer's perspective, engagement means a willingness to go further than just the utilitarian act of consuming, and investing something into the relationship," explains behavioural economist Dr. Oullier. Neuroscientist Dr. Ramsøy adds, "Engagement is about your willingness or ability to spend energy to obtain something, and is always at the cost of engagement with other things."

Our research reveals ten Principles of Engagement. These underpin its Elements and establish the parameters for effective engagement.

1. Engagement is a finite resource, not an infinite commodity

Engagement with one thing is always at the expense of another. Attention and effort are limited. Paying attention demands a small cost, while interaction or participation demand

a much higher cost. Brands must be realistic about what they demand from people and clear in communicating what people can expect in return. Different environments pose different challenges for engagement – whether at home or on-the-go, alone or with friends, at night or in the morning. Knowledge of these factors will help brands identify the most relevant and opportune moments for engagement.

2. Engagement requires reciprocity

Engagement costs people time, effort and energy. The brain processes this cost in relation to the expected reward. Those seeking high engagement must offer a high reward. This can be a tangible reward, such as a voucher, but can also be a softer, more long-term reward, such as a sense of belonging, self-actualisation or status. Softer rewards are adaptable, allowing audiences to serve their personal needs. This requires an understanding of the common ground between the individual's goals and the brand or organisation's goals.

3. Engagement is not binary

Engagement is not a light to be switched on or off within people. It shines all the time, varying in intensity from person to person, time to time, and context to context. Whether brands choose to acknowledge it or not matters less. How and when they choose to capitalise on the right types of engagement across various channels and topics is the real issue.

4. Engagement is about what we want or what we like

Our brains process all decisions as potential rewards driven by two systems: what we want

and what we like. Our wanting system (System One) is driven by subconscious desires. These decisions we call our 'gut feelings'. They are mental short cuts – instinctive, impulsive and often related to immediate and primal rewards, such as a piece of chocolate or sex. System One decisions are most often short-term. Our liking system (System Two) is driven by conscious desires. This refers to how we make a plan for obtaining something in the future. It is how we make sense of the world consciously and articulate our thoughts, desires and aspirations. Our liking system helps us navigate the future. System Two decisions are most often long-term.

5. Immediacy delivers engagement

Our brains have evolved to make snap decisions based on the anticipation of immediate reward. These decisions are not always conscious – consider System One thinking. Communications' call-to-action requires a direct connection to the reward. Rewards that are perceived as immediate deliver higher engagement.

6. Engagement decisions are post-rationalised

People are often unaware of the reasons behind their decisions. When they pledge to get healthy, save money or learn more, they are demonstrating System Two engagement. Later, when they are tired and grab fast food before collapsing in front of the television, the primitive urge of System One takes over. People say to themselves 'I deserved it', and that 'tomorrow I'll restart the diet'. Communications equip the conscious brain with a rational story justifying subconscious impulses. This is both the story people tell themselves and the story they share with others. However, sustained conflict between the two systems creates internal conflict. People unhappily, or

even worse, resentfully, engage. System One urges, supported by System Two planning, are a powerful branding proposition: immediacy harmonised with aspiration.

7. Engagement can be divided into 'capture' and 'build'

Take the example of flat pack furniture. You need a chair. You travel to the store. Your need, combined with the furniture's availability, utility and design, captures your attention. It could even be the special offer that initiates interest. This is the initial engagement ('Capture'). Once home, engagement transforms. The investment you make in assembling the chair builds long-term engagement ('Build'). The personally assembled product carries greater engagement than it did when it was boxed in-store. Professor Michael I. Norton, Associate Professor of Business Administration in the Harvard University Marketing Unit, termed this behaviour the 'IKEA effect'. Like the special offer, communications can capture our attention. Shout loud enough and everyone will look. Keep shouting and you may go unheard. Combining novel ways to capture attention with audience resonance builds engagement. Next time, you won't have to shout so loud.

8. Engagement benefits from being multi-layered

"Religion is the benchmark for engagement," says Dr. Oullier. Religion applies multiple layers of engagement, each reinforcing the other. It initially captures engagement with a great narrative, accessibility and the promise of reward. It builds long-term engagement through social involvement, shared values, integrity, and ultimately, providing a sense of purpose. Neuroscience tells us that the sheer number

of associations that a person has with a brand leads to a positive effect on engagement. Associations can be both broad and deep. This could be about touch points or senses – sight, sounds, smells, tastes and touch – to create a force so compelling that it bids for space in the most lucrative areas of the brain.

