



The Psychology of eMarketing to Smartphones

It's more than just the mobile device.



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Introduction

Futureshock.

In 1970 Alvin Toffler coined this term to sum up the potential damage to people of too much change in too short a period of time; the consequence of an exponential rate of development in a 'super-industrialised' society¹. Looking around, it's hard to see where Toffler's overwhelmed people are. On the contrary, the damage is being felt by businesses who are struggling to keep pace with consumers' rapidly shifting patterns of consumption.

One of these new patterns, and the focus of this paper, is how the Internet is increasingly being accessed on the move. Once you could be confident that your eMarketing (a term I'll use to encapsulate marketing through both email and social media) was landing on the desk of someone sitting in front of a computer, who would process it in a somewhat linear and focused fashion. Now those messages are arriving in the hands of people in a multitude of different locations, and who are usually engaged in other activities at the same time.

This practice has become so commonplace that we take it for granted, but the fact is that mobile marketing has become a whole new discipline. Marketers need to understand what this means for them and their content, and adapt their strategies accordingly.

The biggest single factor that determines how people respond to a given stimulus is context, and this means that we routinely misattribute feelings created by the environment to the actual focus of our attention. This is why, for example, the wine you adored on holiday and bought by the case didn't taste the same when you opened it back in the mundane surroundings of your home².

So what does this new trend to 'marketing on the move' mean for you and your marketing campaigns? Some recent findings in consumer psychology can help cast a light on this phenomenon and ensure your organisation doesn't become one of those overwhelmed by the pace of change.

The Psychology of eMarketing on the Move

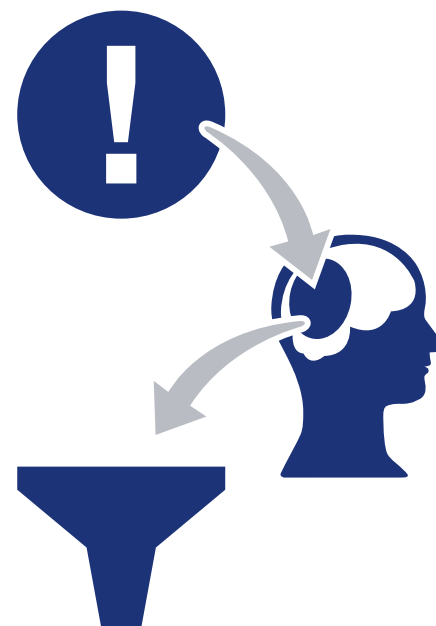
The Psychology of eMarketing on the Move: A New Challenge

We now know that human behaviour is largely driven by the unconscious mind. Possessed with the capacity to process far more information, far more quickly than the conscious mind, it is the primary job of the unconscious to filter for what's 'important' and direct our conscious attention towards it. This filtering is done automatically and instantly, without us being aware of it.

Beyond that, we also rely on our unconscious mind to save energy by handling routine actions efficiently and, rather than work something out from scratch, we frequently fall back on unconsciously held heuristics (rules of thumb) to help us act and react with minimal effort.

This highlights the first challenge to marketers: eMarketing encountered on smartphones is being experienced in one of a myriad of contexts. It is impossible to know at what moment a message will be accessed or, therefore, what contextual cues its recipient will encounter around the same time. Numerous psychological studies have demonstrated how elements in the surroundings that should be irrelevant alter how people respond to the same stimulus. To give just three examples:

- When classical background music was played in a wine store, customers spent up to three times as much on a bottle of wine in comparison to pop music³.
- The reaction to adverts of people who knew a lot about cars could be influenced by whether or not they were first shown an ad featuring a prestigious brand or an everyday one⁴.
- Women shopping in a DIY store with a female companion have been observed to spend on average 75% longer than a woman on her own⁵.



This challenge presents three broad options for marketers:

1. Ignore the potential for variation in context and hope for the best.
2. Guess at the most likely factors to influence eMarketing on the move and include them in the design of your campaigns.
3. Develop sufficiently sophisticated data profiling to identify the context in which eMarketing is received and target consumers with a suitably nuanced message.



Whilst option three is, undoubtedly, the optimum route, particularly when a powerful ‘test and learn’ capability is supporting it (of which more later), option two is a pragmatic place to start.

eMarketing received on a smartphone is likely to be given less attention than that encountered on a PC for three reasons.

First, there is likely to be something else competing for the recipient’s attention at that time which will influence their response. Secondly, the physical scale of the device means that there is less space with which to generate impact and gain the recipient’s attention. Thirdly, the nature of the device the message is being viewed on, and the way in which the recipient is used to interacting with it, will generate a particular type of mind-set (e.g. finger scrolling, pinch to zoom in/out, etc.).

