

The attention economy

 By [John Laurence](#)

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Have you ever wondered how your brain prioritises what you pay attention to?



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The father of modern psychology, William James, once said,

“ One of the most extraordinary facts about our life is that, although we are besieged at every moment by impressions from our whole sensory surface, we notice so very small a part of them. ”

The human brain doesn't have the capacity to process all the billions of bits of information around us at any one moment, so it has developed procedures whereby it selects which elements it will attend to.



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Bottom-up attention

What we pay attention to is driven by two systems, the first of which is an evolutionarily older, hardwired system. It is fast, automatic and out of your conscious control. It is known as *bottom-up attention* and you will use it when, for example, you hear someone scream. You will have no option but to orient your attention towards the source of that scream, regardless of what you were previously attending to.

This system gives priority to bright colours, movement and sharp sounds as well as emotionally salient or threatening stimuli. Unexpected or mismatched stimuli can also attract bottom-up attention and enhanced saliency in a cluttered environment.

Top-down attention

The other type, *top-down attention*, is a goal-oriented, effortful system whereby your brain can allocate attention to stimuli that will enable you to achieve your aspirations, ambitions and objectives in life. For example, you are more likely to pay attention to an offer for a gym membership if you recently discovered your weight has reached a new unprecedented level.

When to use what

Marketers often mix the two types of attention up or use them in the wrong context. Bottom-up attention is useful for achieving initial orientation towards a stimulus – after all, what is not noticed cannot be processed.

For instance, music and sound can be powerful elements at the beginning of a TV commercial. We have found that bottom-up attention is not correlated with successful branding moments, however. If you are having to shout to be heard, you are not creating a compelling proclivity towards your brand.

Furthermore, unless you are an international DJ, once you have gained your audience's attention through bottom-up attention, it is very difficult to hold it. The internet is teeming up with examples of ads that scream for your attention but hold no significance should you be fooled into clicking on them.

This is where relevance becomes vital. Understanding your consumer's goals and motivations allows you to create marketing that is going to capture their top-down attention and result in advertising and products that absorb and engage your audience.



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The use of narrative and emotion are key to effectiveness here, while rational arguments or media that require higher levels of cognitive effort can often be counterproductive.

In a shopping environment, brands that fit with consumers top-down attentional goals will be selected first. When these top-down goals are not active, brands that stand out from a bottom-up perspective will be given priority.

This is why it's important to understand the consumers' motivational drives in a range of shopping and media consumption contexts and to respond accordingly.

The attention economy

Consumer attention has become the most valuable resource in the world, explaining the vast fortunes of companies like Google and Facebook. Becoming better acquainted with it can be a marketer's most powerful weapon.

ABOUT JOHN LAURENCE

John is MD of HeadSpace Neuromarketing and is an experienced marketer with over 15 years in the marketing and advertising industry. As well as having worked in marketing research, he has headed the marketing divisions of two blue-chip global brands in South Africa and has developed strategy for several well-known brands. Contact him on tel +27(0)83 230 8764 or email john@head-space.biz.

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