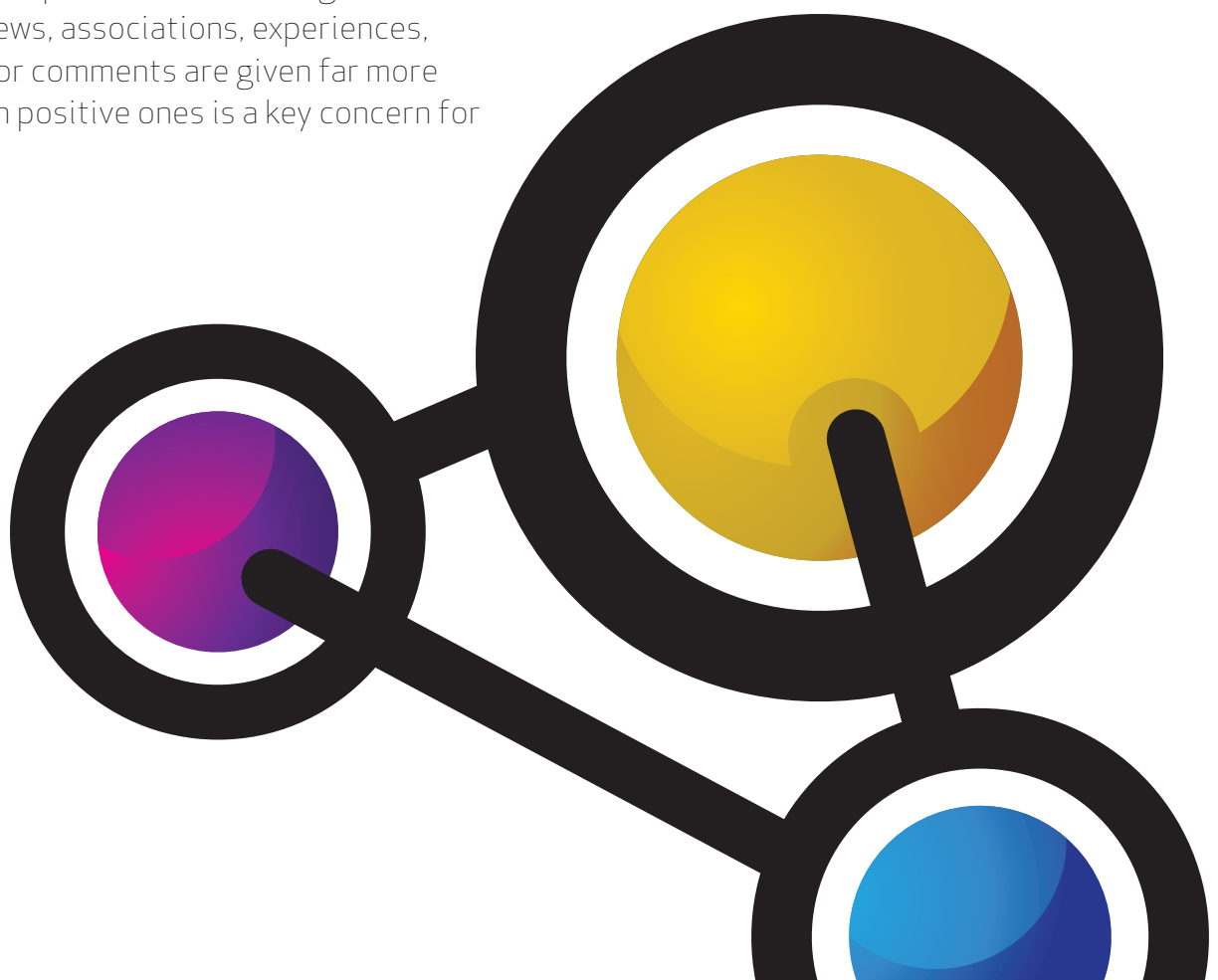
9. Negatives always outweigh positives

Our brains are more driven to minimise risks than seek potential gains. When we make decisions, we give more weight to the negative than the positive. Studies suggest that negative emotions carry roughly twice as much weight as positive ones. This means that, in times of crisis, minimising any negatives holds more importance than highlighting positives, especially on social media, where audiences outweigh communicators and information travels at light-speed. Understanding that negative reviews, associations, experiences, testimonials or comments are given far more credence than positive ones is a key concern for

engagement. We can be positively engaged, but we are strongly influenced by negativity.

10. Engagement marries experience with expectation

Any engagement decision is shaped by an individual's personal experience (with a brand, business or organisation), and also their expectations. Over-delivery is a surprise, under-delivery is a disappointment. Because each experience primes future decisions to engage, over time, individuals grow to expect what they have previously experienced. This shapes the decision to engage. Marrying the two delivers engagement.



The 19 Elements of Engagement

Beyond the Principles of Engagement are its Elements. They are personal motivators that drive people to engage. We have looked outside of brands and organisations for examples where people are highly engaged, whether with the media, celebrities, each other, or entertainment.

Buzzwords such as 'storytelling,' 'play' or 'innovation' don't sit among the Elements. They are examples of multiple Elements working together. Storytelling does not drive engagement, it is engagement.

When reviewing the application of the Elements, consider:

The perfect blend.

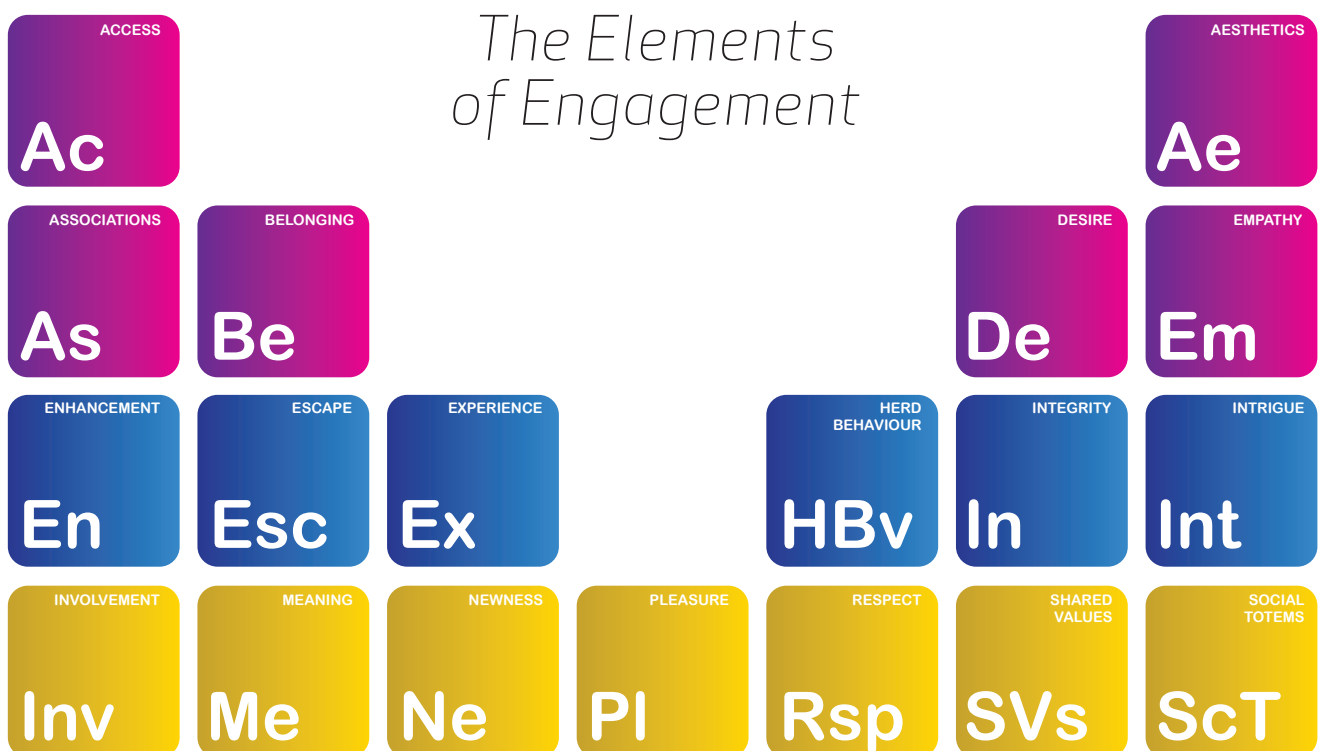
Not all Elements apply to all brands, industries and organisations. Beyond that, different industries or categories can expect different levels of engagement. Careful selection and blending of the Elements increases engagement.

Measurement.

Whether using innovative or traditional research methodologies, measurement helps compare brands to company or industry benchmarks and directs their communications to deliver business goals. As part of *The Science of Engagement* we have identified a series of measurement approaches.

Science, not miracles.

Our Elements come verified by experts across anthropology, behavioural economics, psychology and neuroscience. They are valuable tools for delivering engagement, but are not all that is required. Nor are the Elements 'one-size-fits-all'. Different industries require different Elements. This requires careful consideration. Handle with caution.



Defining the 19 Elements of Engagement

Access

Access relates to how easy something is to obtain. When faced with a range of choices, people's selection is most often based on convenience and availability. Access captures engagement.

The science: the brain tries to minimise the cost of reward in terms of effort, energy and time. High accessibility means low cost.

In action: fast food or second-choice purchases.

Aesthetics

People are visual creatures. Eyes are the primary channel through which they receive information. Closely linked to 'associations', aesthetics capture engagement.

The science: things that are aesthetically appealing command visual attention.

In action: a piece of art or bright colours.

Associations

Connections with indirect memories, whether positive or negative, capture engagement. Associations are most often subconscious and can traverse multiple senses.

The science: the brain categorises information in relation to what it already knows. Positive synaptic associations help frame decision-making.

In action: the colour green evokes nature and nostalgic music evokes associations with the past.

Belonging

Belonging is about familiarity. It is a social habit and requires group acceptance. It builds engagement over a prolonged period of time.

The science: people are inherently social and collaborate together in teams, tribes or families.

In action: sports teams or social clubs.

Desire

Desire is a hole that needs to be filled, driven by a sense of lacking. The brain seeks and anticipates rewards. Desire is a 'subconscious want' that captures engagement.

The science: when presented with stimuli, the brain responds immediately. If the stimuli are positive, it assigns a value and releases dopamine. Desire has its origin in the experience of satisfaction.

In action: wanting a piece of chocolate or impulsive spending.