In such circumstances, the instantaneous reaction to the sender’s name and the subject line are of paramount importance if any further communication is to stand a chance of taking place.

We can see the consequences of these changes permeating through social media. Despite the initial scepticism of many, Twitter is now part of the vernacular. People are evidently very happy to condense social interactions to just 140 characters. The other platform synonymous with social media, Facebook, is hardly a paragon of lengthy prose either. Instead, people have succumbed to what is almost inevitable in terms of evolutionary psychology; they trade off quality for convenience.

Many people have also become adept at managing the multiple channels of communication that have emerged in the very recent past. According to a study conducted last year, while media multitasking has been shown to make people less capable in some cognitive tasks, people who frequently use different types of media at the same time are demonstrably better at combining information from multiple sources: it’s become a skill ⁶.

And the indications are that we don’t worry too much about being less good at thinking things through when we ‘media multitask’; rather we delude ourselves that we’re being productive because, while we perform less well, it makes us feel better. Researchers found that people were more likely to multitask when they should have been studying or working, and that although it seemed to reduce their effectiveness, it made them feel good ⁷.



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The mere act of checking messages and social media has, for many, become an unconscious habit. A 2011 study found that participants, on average, checked their phone for messages 34 times a day⁸. Rather than seeking something specific, this is usually a compulsive habit: if someone feels bored a message offers the possibility of something psychologically rewarding. The fact that the message can frequently be mundane doesn't diminish the activity because checking requires such little effort: it is an action that has been repeated so frequently that it occurs without the requirement for conscious engagement.

It's worth understanding why media multitasking has become a habit. Fundamentally, human psychology is not so different from canine psychology. If dogs learn that they can get a tasty piece of kibble from performing a particular action in response to a command, they will eventually do it on cue without the need for kibble – it will just feel rewarding for them to react as they have in the past. Dogs have been taught to drive cars this way. So it is for the media multi-tasker. We all know that a lot of the email and social media messages we receive are facile, dull and instantly delete-able. However, enough have something juicy in the content that fires off the reward circuits of our brains: we develop unconscious heuristics to distinguish the potentially interesting from the almost certainly dull, without even realising.

The key challenges for successful eMarketing in the age of the media-multitasker are:

1. The rules are changing: be prepared for the fact that what used to work might not work as effectively as before.
2. Recognise that you'll have to work harder to attract attention and you'll have less space to do it in.
3. Don't expect people to engage in anything complex initially.
4. Appreciate that you are targeting the recipient's unconscious mind, not his conscious one. This means making sure that your eMarketing is implicitly associated with something that lights up the reward centres of your customers' minds often enough to be worth scanning: you need to offer a reward and be a release from the things people have to do, rather than another contributor to the stress of digital media. Put another way, you need to feed the habit.



Lessons from Psychology

There are also some general lessons about eMarketing communication that behavioural and psychological studies have highlighted: profiling and targeting people is vital. A study that analysed the content of 124,000 text messages observed significant differences in the use of emoticons between the genders. While women were twice as likely as men to use emoticons, reflecting a generally-held belief that emotion is more important to women in interactions, men actually used a wider range of emoticons.

Another study looked at the impact of pronouns on reactions to marketing messages: the researchers found that, depending on the nature of the existing relationship with the customer, talking about 'we' (for the customer and the brand) or 'you and us' significantly shaped the attitude people had towards the brand in question. Where people were customers of the brand and felt a degree of involvement with it (such as their bank) they had a more positive attitude towards the company after 'we' was used. However, when this wasn't the case they reacted better when the use of 'you and us' reflected the lack of a meaningful relationship between the two parties⁹.



Discounting is also a mixed blessing. It's easy to get hooked on the quick fix of tapping into the consumer's desire to save money. Yes, it attracts attention and can drive short-term revenue: however, it can also create an expectation of value and frame your non-discounted price as expensive. In much the same way as with above-the-line advertising, a direct, price-based call to action can play a role, but there is also much to be gained by a campaign approach that builds the overall brand proposition and is evaluated on a longer-term basis.

Clearly the Holy Grail of eMarketing is a message that recipients propagate on your behalf, by sharing it through social media: going viral. Beyond making it as easy as possible for people to pass on the message – on which point, testing different placement of 'share' icons is well advised – are there any clues to what delineates those messages that go viral from those that don't?

Lessons from Psychology

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Researchers at Miami University spent time investigating this phenomenon last year and found that higher involvement in the product was one factor that caused people to share product information. They also found that if the marketing itself made people think about others they were more likely to share it¹⁰.

