Now, don't say a word…

– How market research can make a good impression non-verbally

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According to research, 95 percent of human behaviour is steered implicitly, or unconsciously (Zaltmann, 2003). How can market research measure these implicit motives? May pictures be of added value?

By Laura Ostländer and Dr. Jessica Schomberg

Many of you will know the common iceberg analogy. We are only aware of a fraction of what causes behaviour and attitude (the tip of the iceberg). The larger part of what moves us as human beings remains in the dark (beneath the water surface). Instead of conscious processes, inner factors cause mindset and behaviour. Traditional market research might hit a wall here, since it usually assumes deliberate decisions on part of the test subjects as well as their ability to introspect.

Verbal surveys aside, what other possibilities are there for market researchers to approach the perceptions of the target group and to get closer to the inner workings of their experience (the core of the iceberg)? One approach uses pictures. Images make it possible to implicitly measure emotions, motives, and affective attitudes towards advertising or brands. The advantages of picture selection, versus traditional measuring methods, are explored in the following section of this article. Furthermore, the limitations of this method will be demonstrated.

Advantages of pictures in market research:

- Intuitive and rapid processing of perceptions: Brain research has shown that most images are processed rather quickly and automatically, without further complex conceptual processing (Kroeber-Riel & Gröppel-Klein, 2013). The latter is often necessary for texts. Thus the perception of the test subjects is targeted quickly and intuitively, leading them to answer spontaneously while counteracting any rationalisation. Another advantage: socially desirable responses are also avoided this way. The pictures are intuitively accessed before the response behaviour can be compared to and aligned with existing social standards.

- Easy access to sensations that are difficult to verbalise, such as taste experiences for example. Sensory impressions in particular are often translated into figurative language, for example „this smells like flowers" or „it tastes like fruit". When the test subjects are able to describe their sensations by means of pictures, the aforementioned translation does not occur. But not only sensory impressions are difficult to verbalise; it is often also difficult to put words to one's perception of a brand. Information might be lost while translating subjective impressions into objective descriptions. This, however, may be prevented by utilising pictures.

- For test subjects with little language affinity, it is easier to express themselves by means of pictures instead of verbalising their sensations. Especially for market researchers, it is essential to communicate with one's target group on an equal footing. In verbal surveys, however, this is not always possible – pictures, on the other hand, create an intuitive common language for customers, researchers, and test subjects.

- Pictures stimulate interest which causes the test subjects to perceive the interview as rather varied. This increases the test subjects' motivation during the response process tremendously and counteracts fatigue-related loss of attention.

- Result reports turn into experience reports: They are enhanced with graphic elements, for example the brand position and brand image can be depicted in tag cloud. This graphically shows – literally – how the brand is perceived by the target group.

- In the experience of Produkt + Markt, pictures, rather than verbal expressions, manage to carve out more clearly the nuanced differences in the brands' positioning during a brand measurement, even if the brands differ only slightly.

- Pictures are especially well-suited for low involvement products, since weakly sensed perceptions are difficult to measure with verbal scales. If test subjects are interviewed about dish soap for example, the low involvement with the product can make it difficult for them to state an opinion. In contrast, pictures often trigger hidden sentiments; thus they are able to unveil associations that cannot be captured on a strictly rational or verbal level.

- Emotional clusters can be identified in segmentations by means of pictures. Produkt + Markt has conducted segmentations based on a picture selection of the respondents (Jütting & Koch, 2015). We identified segments that differ distinctly from the ones identified through a segmentation using traditional variables. Anywhere where a traditional cluster analysis provides problematic segments, an implicit segmentation with pictures offers a valid alternative to identify previously undiscovered segments.

Disadvantages of pictures in market research

- Pictures are often ambiguous. A picture can be interpreted in many different ways, depending on context and individual prior experience. For example, a bike helmet might signify safety for one person, while signifying rules and bureaucracy for another; yet another person might associate Sunday's family bicycle trip with it. Thus the picture can represent family values and emotional security for him. Hence it is initially quite difficult to interpret a picture's attribution to a brand or property.

- It takes a considerable amount of time and money to validate the pictures: What do the test subjects associate with the picture? Which emotions does the picture trigger? The validation process is of fundamental importance, precisely because pictures tend to be ambiguous.

- Pictures quickly become outdated. Images that stand for progress and high-tech today, may be perceived as old and dated in just a few years. Therefore the pictures always need to be renewed and undergo continuous validation.