Empathy

The ability to relate to another person's situation, feelings or experiences is a fundamental human trait. Empathy is a subconscious process that builds engagement.

The science: understanding or observing something engages the same neural structures as actually doing it.

In action: caring about a film or story's protagonist.

Enhancement

Self-improvement is a fundamental human motivator. Enhancement is about improvement relative to social environment. It is often connected to status and enhanced by competition. Enhancement can either capture engagement (technology upgrade) or build engagement over time (learning a skill).

The science: as part of natural selection, people are driven by competition and a motivation to be ahead of the crowd.

In action: learning a new language or purchasing a new computer.

Escape

Reality is complex. Escape transports people away from physical and psychological realities. It both captures and builds engagement.

The science: people use their imaginations to project fears and desires, in order to find release from reality and satisfaction.

In action: fantasy films or dream holidays.

Experience

Connections with direct memories, whether positive or negative, affect engagement. Bad memories halt engagement. Good experiences encourage repeat engagement.

The science: anchoring this primes the brain to release dopamine in anticipation of repeating a positive experience. People are inclined to repeat good experiences and develop habits.

In action: repeat purchases or routines.

Herd behaviour

People follow the crowd, adhere to social norms and take subconscious leads from others. Herd behaviour can either be the spark that captures engagement, or the tool that builds it.

The science: the ability to understand other people's emotions and intentions builds mirror neurons. This strengthens social norms and social acceptance.

In action: riot behaviour or flash-mobs.

Integrity

Integrity is about honesty and commitment. Over a period of time, integrity results from delivery of defined principles and promises (shared values), even in the face of temptation. Integrity builds trust and engagement.

The science: similar to respect, integrity requires reciprocity, mirroring of values and delivery. Our brains constantly aim to minimise threats and seek out consistency.

In action: delivery on CSR principles or politicians delivering on promises.

Intrigue

Intrigue results from being given an incomplete picture. It is an invitation to fill in the blanks. The unknown sparks curiosity, driven by fear of missing out. Porous communications absorb audiences. Intrigue can both capture and build engagement.

The science: the brain responds strongly to ambiguity. It engages classical fear structures.

In action: a detective novel or a jigsaw puzzle.

Involvement

This is developed through ownership or investment of either effort, time or money. Through involvement, a product or brand becomes a small part of the investor. Involvement is a subconscious process which builds over time.

The science: there is a fundamental human need for control – an ability to influence and produce desired outcomes in one's environment.

In action: the 'IKEA effect' states that people tend to place increased value on things in which they have invested time, effort and energy.

Meaning

This gives people a direction, a sense of purpose or a reason for being. Meaning builds repeat engagement.

The science: psychologically, people seek meaning in everything; however, some things are perceived as more meaningful than others.

In action: religion gives people a purpose or work gives them a sense of direction.

Newness

Anything new, original or innovative stands out from the crowd. Newness captures attention and engages people in the short term.

The science: the 'contrast effect' determines that newness stands out against uniformity. Coupled with positive associations, this creates an inclination to investigate.

In action: new technology or unread emails.

Pleasure

Pleasure is the sensory experience resulting from a stimulus. Pleasure happens after the 'wanting'. It is subconscious and maintains engagement.

The science: pleasure triggers an opiate release in the brain and continued pleasure releases dopamine as a reward.

In action: sex or winning on a slot machine.

Respect

Respect is about achievement and requires mutually shared values. It develops from an individual's recognition of another's feats in delivering a common goal. Respect inspires.

The science: the psychology of reciprocity and mirroring – respect is personal and context-dependent. People seek those who set benchmarks and provide direction – this instills belief and motivates.

In action: visionary business leaders or Olympians.

Shared values

The mutual pursuit of goals. Shared values are considered, rational and build long-term engagement.

The science: shared values create an in-group bias that encourages people to spend more time and energy on something. The importance of reciprocity in shared values emerges from social psychology.

In action: an open source community or Mumsnet.

Social totems

These provide commonality for social interaction, allowing people who have little in common to share something. Social totems capture engagement.

The science: social totems break down social barriers, unite common interests and encourage reciprocity.

In action: learning to play golf or watching soap operas.

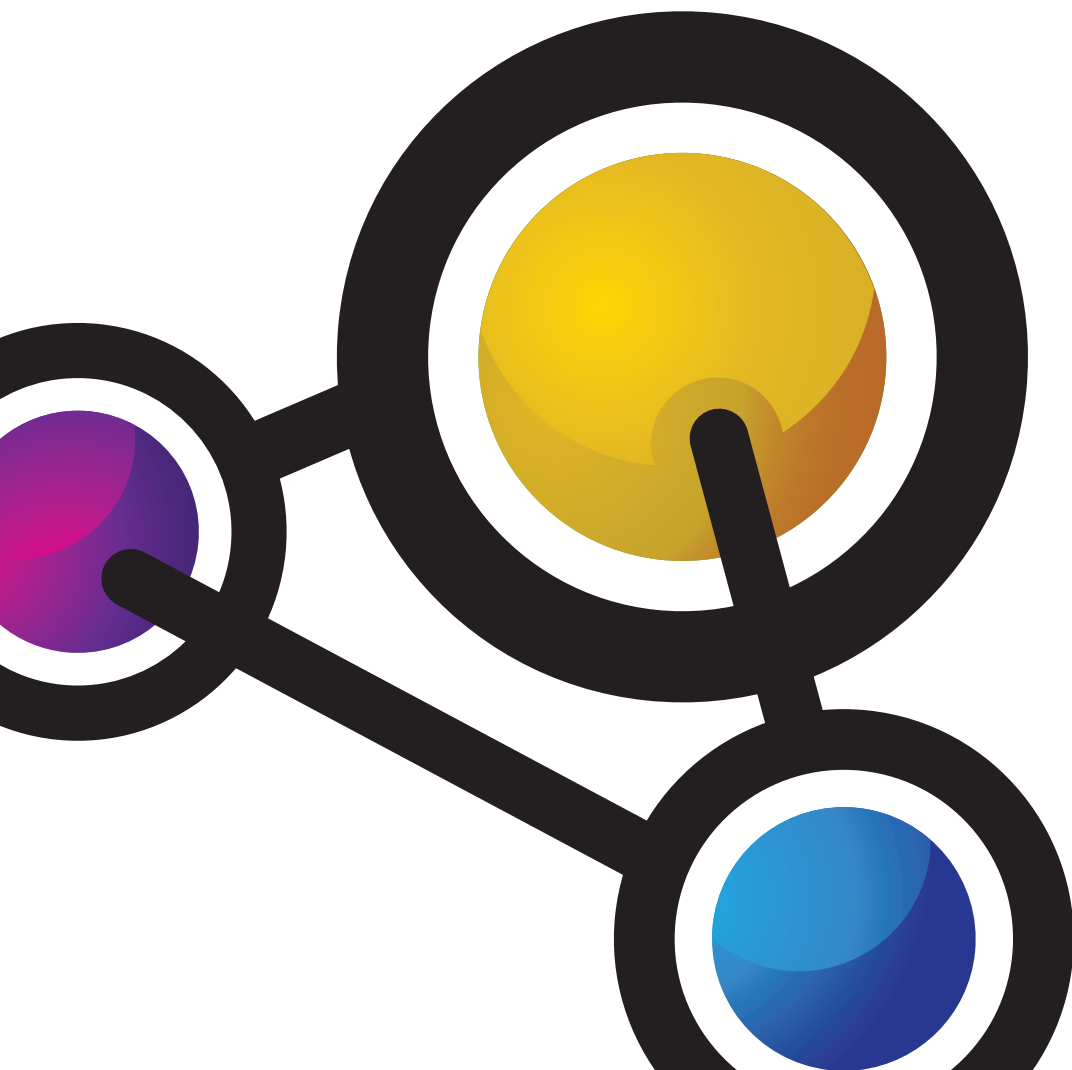
The Blueprint for Sustained Engagement

Sustained engagement comes from taking a multi-layered approach to the application of the Elements. Communications direct and amplify engagement to deliver brand or business goals.

