Information Intercourse: Making Messages Penetrate.

By Max Sutherland

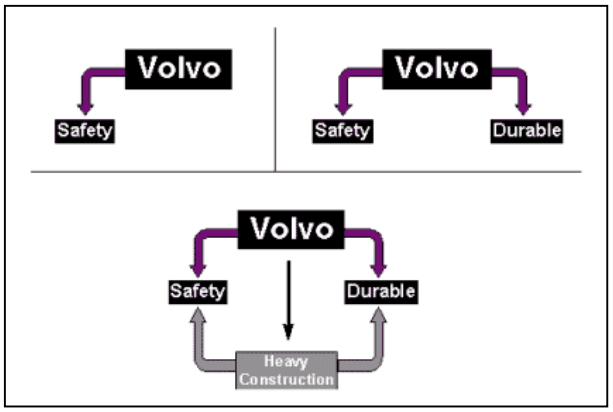
Dr. Max Sutherland's column is published monthly and posted on the web at www.sutherlandsurvey.com. Receive an advance copy by email - free subscription. Max Sutherland is author of the book 'Advertising & the Mind of the Consumer' (published in 8 languages) and is a registered psychologist. He works as an independent marketing consultant in Australia and USA and is also adjunct Professor at Bond University. Contact msutherland@adandmind.com.

Brand features stick more easily in the mind if they integrate with each other rather than being isolated islands of information. The human mind is like an interlocking structure. New information craves intercourse and looks to integrate with other information. If it doesn't, it is prone to slip out - instead of being retained.

Ads that integrate information reduce the memory load and hit the ground running with traction and momentum. By contrast, ads that resort to the catalogue approach bang their heads against severe limits. Limits, not only of attention but also of how many unrelated things the brain can absorb[1] and retain in memory[2].

Communicating features as islands of information (such as 'Volvo is safe', 'Volvo is Swedish', 'Volvo is fun to drive' etc.) quickly runs afoul of these memory limits and diffuses the brand's positioning in the mind. When the target audience's involvement is low, the limit is especially severe and that's why experts like Reis and Trout advocate single-minded positioning that focuses on a single attribute.[3] My view is similar although I believe after you have firmly consolidated a primary association (safety in the case of Volvo), then especially for higher involvement products you *can* shift the focal beam slightly, to stage right or stage left, and illuminate other adjoining features. But you have to integrate the new information.

Let me illustrate. Volvo's long established primary positioning is safety. So, an assertion that "*Volvo lasts longer than other cars*" doesn't have anything to do with safety. Such a durability claim is much more likely to stick if it links to safety - for example by using something like:



- *'You know Volvo is safe. One reason is because of its heavier construction – which also makes it more durable.* ***Volvo - the car that outlasts other cars.'***

The resultant mental structure becomes a more integrated and more mutually reinforcing whole. It reinforces the old association (safety) while locking in the new association (durability). Integration gives it not just structural support but cognitive economy - less *separate* things to remember.

Integration of associations is fundamental to how our brains work and underlies the brain's capacity for inference. (If you know that Volvo has a better safety record than Mercedes and you learn that Mercedes is safer than Lexus then by inference you 'know' that Volvo *must* be safer than Lexus.) Interleaving of associations is so basic a mechanism that even the brains of rats and monkeys have been shown to do it. Indeed, in revealing experiments, it has been shown that if you surgically remove a rat's hippocampus (a part of the brain that humans also have) the rat can still learn separate associations but is unable to integrate those associations.[4]

Mnemonic Scaffold

It takes time for the human brain to absorb, retain and then consolidate new associations into long-term memory. When new associations are presented so that they interlock with other associations, this scaffolding supports the retention of the new association while it is under construction.[5]

Can you remember the word lanoitidart? Why not? You can remember the word 'traditional' yet both are eleven letter strings. The difference is that lanoitidart is a memory still under construction and as such is beyond the memory span limit for even an involved person.[6] Would you be able to remember it tomorrow? Unlikely! Yet these are the same letters as the word 'traditional' - but in reverse order!

With that latent relationship now made *salient* in your mind, you should have no trouble locking the retention of this eleven letter string into it and using it to support retention of 'lanoitidart' while the long term memory of it is under construction. I'll bet you can now hang onto it and I'll bet tomorrow or next week you can reproduce that new word fairly easily. You may have to think about the transposition of letters for a while but with repetition it is easy to see how, like the word 'traditional' or your own phone number, it could start to roll directly off the tongue. Just as Aflac now does for millions of Americans when they think of insurance.

Aflac:

Aflac is a great example of using scaffolding. A five-word brand name like 'American Family Life Assurance Company' is not easy to remember. As an acronym it is still five letters – five pieces of information and no easy task to remember. We know that new information seeks intercourse with other information so how can we use this to help people remember a new string of letters and transform it into an integrated brand word? For 'nonsense words' made up of letters like this, research shows that our brains react by striving to think of what else it sounds like.[7] Low involved consumers won't strive for more than a nanosecond. So *the ad must do the work* to trigger some latent supportive element in terms of what it sounds like.

In a stroke of brilliance, that's what the people from the Kaplan Thaler ad agency came up with - the Aflac duck.[8] (Since 2000 Aflac commercials have featured a duck that is now one of America's favorite brand icons and has even appeared on "The Tonight Show", "Saturday Night Live" and has a guest appearance in the recent Jim Carrey/Meryl Streep movie, "Lemony Snickets".)

What helped integrate this string of letters and build it into a household word is that it sounds like the noise of a duck making a double quack. The duck in the ad quacked an answer, "Aflac', whenever various characters asked 'where do you get (supplementary) insurance?' As a result Americans no longer think of Aflac as a string of letters or a nonsense word and probably don't even realize that the brand stands for American Family Life Assurance Company. They just know Aflac and they know it sells insurance and they know it is a very successful brand.

Aflac
'sounds like'
a double quack.

This illustrates that familiar but latent knowledge, made salient and brought top of mind by an ad, can mnemonically support the integration of a new association while it is under construction. Such scaffolding can take various forms. In the Volvo example, heavier construction played the role. With Aflac it was the duck. And with lanoitidart it was the known word 'traditional'.

Conclusion:

When positioning a new brand or repositioning an old one, think 'information intercourse'. Remember that new information wants to enjoin with other information. Providing that integrative link is the secret to making new information penetrate.

"Memory is the scaffolding upon which all mental life is constructed." Donald Schacter

Notes:

[1] The 'fan effect' limits how many items can be held in long-term memory. Anderson, J. (2000). Learning and Memory. N.Y., Wiley.
[2] For the short-term memory span limit see Miller, G. A. (1956). "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information." Psychological Review **63**: 81-97.
[3] Reis, A. and J. Trout (1981). Positioning: The Battle for the Mind, McGraw Hill.
[4] Eichenbaum, Howard., Declarative Memory. In Neuropsychology of Memory. Squire, Larry L. & Schacter, Daniel L., Guildford Press NY. 2002, pp351-360
[5] Belezza, F. S. (1996). Mnemonic Methods to Enhance Storage and Retrieval. Memory. E. L. Bjork and R. A. Bjork. San Diego, Academic Press**:** p374
[6] Miller, G. A. (1956). "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information." Psychological Review **63**: 81-97.
[7] Saltz, E. (1971). The cognitive bases of human learning. Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press
[8] Thaler, L. K. and R. Koval (2003). Bang: Getting your message heard in a noisy world. NY, Currency Doubleday. P19-24