Making good use of ambiguity

Produkt + Markt has tackled the disadvantage of ambiguity and developed the tool VAL|**LERY** (VALidated galLERY), which calculates the ambiguities of a picture based on a statistic model. It is understood that a picture cannot be described sufficiently with just a single keyword (called „dimension" below). Instead, a picture can be attributed to several dimensions, depending on context, the polled target group, and the test subject's free associations.

We interpret this alleged disadvantage as an advantage. Not only do we want to be able to understand all underlying dimensions of a picture, we also want to be able to accurately calculate and predict them. After a picture has been selected, we ask the test subjects to describe what the picture represents, based on keywords. This method has allowed us to build a data base which not only stores information on the dimensions attributed to a picture, it also knows the probability of the picture being associated with the respective dimension. Therefore the picture shown in fig.1 is attributed to the dimensions momentum and health as well as to freedom and happiness – The result is based on just under 800 measurements of the picture.
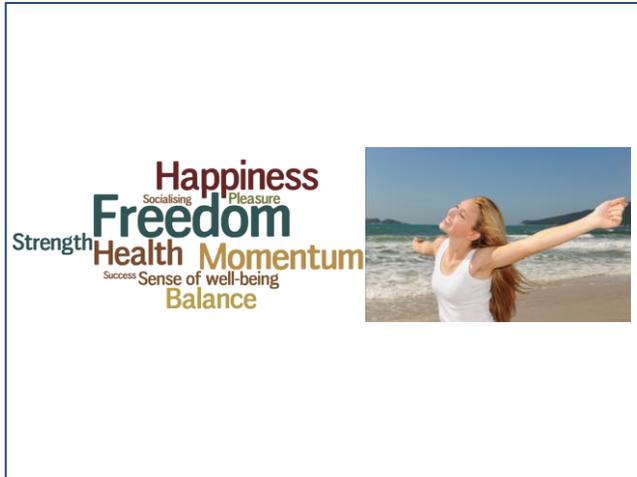
Due to the aforementioned probability of attribution of dimensions to pictures, i.e. a brand cannot only be characterised by how many times a picture has been assigned, but also by the respectively underlying dimensions. In aggregated form, it is possible to detect the dimensions in which two brands differ.

Therefore it can be calculated and illustrated (fig. 2) that brand A rather represents success while brand B is rather associated with care.
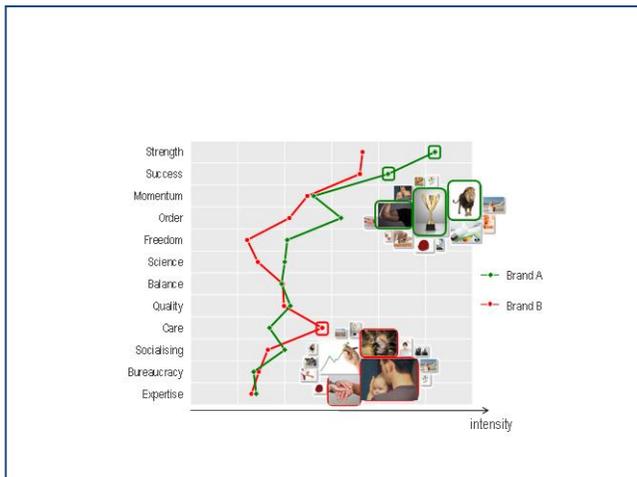
From our point of view, the alleged disadvantage of ambiguity actually serves as the basis for a meaningful model for the distinction of i.e. brands, products, producers, or customer service. With the help of the tool, one can measure dimensions of positioning relevant to the brand perception. Additionally it allows to illustrate custom positioning fields or dimensions that have not yet been defined.

In conclusion, pictures prove to be a great means to get deeper insights into the test subjects' sensations, and therefore complement traditional market research. Nevertheless, pictures are not suitable for every market research study. There are certain subject areas that can hardly be elucidated in pictures. Some examples are studies on pricing or the evaluation of visual test material such as ads, magazine covers, or videos. If pictures were used to evaluate visual testing material, the subjects would be severely influenced in their selection by similarities regarding the content (such as similar picture elements or colour schemes), and their answers would be less associative. However, the use of pictures is advisable for brand and image surveys, taste tests, or segmentations.

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