This deceptively simple approach requires a deep analysis of the universal biases, needs, wants and likes of the people you are trying to engage. It creates a personalised blueprint for action across a range of categories, industries and environments.

Looking forward a knowledge of anthropology, neuroscience and psychology will need to be integrated into the complexities of digital channels to deliver sustained engagement.

From tinkering in the laboratory, to real world application, this research represents our first steps towards understanding *The Science of Engagement*. We hope you'll join us on this journey.



Expert Views

*Much of the thinking behind *The Science of Engagement* has been influenced by a panel of experts representing various domains of science. Here are their personal perspectives on engagement; what it means and how to most effectively achieve it.*

Firstly, anthropologist Dr. McCracken discusses the importance of media that is half-formed and not fully formed. Then, psychologist Dr. Oullier reveals how behavioural economics is changing the engagement. Finally, neuroscientist Dr. Ramsøy explains how engaging people with what they want is very different from engaging them with what they like.

1. An anthropological perspective from Dr. Grant McCracken

*Anthropologist Dr. McCracken discusses *The Science of Engagement* – why play is the key to engagement and how not understanding the U.S. detective show ‘*The Wire*’ is moving us from a ‘rock-back’ to a ‘lean-forward’ culture.*

There was a time when marketing spoke with a megaphone and belloped the message to all and sundry. It didn’t care that people were responding, and it didn’t respond to their responses. It kept banging out the same old message. Some brands are like that guy at the party who’s had too much to drink and just keeps talking; you can just see this circle form around him as people start to back away. Moving to engagement is about being responsive, nuanced, customised, companionable and playful.

Communicators can craft a different kind of signal to engage people because people are now vastly more literate in matters of culture than before. Previously, communicators worked from a genre playbook. They had to be loyal and faithful to that genre. If they were making a television detective show, they knew precisely what they were obliged to say to make their audience think, “Oh, we get what’s happening here.” Now that everyone is so media-literate, I think the notion is, ‘don’t be obvious’; if you want people to engage, craft a message which leaves something out. Give people room to engage with it.

When you’re too obvious, people bounce off. When you leave things unfinished, people think, “Oh, so what is this?” There has to be enough of a signal that they know what they’re looking at, but enough noise that they think, “Oh, wait a second, what?” That’s the secret of engagement. The best cultural producers have this gift for creating something that’s half-formed; people sort of know what it is; and half-unformed, so that people don’t quite know what it is and are drawn in to figure it out. *The Wire* was wonderful because its creators didn’t care that the audience didn’t understand everything.

The worlds of public relations, communications and marketing have changed radically. We’re seeing a changing of the guard. Our world used to be occupied by people whose speciality was keeping it simple and making things irresistibly obvious. Engagement failed precisely because they’d done such a good job of satisfying the requirements of genre. So the misconception of engagement is that the traditional means of communication are, ironically, preventing the very thing they’re trying to do.

When creating this kind of participation, it's important to remember 'manageable difficulty'. A task that's too easily dispatched gives no real satisfaction; a task that's way too difficult gives no satisfaction. Participation should be difficult but not impossible. That's the sweet spot.

Communications can no longer declare the standing, the significance or the meaning of the corporation and or brand. It can only propose it. It must work with culture and the consumer to create it.

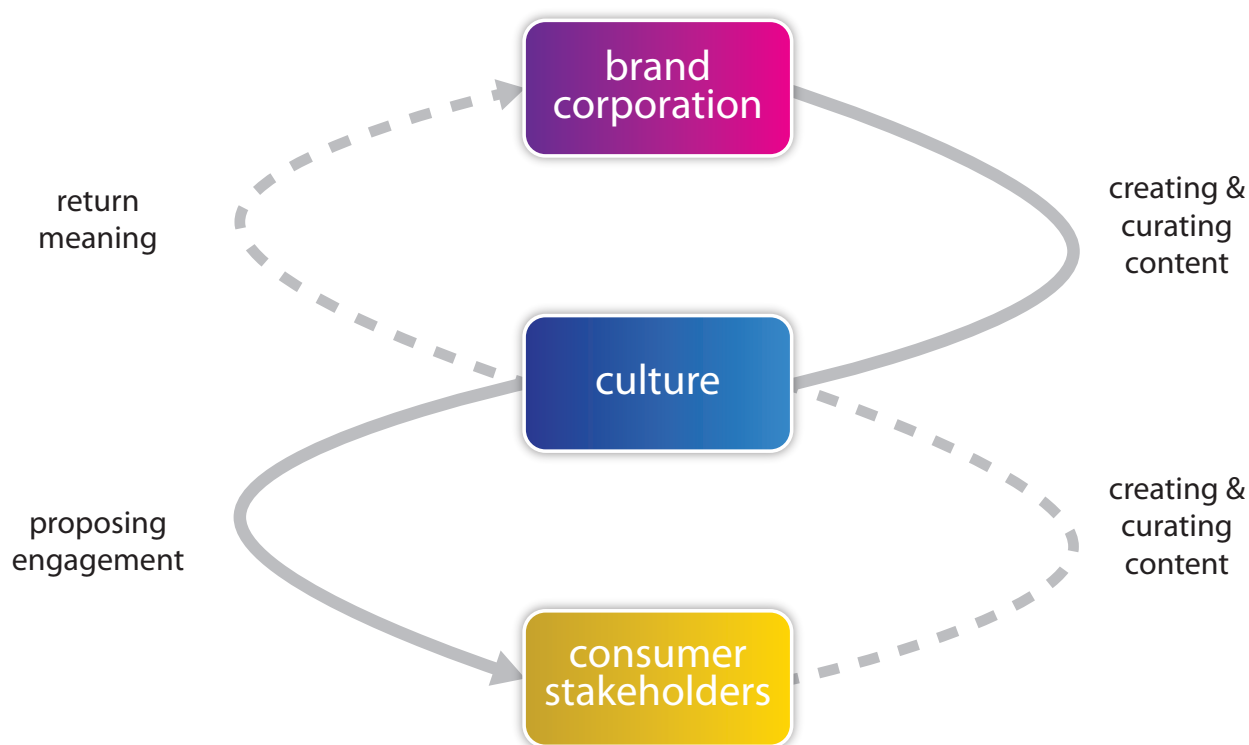


Figure Eight Engagement Model : aka, engagement goes through culture
Copyright Grant McCracken

Engagement is a kind of relay in which meaning is exchanged between the brand, organisation or cause and the individual as it percolates through culture. There are two steps. Firstly, the brand, organisation or cause reaches out to an individual by creating and curating cultural content. If an individual accepts this content, builds on it and then distributes it, an exchange happens. In this engagement, the individual unlocks the meaning in a brand, organisation or cause. Over time, communications can build and deepen this meaning.

