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Limbic Market Research: Plumbing the Subconscious Motivators of Physicians

By John Mack

As more and more pharmaceutical sales reps have been deployed in the field, it is becoming extremely difficult to gain access to physicians let alone leave an impression that will motivate them to prescribe your product. Now more than ever it is necessary to be sure that your message is optimized for specific segments of your physician customer base.

Market research is a critical tool for developing the right message for the right audience, but stop and think—what do you really know about the physicians and patients your researchers are talking to. Sure, they passed the screener, but do you really know where they are coming from?

Behind the Curtain

“Conventional market research addresses a physician’s rational or higher brain and generally elicits responses that are not a sound guide to either what the physician really means or how he or she is likely to act,” says Peter Simpson, president of Segmedica, an industry leader in the application of behavioral science to medical market research. What’s needed is a way to look “behind the curtain” of verbal responses and reveal what truly motivates physicians.

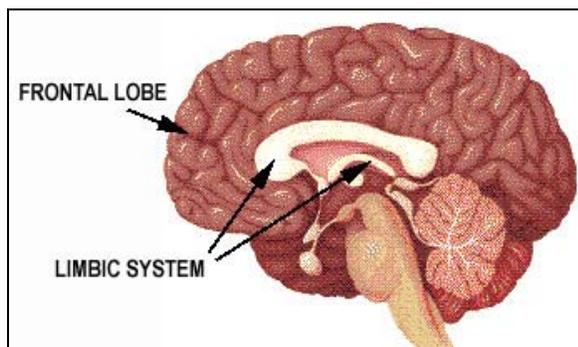


FIGURE: Conventional market research techniques measure rational responses that originate in the frontal lobe or intellectual cortex of the brain. The emotional response, however, lives in the emotional, limbic portion of the brain. <http://www.segmedica.com>

For example, physicians with certain deep seated concerns about their income will deceive themselves into thinking that a new drug or procedure is “not ready” for them to recommend when in reality what they are concerned about is its financial impact on their practice or the risk of being the object of a malpractice suit.

Lock, Stock, and Both Lobes

Rational responses originate in the frontal lobe or intellectual cortex of the brain, whereas the emotional response lives in the emotional, limbic portion of the brain (see FIGURE, this page).

Respondents to conventional market research often will not, or cannot, access their fundamental feelings about brand and marketing issues. Although all questions pass through the limbic brain on their way to and from the cortex, we tend to give our intellectual response first, and our emotional response only after probing. Basically, conventional research tells us what physicians do but not why they do it, and therefore cannot tell us how to effectively modify their behavior

Getting Limbic

“Our methodology works by profiling respondents for basic personality type (limbic) and for behavioral patterns (cortex),” says Simpson. “Knowing each respondent’s profile enables us to interpret their responses more meaningfully, provides new ways of segmenting markets, and tells us how to communicate with target audiences in a way that will connect with them emotionally.”

The answer to marketing questions does not always lie in what respondents say (content), but in how they say it (context), which can often override the stated answer to completely alter the meaning of the recorded response. “Building Segmedica techniques into market research provides important insights into human communication and decision-making that are often overlooked,” says Simpson.

Psycholinguistics

Individuals generally do not understand their deepest motivations, needs and desires that lead to

purchase and use (prescription writing and compliance!) decisions. The most deeply held values have the greatest power to influence and are also the most engrained in beliefs, behavior and habits. For this reason they are most often not in the consciousness. However, these deeply held values and criteria are available by listening to the language patterns used when describing experiences with a drug, device or instrument and using psycholinguistic analysis to reveal their unstated motivations.

Psycholinguistics must be practiced in supervised, open ended studies. "We make use of the technique in in-depth interviews, focus groups and X-Groups," says Simpson. This methodology is used to uncover "X-Factors", hidden and unconscious motivators that will not be revealed in regular market research.

X-Groups

Most marketers are familiar with focus groups, which is brings together a group of people in order to gather qualitative data on the preferences and beliefs of consumers or physicians through group interaction.

Segmedica's X-Groups differ from focus groups in several ways. X-Groups are smaller in size. Focus group respondents participate in a dynamic and free flowing exchange between all members at once. With X-Groups, the facilitator moves sequentially from one respondent to another, delving in-depth into their past decision making processes. The effect is that one respondent builds on the input of previous respondents. This in-depth approach stimulates each successive respondent to dig more deeply into the subconscious feelings that were used in the decision process. This type of technique is often the only way of completely understanding the true motivations behind a decision making process.

HealthEnact™

HealthEnact is a unique form of encounter research, in which actors and actresses are used to play the roles of physicians or patients in mock medical consultations. "The unique aspect of HealthEnact," says Simpson, "is that we recruit a team of actors through a strategic partnership with a national theatrical agency, and train them to portray a variety of personality and behavioral types in both physicians and patients."

In a controlled environment, the team plays the roles of patients with real physicians or physicians with real patients, so that simulated medical appointments can be observed.

Simpson cited the erectile dysfunction (ED) market, where emotions in both the physician and patient can play a major role in treatment choices, as an example where the HealthEnact methodology could help companies better understand the dynamics of the situation and how to influence them. Considering that drug sales in the ED category have been "limp" of late (see "[ED Drug Sales Limp](#)"), this kind of insight might indeed be valuable.

Segmentation

Segmedica pushes segmentation beyond simple regression modeling with Rx data as the independent variable. "We often use Latent Class models," says Simpson, "which do not rely on the traditional modeling assumptions that are often violated in practice (linear relationship, normal distribution, homogeneity). Hence, they are less subject to biases associated with data not conforming to model assumptions."

By introducing behavioral profiling questions and objective demographic data (such as gender, age, ethnicity and geographic region) Segmedica introduces independent variables that can easily be applied to the universe as a whole. Segmedica research shows that these demographic variables have a high level of association with specific attitudes and behaviors. Segmenting by Rx decile alone may be too restrictive to produce a robust working model of the market.

It often turns out that psycho-behavioral patterns associated with gender, ethnicity, age and experience or even region of the country are linked to prescribing behavior, so that high potential segments can not only be identified mathematically but also easily identified in the real world for selective sales and marketing treatment. The behavioral profiles of each segment can be translated into sales training, collateral design, advertising or CRM campaigns.

Relationship Segmentation

As well as segmenting physicians and patients, Segmedica can also segment relationships between them. Relationship segmentation results in physician/patient pairings that will lead to greater or lesser compliance and persistence with therapy or acceptance of interventional advice. This information can be used to design high impact physician education and information programs and patient push initiatives.

An example is patient-physician cross-cultural or cross-racial pairings where a Caucasian physician, for example, is trying to persuade an Asian patient to be compliant with a specific treatment. Multi-

cultural physician marketing programs designed to overcome the barriers in such situations revealed by “limbic” market research will be more effective and help the physician’s practice.

Next Step in Pharmaceutical Marketing

Pharmaceutical companies are actively seeking new and better ways to segment physician and patient markets. Understanding these markets at a fundamental psychological level and in a way that leads to practical execution is the next step in pharmaceutical marketing. New market research techniques will lead the way to sharper and more precise pharma marketing and sales strategies. When you think about it, it just makes sense to know more about your research respondents.

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