Critical Thinking in Marketing

Critical thinking is a skill that allows us to either assess the arguments, evidence and assumptions that a presenter uses to gain our support of a conclusion or position; or alternatively, it is a skill to help us gain the support of others for our conclusion or position based upon our arguments, evidence, and assumptions used to support our conclusion.

In the book, “Asking the Right Questions” by Browne and Keeley, they list of a series of questions useful in both situations noted above. These ten questions include:

1. What are the issues and conclusion?
2. What are the reasons that support the conclusion?
3. What words or phrases are ambiguous and or vague?
4. What are the imp-lied assumptions? Things left unsaid but assumed.
5. Are there any fallacies in the reasoning? A fallacy in this case is a trick of reasoning.
6. How good is the evidence?
7. Are there rival causes?
8. Are the statistics deceptive?
9. Has any information been omitted?
10. Are there any other reasonable conclusions that should be considered?

These ten questions bring up subjects that can be used in two ways. First, in marketing research, and second in advertising and marketing communications.

**Marketing Research**

If you are in a position where you need to gather information, especially secondary information, you will want to consider the accuracy, the usefulness, the credibility of the information you have collected. Consider the source; consider who is the publisher of the information; consider the nature of the process of collecting the information and the presentation of the data.

Example: As part of your research, you pull a publisher study. It appears on the surface to be useful and interesting. Is it from a reliable source? Does the publisher have an agenda? Next, is it useful? Are the conclusions well-reasoned? What is the conclusion and what are the reasons presented … do they make sense? Does the author use any tricks to get you to agree with her? These are called fallacies of reasoning. Is it implied that we should assume certain things (usually unmentioned). Are correlations presented as causal? If so, is the causation proven? Could there be other causes (sometimes referred to as rival causes)? With regard to data or the results of a study, are you satisfied with the sample size and its representativeness; was the study completed I an unbiased manner; is the presentation of the information done in an unbiased manner? Is there any information missing? Arte there any other logical conclusions that could be reached or considered? As researchers we need to be careful consumers of data and information!

**Marketing Communications and Advertising**

The study of critical thinking is useful to marketers who are in need of persuading their target audience to accept the position or conclusion that might lead to a positive marketing outcome such as accepting a brand for consideration, purchasing a product for use etc. Often brands will present a position such as NIKE positioning itself as a high performance brand that will make you a better athlete. Getting customers to accept the positioning through a process of reasoning is vital to gaining the desired position. It is useful for marketing professionals to understand the building blocks of reasoning and critical thinking that can support a conclusion or position.

We have also learned that there are tricks used by some to gain acceptance of positions and conclusion. These are sometimes called fallacies of reasoning. I will not discuss the appropriateness of using such mental tricks but note that they have historically been used and are effective in the process of persuasion.

For example, the NRA (National Rifle Association) has long held that if any gun control legislation is passed at the Federal level, that this would lead to the loss of our second amendment right to bear arms. In the world of critical thinking, this argument is known as the “slippery slope” argument. It is not provable; it is not backed by reasons or evidence; it is a fallacy of reasoning that works!

A second example, a second fallacy of reasoning, is to attack someone, rather than to attack the conclusions or positions of the person. Let’s say you don’t want to go head to head on an issue, you can just go about winning by attacking the person. Consider two restaurants in competition with each other. Both serve up fine fare. However, it is found that the chef at one restaurant is a former felon… nothing too ugly, let’s say a white collar crime. The owner of the other restaurant in order to gain a competitive advantage might attack the restaurant as a place that hires felons. This avoids the general issue that the chef is a great cook and the food is terrific. Rather, it is an attack on the person which otherwise distracts from the key issue of food quality.

When we talk about marketing communications, we are talking about persuasive communications. And the skills we have learned about being a good =critical thinker actually can be used in a somewhat perverse way to create arguments that will be effective, and achieve acceptance of a conclusion, but not be strong well-reasoned arguments.

For more about critical thinking, please consider obtaining a copy of the Browne and Keeley text noted earlier.

Jeffrey Heilbrunn

Want to think better …… consider thinking less …. See the article that follows

**Think Less, Think Better**

By MOSHE BAR JUNE 17, 2016

A FRIEND of mine has a bad habit of narrating his experiences as they are taking place. I tease him for being a bystander in his own life. To be fair, we all fail to experience life to the fullest. Typically, our minds are too occupied with thoughts to allow complete immersion even in what is right in front of us.