As an anthropologist, engagement over time means a relationship formed of two stages. In stage one, you invest curiosity – say, looking at something that captures your attention in a mechanical way. In stage two, you have to invest time, and most of all, trust. At that point, you want to see integrity in the building of the relationship. That's one of the necessary conditions of trust. You want to see people making good on some promise they have made. And then they can say "Okay, well then, this can be a relationship, there's some substance here. I can invest more of my interest and my social time, because I have reason to believe that this creature will make good on any future promises."

The risk-takers spread engagement. Engagement often requires first attracting the attention and confidence of the most adventurous people. These risk takers are then imitated by others and the behaviour flows through our society, eventually reaching the risk-averse.

Empathy is hard-wired into the human species. It is creating what anthropologists refer to as ‘the death of difference’. Not very long ago, people saw groups that were different from their own as being slightly alarming or strange and threatening. You could persuade them without much difficulty to demonise those groups. Culture used to get in the way of people’s natural mirroring process or empathy. Younger people are now thinking “Well, they’re not that different. No-one’s so different from me that I can’t imagine what their lives are like. I can’t participate in their lives from a distance.”

Now, the ‘empathy genie’ has been let out of the bottle, and now it’s spreading everywhere. People are using it for new purposes, as a kind of experiential vehicle. They use it to imagine what it would be like to be a coffee grower in Guatemala. You can engage with people’s empathy. Empathy means that people will follow you anywhere.

A wonderful English film critic recently said that in the old days we used to identify with the hero. Now, we identify with everybody on the screen – the hero, the villain, the bit players – we are voracious in this process of identification. So it’s an incredibly powerful piece of engagement, to give people an opportunity for identity exploration, for identity definition and identity manufacture.

I think people are increasingly engaged by the idea that they are accomplishing some social good; they’re still individuals, acting in a way that suits them and benefits them, but from that stems social good. Younger consumers in particular want to break out of the prison of individualism.

Playfulness turns a ‘rock-back’ consumer into a ‘lean-forward’ consumer. Morris Berman, U.S. cultural historian and social critic, claimed the Industrial Revolution drained the world of some of its interest, magic and powers of engagement. Now, people are trying to re-enchant the world with play.

Play is a sense of “I’m doing something a little bit out of the ordinary here, it needn’t frighten you.” Everybody is open to play because they’re more media literate. That makes ‘play’ the Magna Carta, the principle of opportunity for engagement.

People are more interested in intrinsic than extrinsic things, in expressive individualism than instrumental individualism. Brands and organisations that can supply that kind of engagement say to people “I get you. The most imaginative, thoughtful, playful, alive part of you is known to me.” When somebody tells you a certain kind of joke they pay you a huge compliment, and the compliment is, “You’re up for this. You’re smart and intelligent enough, and engaged enough, to hear what I’m saying and respond to it”. This is a great way for an organisation to distinguish itself from those who are still banging the old marketing drum.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, wrote a book called Flow. He found that people like experiences that completely captivate them. When the experience ends, they shake themselves and wonder “Where am I? What was I doing? What was happening there?” That seems to me the highest quality of engagement. And it comes from ‘flow’. And the way you get to flow is through play. If you engage people by saying “If you do this I’ll give you that”, that’s a fully transactional experience of the world. These tend to be extrinsic benefits. The things that really work create flow. Only play, Csikszentmihalyi would argue, delivers that kind of engagement.

Religion is a great example of engagement, but look at what’s happened to it in the era of new-age spirituality. The ‘new-age revolution’ is saying, “No, I’ll decide what resonates for me”. There are thousands of ideas of what God is, what spirit is, what religiosity is, what worship is. It’s this perfect example of a culture that’s gone from being quite formulaic to busting out all over. This is where American culture has been going for the past sixty years. And that tells us precisely what works as engagement now. People went from being prepared to be told what religion was, or anything was, to saying “You’re not the boss of me, I’ll figure out what I believe in, and how I should worship”. That’s happened across the board in our culture. Which is why mass marketing has died.

However, people increasingly draw part of their identity from brands, particularly brands which stand for cultural meanings that people are passionate about. Coca Cola has invested heavily in the notion of joy, which has a cultural meaning all American consumers care about. The organisation’s face is made up of cultural meanings as created by the marketing team and the PR team.

Digital has made the receipt of messages unpredictable. I Tweet a few times a day, and I never know who’s going to Retweet or respond. It’s as if my network lights up, unpredictably, according to the nature. It’s hard predicting whether a message will light up my network, and who in the network will be lit up by it. Of course, there are communities of interest out there, small and nimble that cluster around things, but Twitter is a fantastic laboratory – you throw something out and it’s like there’s this feeding frenzy.

The new model of engagement understands that now people can say “When you talk to us that way, it isn’t interesting”. Engagement is about a conversation that draws people out, and hear what they’re saying and then re-craft the message to suit. Every act of communication now has to be intensely iterative.

2. A psychological perspective from Dr. Olivier Oullier

Psychologist and behavioural economist Dr. Oullier discusses The Science of Engagement – why crowdsourcing should be used for ‘sensing’ rather than co-creation, the importance of the pace and rhythm in engagement and why religion might be the benchmark.

Engagement is always a two-way relationship. It is the mutual exchange of both information and influence. For an organisation or corporation, engagement lies in the way that you use your presence (physical, digital, imagined, remembered etc.) to build strong connections. From the customer’s perspective, engagement means a willingness to go further than just the utilitarian act of consuming, investing something beyond money into the relationship - your heart, your emotions, your expectations...

Engagement today differs from how it was defined by some social psychologists. In ‘traditional’ psychology literature, engagement was related to actions rather than intentions: what people really do, with respect to a context, a situation, a person. It wasn’t about goods or services. Today we think about engagement not only in terms of what people are doing, but what we think they can do, what they will do in the future and what they expect.

Expectations are important here too; people create an ideal image of what a product is, or what a brand represents, and the brand has to live up to this. Failure to do so leads to disappointment.

Engagement is a continuous exchange of information between what is expected and what is really happening. For a long time, the brand approach to the consumer was: buy something, then buy it again. Now there is a more complicated interplay between offer and expectation. Consumers give money – that is their part of the deal. Brands must do the rest. With the consumer empowered, not just by social media, but by information exchange in general, there is an asymmetry in the relationship between consumer and brand. The consumer feels more entitled, not only to the product, but to a lot more as well.

Brands need to create a connection that brings people back – something in addition to the product itself. They must spark the imagination of the consumer. And it cannot be an illusion; engagement must be real and genuine (or at least perceived to be) in order to be sustainable.

Participation goes beyond purchasing. We are rarely just the person at the end of the production chain who either consumes or doesn’t. Participation is not a binary matter – it goes beyond the simple act of purchasing. If people feel that they are involved in a product and that their voices are being listened to, there will be more willingness on their side to continue buying and participating. For the past two decades, we’ve seen communities emerging around brands and products, almost like families. If you belong to a family you have a responsibility to understand the family’s needs and contribute to its well-being.

Crowdsourcing is a way to know, in advance, what people want. It demonstrates a willingness to produce what people want – but it can create a perception that the brand is a follower. Engagement requires being a trendsetter. Crowdsourcing can be used intelligently, to sense whether people’s desires remain stable, or whether they want something new. It’s up to a brand to sense this and deliver it. People might not be able to articulate what that ‘something new’ is.

Engaged customers participate and support. The more we give our opinion, the more we believe it – this is a type of confirmation bias. If people provide a brand with information, they are likely to believe that the brand listened, or that they participated. Making people feel that their voice has been heard is crucial to engagement; the product or the brand becomes a little piece of themselves.

