

Deciding At First Glance - Tracking eye-movements reveals what grabs the consumer's attention

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Despite the overabundance of offers on today's grocery shelves, most consumers decide whether or not to buy a product within seconds after glancing at the assortments. To be successful, a product must grab the consumer's attention as quickly as possible, and at the same time be persuasive. To see if this is the case, eye-movement registration and tachistoscopic research can be used. Irouchka Moyersoens of the Belgian Sensory and Consumer Research Institute ROGIL (www.rogil.be), a member of the European Sensory Network, is convinced that these techniques can augment other sensory methods.

Most of the information that reaches the human brain does so through the eyes. Out of this flood of impressions, the central nervous system filters only the small part that seems to be important for the individual. Everything else falls through the cracks. But what once functioned in a world of hunters and gatherers in which the search for sustenance was a laborious one, has become a problem in the modern consumer world of over-abundance: since the consumer is able to process only a part of the available information, the challenge is to develop products that will catch the consumer's attention in spite of the plethora of offers. This holds true in the area of foodstuffs as well as for other sectors. That some products are flops often has nothing to do with how they taste; rather they simply were not noticed among the numerous competing brands. The same problem affects product advertising. Print, video, and poster advertising must be designed for maximum effect for them to have a chance of sticking out from the multiplicity of information. In consumer research this is often checked with the help of qualitative and quantitative research. These research methods are used in the same way that they are deployed in order to rate product qualities in regards to taste – through focus groups, consumer tests, and panels of sensory experts. However, it is relatively seldom that consumer behaviour is examined in an environment that realistically simulates the complexity of the buying situation. This is where registering eye movements (eye tracking) proves successful.

Objective data on the first glance

Irouchka Moyersoens, project manager at ROGIL, explained that, “ We at ROGIL Belgium value this additional information, since it gives us objective data concerning consumer behaviour at the extremely decisive first moment of eye contact with the product. For the most part, eye movement occurs automatically; the test person does not notice the eye-tracking, and so their spontaneous reaction to the product is recorded. Thus, by tracking eye movements it is possible to understand how visual communication functions, and eye-tracking is the only way to gain this information.”

Eye movements reveal

- * whether a product positioned on the shelf next to competing products attracts enough attention
- * how many and which consumers especially notice the particular product
- * the length of time they look at the product
- * how often their gaze returns to the product

The same questions can be asked when examining a package by itself. It can be determined whether and how many consumers notice the central element on a package, and whether they see it early and long enough to understand the message the product intends to communicate. What characteristics are the first to be noticed? Are consumers registering additional information, such as special instructions and labelling?

Objective data on the first glance

Irouchka Moyersoen knows that, “To a certain extent, eye movements reflect what makes an impression on people. Sometimes when inspecting an eye-tracking pattern, you can even recognise whether the person is male or female.” For example, the male reaction to an attractive woman in a bikini featured in a vacation advertisement was much more intense than their reaction to the offer or the price, whereas the eye-movement patterns of the female participants indicated the opposite result.

Depending on the types of test questions, eye-movement can be tracked in either static or dynamic settings. In static settings the test person stands or sits in a fixed place and looks at a scene that usually is shown on a screen. In dynamic settings, special mobile eye-tracking glasses are used, and the test person’s eye movements can be tracked as he or she moves freely through a supermarket or drives a car. In comparison to static tracking modes, this variant is technically more elaborate, and a good deal more expensive.

Tachistoscopic research supplies accurate information concerning how quickly, in what degree of detail, and in which order the range of goods are visually processed. Technically this is a relatively simple process that ROGIL uses as a part of its IM-PACKT research design. The products to be tested are shown on a screen either in isolation (single-object tachi) or on a shelf in context with competing products (shelf tachi), depending on the questions to be asked. As the products are projected for a matter of a few seconds on the screen, the test subject’s eye movement is simultaneously tracked. Thus the quick glance with which the consumer gains an overview of a product in the normal selling environment is simulated.

However neither eye-tracking data or tachistoscopic data do reveal the reasons why a particular product did or did not arouse the consumer’s interest. The researcher pursues the deeper reasons behind the viewers’ choices by questioning them as to which aspects they can recollect. In combination with other relevant market research data such as product ratings, product and product design likeability, product-elicited viewer associations, and the image the product projects it is possible to precisely evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a test product and to indicate its optimisation potential.

The European Sensory Network (ESN; www.esn-network.com) is an international association of leading academic and research institutions in the field of sensory and consumer sciences. Presently the network comprises 23 member organisations from 20 countries. ESN members share their knowledge and work towards standard methodologies.

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