Sometimes, this is O.K. I am happy not to remember passing a long stretch of my daily commute because my mind has wandered and my morning drive can be done on autopilot. But I do not want to disappear from too much of life. Too often we eat meals without tasting them, look at something beautiful without seeing it. An entire exchange with my daughter (please forgive me) can take place without my being there at all.

Recently, I discovered how much we overlook, not just about the world, but also about the full potential of our inner life, when our mind is cluttered. In [a study published in this month’s Psychological Science](http://m.pss.sagepub.com/content/27/6/776), the graduate student Shira Baror and I demonstrate that the capacity for original and creative thinking is markedly stymied by stray thoughts, obsessive ruminations and other forms of “mental load.” Many psychologists assume that the mind, left to its own devices, is inclined to follow a well-worn path of familiar associations. But our findings suggest that innovative thinking, not routine ideation, is our default cognitive mode when our minds are clear.

In a series of experiments, we gave participants a free-association task while simultaneously taxing their mental capacity to different degrees. In one experiment, for example, we asked half the participants to keep in mind a string of seven digits, and the other half to remember just two digits. While the participants maintained these strings in working memory, they were given a word (e.g., shoe) and asked to respond as quickly as possible with the first word that came to mind (e.g., sock).

We found that a high mental load consistently diminished the originality and creativity of the response: Participants with seven digits to recall resorted to the most statistically common responses (e.g., white/black), whereas participants with two digits gave less typical, more varied pairings (e.g., white/cloud).

In another experiment, we found that longer response times were correlated with less diverse responses, ruling out the possibility that participants with low mental loads simply took more time to generate an interesting response. Rather, it seems that with a high mental load, you need more time to generate even a conventional thought. These experiments suggest that the mind’s natural tendency is to explore and to favor novelty, but when occupied it looks for the most familiar and inevitably least interesting solution.

In general, there is a tension in our brains between exploration and exploitation. When we are exploratory, we attend to things with a wide scope, curious and desiring to learn. Other times, we rely on, or “exploit,” what we already know, leaning on our expectations, trusting the comfort of a predictable environment. We tend to be more exploratory when traveling to a new country, whereas we are more inclined toward exploitation when returning home after a hard day at work.

Much of our lives are spent somewhere between those extremes. There are functional benefits to both modes: If we were not exploratory, we would never have ventured out of the caves; if we did not exploit the certainty of the familiar, we would have taken too many risks and gone extinct. But there needs to be a healthy balance. Our study suggests that your internal exploration is too often diminished by an overly occupied mind, much as is the case with your experience of your external environment.

In everyday life, you may find yourself “loading” your mind in various ways: memorizing a list of groceries to buy later at the supermarket, rehearsing the name of someone you just met so you don’t forget it, practicing your pitch before entering an important meeting. There are also, of course, the ever-present wanderings of a normal mind. And there are more pathological, or at least more chronic, sources of mental load, such as the ruminative thought patterns characteristic of stress, anxiety and depression. All these loads can consume mental capacity, leading to dull thought and anhedonia — a flattened ability to experience pleasure.

My birthday gift to myself for the last couple of years has been a week of silence at a vipassana meditation retreat. Being silent for a week, and trying to empty your mind of thought, is not for the faint of heart, but I do wish that everyone could try it at least once. During my first retreat, I wondered how a simple tomato could taste so good, why I did not mind physical discomfort as much, how looking at a single flower for 45 minutes was even possible, let alone so gratifying. My thoughts — when I returned to the act of thinking about something rather than nothing — were fresher and more surprising.

It is clear to me that this ancient meditative practice helps free the mind to have richer experiences of the present. Except when you are flying an F-16 aircraft or experiencing extreme fear or having an orgasm, your life leaves too much room for your mind to wander. As a result, only a small fraction of your mental capacity remains engaged in what is before it, and mind-wandering and ruminations become a tax on the quality of your life. Honing an ability to unburden the load on your mind, be it through meditation or some other practice, can bring with it a wonderfully magnified experience of the world — and, as our study suggests, of your own mind.

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