People are providing information to brands through social media; they are investing time without being asked to. This is creating a huge volume of data. Qualitative and quantitative tools are still popular and useful for understanding human behaviour, but crowdsourced data is much more interesting because it can be used to sense how viable the opinions or needs of people are, as individuals and communities.

People love to be loved. They can be egocentric and selfish. They need to feel that their own views are the most important. The brand must be a mirror of what people are thinking – not a basic mirror, but an enhancing mirror. When people look at themselves, they have to feel that they are taller stronger, more beautiful, happier, healthier.

In a world where consumers have never been so informed and so volatile in their decisions and preferences, storytelling makes engagement sustainable. More information creates more uncertainty. Judgements and decisions are not processed by the same brain network, contrary to rational models of decision-making. They can be differentiated. As can preference. The volatility of preference is tied to the fact that there is more and more information and an abundance of choices. Narrative has to be considered in any long-term engagement, not only as the hook or the primer, but as a method of creating or inducing beliefs. It should not be thought of as merely a method of simplification. Simple things are easy to understand, but they can also be perceived as not making enough effort to please or seduce. Engagement might require simplicity at the beginning, but for it to last, you may have to add more layers – being able to hold it is key.

Engagement is in the details. Developers, strategists or engineers might be interested in the rational elements that relate to a product, service or brand, but what sticks in people’s minds are the little details in the story – the kind of detail that only another human can have experienced, not something from a machine or a communications strategy that’s trying to sell me something. There need to be humans behind the brand. A Beatles song resonates strongly because it feels like it was written for you or about you – you engage strongly because it ‘understands’ you. The meaning is important, but it’s also about the pace, the repetition, the playfulness, the ups and downs, the good and the bad – the emotional roller-coaster of narrative that takes you from one place to another.

Certain words, situations and contexts resonate more with certain people. The more something echoes with my experiences, the more it resonates.

With identity there are huge paradoxes. We want to be individuals, different and treated as such, but concomitantly we also want to be part of a tribe. Tribes create rules, but they should not prevent us from being free. Identity means that individuals need to appear to be unique; but in order to be unique, they must be compared with others. So the concept of identity comes both from shared values and differences. Products encompass more than just their monetary value.

Status is linked to preference and is highly volatile. Status can rise and fall. Apple has managed to successfully shift from being an elite to a mass brand. When it released the iPod, people who couldn't afford the real thing bought white headphones to make others think they had one. Then came the iPhone, which was a massive success from a company whose story is based on the idea that it is for an elite. In spite of the fact that status is volatile and temporal, in the transition from elite to mass, Apple has retained a perception of a quality product and innovative brand.

If we were rational, we would all drive safe cars. Brands that pursue too much of a utilitarian approach – meeting rational needs with stronger, better, longer products – tend to lack engagement. This is because with utility, there is generally more to lose than there is to gain. Function is just a cost of entry.

You've always wanted a designer suit, but can you afford one socially? Affordability is not just a monetary issue. It is a social issue. Imagine the factory worker who saved for two years to buy a designer suit. The day he starts wearing the suit, colleagues might think: 'A guy like him should not be able to afford a suit like that.' Perception becomes reality. These kinds of suits are not meant for these kinds of people, some would think, wrongly. Affordability, both monetarily and socially, is the match between who you are, who others think you are, and what the brand represents.

Engagement should drive audiences forward and upward. Aspiration is driven by social comparison. We are surrounded by peers, generally of a similar social standing, with comparable incomes and maybe even dreams. Brands tap into the goals people set themselves – to save money, to fight social pressure, to be healthy – but those goals have to be realistic. We dream of things we will never be able to reach. Other things we know that with a lot of effort and hard work, we might be able to reach. Owning a Porsche might not be possible but owning a BMW might be.

We recently did research into promoting healthy eating in obese people and found that showing an image of a slightly overweight person motivates people to follow a diet more than if they were shown an image of a professional athlete – because athletes (and their bodies) represent an unrealistic goal. Otherwise, the idea is like the Porsche – just a dream. The key is to be able to find the right range in which you can move your audiences from their current position. To bridge the gap between dream and reality, affordability and potential. Whether we are made to feel like we can do this or not determines how motivated we will be to connect and participate.

The strength of the belief that a brand can instil in me that I can become (what I think is) a better person determines the strength of the engagement.

History and past experience constitute a referent and are the unavoidable foundation for people's expectations. What you were makes you what you are. Being able to distinguish yourself based on what you were is key for a brand, whether it is aiming for continuity, consistency – or disruption and regeneration. There is a quote from a neuroscientist: “Memory is not something to remember the past, but to anticipate the future.” You need memories in order to be able to design a better future.

This is interesting with respect to objects. Objects work like landmarks. They tend to remain as a kind of invariance, something that comforts us and we know we can rely on to some extent. We need these landmarks, in the same way we are attached to the village or school we grew up in. They remind us of good or bad times in our lives.

The dynamics and asymmetry of trust are radically different on social media. A big food manufacturer recently released a new cereal and promoted it as ‘natural!’ When a grocer in the U.S. discovered the cereal was made up of 100% genetically modified ingredients, he simply removed the product from his shelves and put up a note to explain to customers why the cereal was no longer on sale. Someone took a picture and within hours, this very local event went viral on Facebook, becoming an international crisis for the company. The consumer is empowered on Facebook and trust dynamics have never been so volatile. It takes longer to build trust and only a moment to lose it.

Perceptions relating to corporate responsibility fluctuate. In the 1980s Bill Gates was a positive figure, an innovator. Then in the 1990s he became the face of a decade-long anti-trust investigation. Now he's the face of philanthropy, helping millions of people out of poverty. When we are engaged we are able to overlook problems with a brand. A few months ago a man representing the far left was running for the French presidency. He was completely against capitalism. A journalist noticed that he was wearing a certain brand of footwear. Despite his anti-capitalist views, and his previous speeches berating the brand, the candidate claimed to like the products and the brand. People are neither emotional or rational, they are both, and both systems are interdependent. I call it ‘emotionality’. When you realise how irrational people can be, it demonstrates how powerful engagement can be. It creates forgiveness. You unconsciously end up not seeing the downside.

One of the big misconceptions around branding is that it's a linear process. That if I do this, you're going to do that. Now, brands cannot take anything for granted in terms of knowing a set of tactics or tricks that work. This might have been true in the 1980s when communication was going through the radio, press and television. Today, social media has made it very hard to capture attention. Since we are more inclined to communicate in 140 characters, attention is reducing. Newspapers should consider shortening their size. You also have to make an impact faster because we have less time. We are multitasking. We do not want to waste time. Engagement is not just about grabbing

attention, it needs to last, to sustain attention and keep the relationship strong. It is like bringing flowers to your lover to maintain a relationship. The pace and rhythm are not considered enough, because we are rushing. Few companies can afford to take the time to establish a relationship. Most need results fast. They need growth. They need new income. They need to make money. However, understanding the rhythms and pace of engagement must be a key focus.

In order for things to feel good, they have to be immediate. With engagement, companies fall for the same cognitive bias as people, favouring immediate reward over long-term investment. Long-term reward may not be satisfying because I'm not getting enough of a 'dopamine rush'. Loss aversion is a well-known cognitive bias, but we are discovering from experiments in neuroeconomics that 'me today' and 'me in the future' are two very different people. Imminent reward and delayed reward are processed by two different systems. The mental process I undergo when thinking about advising you how to invest money today is completely different from the process I go through when thinking about my own investment. However, if I am telling you how to invest over a thirty-year period, I undergo exactly the same mental process as I do when I am thinking about my own thirty-year investment. If I am thinking about you and me now, there is a difference. If I am thinking about you and me in the future, there is no difference. Me in the future is a kind of stranger.

This makes long-term planning around engagement very difficult. A brand might think it's wasting time. With the iPad, Apple has convinced people they need a tablet, getting them to engage with a whole sector rather than a product. Whether that's an iPad or a another product is a different matter. Brands that have infiltrated the market are trying to offer something better, more functional. Plenty of products are now theoretically better than the iPhone, or iPad. They last longer or have more features, better definition or a better battery life.

So why aren't people buying these things? All over the internet, many websites, forums and discussion boards tell you that the iPhone is far from being the best cellphone, technically speaking. What people think of the brand - the image, the quality, or the perception of the quality - is so strong that there is faith.

I live in a country where people buy cars because they're French. In any other country this would be the best counter-argument to not buying a car. German cars are reliable. This is beyond identity, it's a belief - a faith.

Faith can lead to a form of 'blindness'! Along that thinking, religion can be a benchmark for engagement. Religion has evolved and still influences people. If people had presented religion as a system of hard hierarchical rule would it have succeeded? Perhaps not. It was the power of storytelling.

The success of religion is based on its systemic approach, not necessarily in the belief in a God. It offers people not only what they expect, but more. People feel understood, fulfilled, as if their wellbeing is improved. It resonates.

3. A neuroscience perspective from Dr. Thomas Zoëga Ramsøy

Neuroscientist Dr. Ramsøy discusses The Science of Engagement – why ‘what we want’ is not always ‘what we like’, why negatives outweigh positives two to one and how engaging multiple senses lights up the brain.

Engagement requires willingness and sacrifice. Engagement requires a willingness or ability to spend energy to obtain something, and is always at the cost of engaging with other things. You always choose one thing at the cost of others, such as a particular page in a magazine.

The brain balances investment and reward. The brain balances the amount of time and energy we invest with what we expect to receive. Engagement is always coupled to a net win or loss of energy.

People shy away from risk and are reward-focused. Humans are ‘evolved agents’, who pick up cues and are less interested in engaging with risk – this is the default mode of the brain.

When we test decision-making across different kinds of conditions, such as social decision making, financial decision making, risk-taking or choosing consumer products, the basic motivational systems are the same.

The brain differentiates between primary rewards and future rewards. Distinctions in the brain arise when decisions are based on the expectations of a reward. Primary rewards, like food and sex, tend to be more immediate and are processed by more primitive systems, while more abstract rewards, or future-facing choices, such as financial decisions, engage what we consider to be the most evolved part of the brain.

The primary reward is always positively rewarded instantly. A primary reward – for example a piece of chocolate – is instantly rewarding. A brand like Cadbury has trained our brains to signify the promise of chocolate in just a few seconds.

This is how branding works – it signifies a relationship between an abstract symbol, such as a logo, and a primary reward. Looking at a logo engages the reward system, but in a slightly different way from the primary reward itself. That would be the indirect or conditioned reward.

More abstract rewards – such as having ten pieces of chocolate tomorrow, rather than having one piece today, are future rewards which involve a different kind of reward system.

Reward systems impact engagement – this can be split into ‘wants’ and ‘likes’. The wanting system is the basic reward system. It relates to immediate and direct responses. Impulsive purchases, for example, are highly related to the wanting system.

The 'liking system' is what you refer to when you make a future plan for obtaining something. This is the delayed reward.

A similar distinction has emerged in behavioural economics, particularly in the work of world-renowned U.S. psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who describes System One and System Two thinking. System One is related to the wanting system: the unconscious, direct, short-lived system. System Two is the more controlled motivational system; it is conscious of urges and likes to plan.

If you look at financial companies, they have built System One and System Two into the way stockbrokers work. For example, you have the 'here-and-now' stockbrokers reacting to their gut feelings – these are very much System One people. On the other side are portfolio managers, who operate a very strict system in order to invest money as strategically and rationally as possible.

Harmonising System One and System Two thinking drives engagement. In many conditions, Systems One and Two work together. What you like tends to be also what you want, and vice-versa. A conflict between the two motivational systems would create a conflict within the person. Ideally, you want to synchronise both systems, but I don't think anybody has really done this, because this is so recent in neurobiology. Cigarette smokers are often very explicit in their desire to stop smoking. They end up with a cigarette in their hand. This is a conflict between the wanting and liking systems: 'Conscious – I know it is bad. Unconscious – I want it'. The two systems need to be approached in two ways. The System One approach is in the very short and direct messages and images that capture the essence of the message on the pack. System Two would be the rational 'we can provide more information' approach. They need to work in harmony.

Loyalty is a subconscious indicator of engagement. Loyalty is a very good indication of engagement – the amount of time, energy and money spent to stick with one brand or product, against the possibility of switching over to a possibly cheaper or more convenient alternative. However, our research has found that loyalty is related to basic System One activations. This means that asking people how loyal they will be – but that would not reflect how loyal they are going to be. A measure of brain activation or hand grip – System One – would far better indicate the level of loyalty. Loyalty is subconscious.

Negative emotions typically weigh twice as much as positive emotions in decision making. In general, engagement is positively related to reward. However, negative emotions typically weigh twice as much as positive emotions when it comes to decision-making – you need to have twice as much positive reward outcome as negative outcome before people make the decision to take that gamble.

Brains try to post-rationalise decisions but most engagement occurs in the first few seconds. If we ask people why they engage, their answer would often be wrong. This is because the brain tries to rationalise decisions, post hoc. Actually, engagement and motivation are decided within an instant. When we do brain scans, we see that as soon as people look at a product – before they know the price, the name of the product, any related information – we can predict their willingness to buy.

This suggests a lot of the decisions people make are highly influenced by the first few seconds, and how they respond in terms of a direct emotional response – their gut feeling. People post-rationalise, but are often wrong. In our tests, we can influence a person's choices without them knowing, yet they still make up a seemingly rational story about how they behaved.

The first engagement sets the tone for future engagement. Engagement is very related to the instant and direct emotional response you get from people. If we show positive images of a brand at an unconscious level – let's say a high fashion brand they have never seen before – then ask them to rate a related product – say a piece of clothing – we can demonstrate how the unconscious priming has a big influence on how they will rate it. The brand itself can unconsciously trigger an emotional response that influences how people will perceive any kind of subsequent information. Therefore, we should look at engagement from the very first second people are looking at the information brands want to promote. How they respond to that information will influence how they process, understand, prioritise and prefer the product subsequently.

First impressions and unconscious factors influence choice. Information might be available on a computer screen or in a product's packaging, but it is processed subconsciously. People do not know why they choose what they choose, and surveys only tap into one half of the story. We can't always trust people's subjective reporting.

People are driven by both emotions and senses. A good example of an emotionally driven choice would be two remote controls with exactly the same design and electronics. If one weighs more than the other, people will think it is of a better quality. This is happening unconsciously; people aren't privy to it.

Religious engagement is multi-layered. Religion engages on both System One and System Two levels. We indulge in the story, which is overt conscious deliberation – this is System Two. We also see predictability as a part of engagement, in the ritualistic and habitual aspects of religion – this is a System One. Religious engagement is multi-layered. There is a social element in church. There is a highly personal aspect – the epiphany. Then there are the behavioural rituals and the amount of time and energy already invested in religion.

Apple evoked a quasi religious feeling in people. Apple computers have their own design and operating system. There is also the cultural value people assign to the computers in terms of innovation and social status. They are also more expensive. This is not necessarily a bad thing; the Veblen effect dictates that increasing a product's price can have a paradoxical effect; if you increase the price, it becomes more attractive as it signifies higher value. Just like adding weight to a remote control.

Apple started as a very small brand, then at some point it reached critical mass and a community started emerging. You see this with Linux: a whole community emerges with a self-propelling feedback loop. There are so many layers: the social, the personal, the unconscious. Religion is the ultimate engagement.

Co-creation and community drive engagement. Co-creation and community invite the consumer inside, so that they can influence and co-create products, services and brands. This can be used as a barometer for levels of loyalty and engagement.

Visual appeal differentiates and initiates engagement. Visual appeal, in the context of competing information, fights for attention. It needs to have a direct appeal to the perceptual system when it comes to aesthetics, but also the choice of colours and the choice of layouts are highly important to make contact and grab attention. Visual appeal is crucial to differentiate brands and initiate engagement.

Take the iPhone. It had a very distinctive design, a simple interface and sleek layout. It stood out. Some other brands now offer some very comparable products, which also look very similar, meaning Apple doesn't have the same level of visual differentiation any more. That is why Apple is currently competing on the operating system and less on the aesthetics. The immediate perceptual quality of the product has great potential to engage. Once you're past that, other factors start to play a role.

The science behind the visual lies in the interface of design, marketing and neuroscience. Products that are subsequently deemed to be highly attractive seem to engage both the visual and the emotional systems of the brain instantly. Form recruits visual attention.

Associations have a strong influence on people's preference. The more touch points or associations people have, the more they like the brand (this can go both ways - the more people like a brand, the more associations they have). When there are more associations, people generally prefer the product and are also willing to pay more. Whether images, sounds, jingles or snippets of information - all these together increase liking. Consistent use of jingles in McDonald's marketing is a very strong touch point, but sounds and smells are also touch points.

Airlines often use scents in everything, from the cabin to the brochures. The idea being that consumers associate this perfume with the product in a positive way. But if you had one bad experience with the airline - say food poisoning - that would eradicate a positive impression completely. The next time you smelled the perfume, not only would you have to start again, you may start from a negative viewpoint. There is a risk with odour because it goes straight into the brain. Unlike sight or sound, odour goes straight into the memory and emotional system of the brain.

Digital media is a low energy expenditure. The digital tools we have are making it much easier for us to obtain something at a lower cost. If engagement is your willingness to spend time and energy on something, we now need to devote energy to posting a message, visiting a web page or Tweeting. This is a low energy expenditure.

Previously, to maintain social relations, you needed to phone people, write a letter, or go and visit them. Today you can send them a one-line message almost instantly. With brands and products, it is the same thing. Digital has reduced the costs of obtaining information, or even products and services. This poses a huge implication with how we look at engagement.

Short-term engagement is easier; long-term engagement is far harder. In the pre-digital age, there was a huge cost in trying to obtain certain products, say a book or a film. The lower cost now means that whereas before we may have needed to engage System Two, now System One – urge and impulse – is in control. With so much availability, it is easy to have a thought and then go ahead with it. Distractions are everywhere, so short-term engagement has become easier. System One is in the driving seat, meaning engagement is quick to obtain, but also quick to lose. Long-term engagement is a far harder challenge, and loyalty is lower today than we have seen before.

Thank you for Engaging

This is just the tip of the iceberg. As our knowledge of anthropology, behavioural economics, neuroscience and psychology grows, we'll continue to develop our understanding of *The Science of Engagement* for the benefit of Weber Shandwick's clients. For more information about how *The Science of Engagement* can help your brand or organisation please visit:

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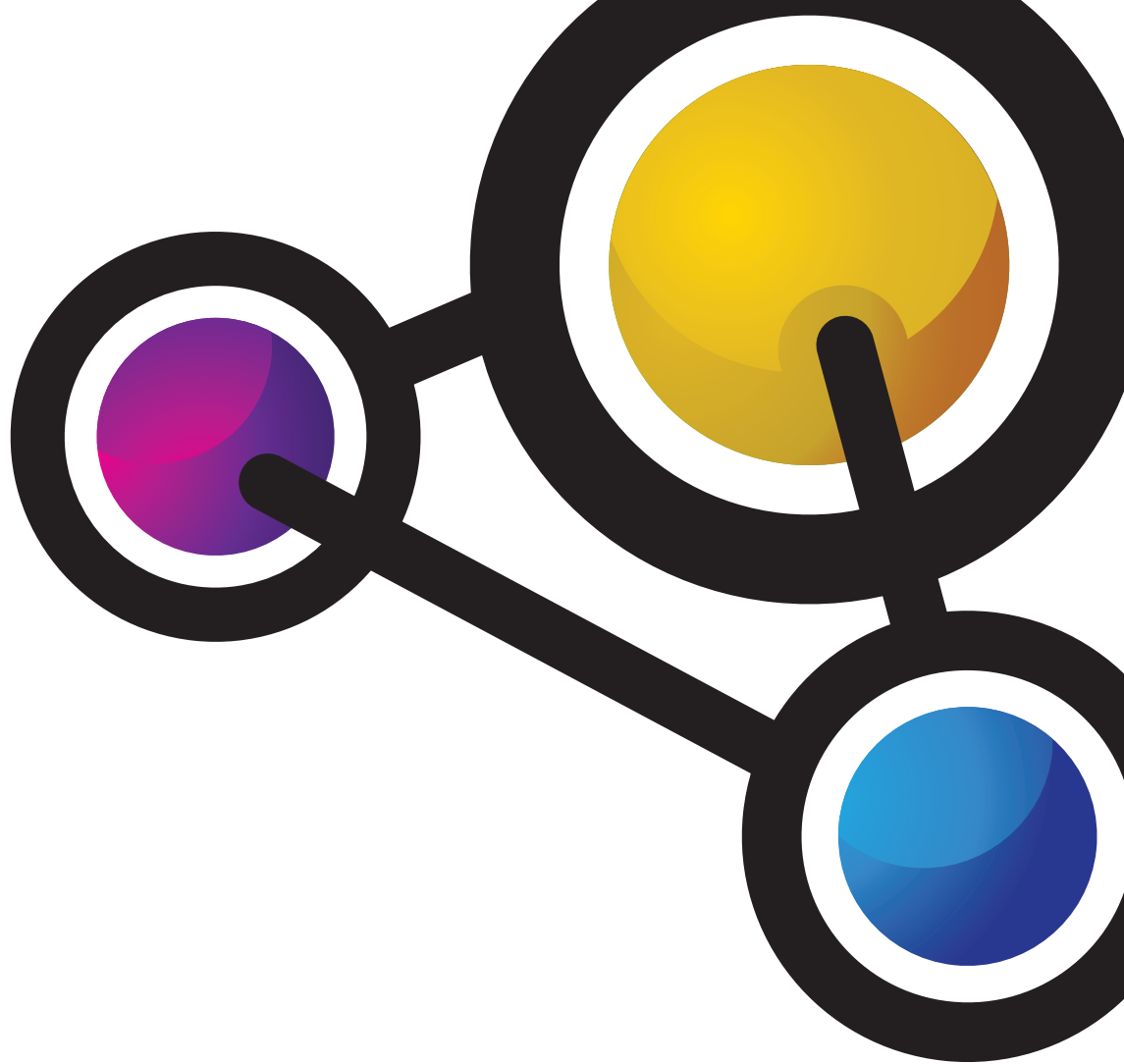
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