This conclusion makes perfect sense when you consider the nature of the unconscious mind. While we like to think our thoughts are our own, abundant evidence points to the fact that we are susceptible to priming. In other words, the way we think about something is influenced by what we were exposed to immediately beforehand. So a subtle prompting to think about people we know will encourage us to share once we have identified the content to be informative, or entertaining, or salacious.

'Subtle' is the key word here: if we're consciously aware of being directed to do something we are more likely to appraise it at a rational level and be resistant to the message.

With media multitasking and eMarketing being viewed in a more challenging context it is, arguably, more important than ever to consider the psychological impact your communication is having:

- Segment and target your communication, certainly at a gender level and, where possible, according to the viewing context.
- Understand the nature of your relationship with your customer base to determine which pronoun (you/we) is most likely to be received favourably.
- Be wary of price-focused campaigns: short-term impact may come at the price of longer-term revenue.
- Consider and evaluate what will make your audience share your message with their peers.

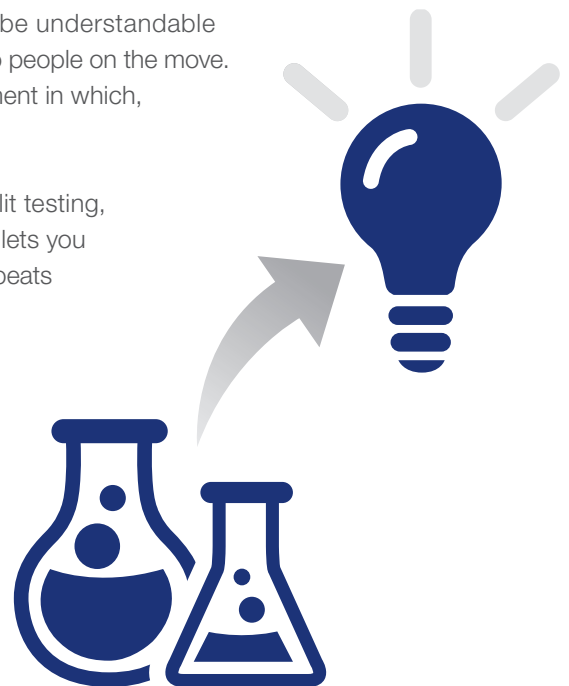
Guaranteed Success!

Given the many external factors and influences described above, it would be understandable if marketers felt somewhat daunted when faced with the task of reaching out to people on the move. However, eMarketing, and email marketing in particular, provides an environment in which, with the right approach, success can be almost guaranteed.

The key is experimentation. Whatever you choose to call it – A/B testing, split testing, test and learn, field trials – there is no substitute for trial and error. Crucially, it lets you evaluate your content in the context where it will be encountered, which easily beats anything you might be able to evaluate in traditional market research.

The UK government's Behavioural Insight Team has had great success experimenting with different psychological levers in communication. They have demonstrated dramatic increases in response to correspondence requesting fines be paid, or tax payments made on time, by evaluating the effectiveness of different messages with small test groups.

The joy of an experimental approach is the opportunity it affords to be creative. Ultimately, it may be a whacky idea that generates the response you're looking for.



The New Frontier

We are entering a new age for data and data analysis. Simple measures, such as open and click rates, sharing and conversion are a great place to start, and are still significantly underused by many organisations. But more developed analysis could help to identify when messages have been received, where people were and what they were likely to have been doing at the time. Academics are developing tools that can analyse social networks to, for example, identify who are the most influential opinion-makers¹¹: consider the efficiencies that would be possible from knowing who the movers and shakers are for your category and directing your energy at connecting with them successfully.



Even in the short time that eMarketing has been around, we can begin to see that the real prize awaiting the most forward-thinking organisations is not building up a database of contacts, but the ability to really understand and connect with their audience, through an understanding of how it behaves and reacts, and which is revealed in the data that can be collected about what they do.

However, throughout all of this change one thing remains constant: the key to marketing success is ruthless brand consistency. In the fragmented, attention-depleted media environment we inhabit, it is more important than ever that each new encounter with a brand reinforces the same implicit associations as the previous one. Such congruence and consistency convinces our unconscious mind that we can believe in the product and the experience it will deliver.

Philip Graves

Philip Graves is a consumer behaviour consultant, author and speaker. His book, *Consumer.ology* was named one of Amazon's top ten best business books of 2010 and a revised edition was released in 2013. In addition to running his own consultancy business, Philip is an associate of Frontier Economics.

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About emarsys

emarsys is one of the largest providers of email, mobile and social marketing automation solutions in the world sending over 50 billion messages each year on behalf of over 1000 clients including blue-chip companies such as eBay, Volvo, Garmin, Sky, 3M, Swiss Airlines, Zurich and TimeOut.

Our industry leading solution is designed to meet the complex needs of our customers, providing all they need for driving multi-channel online marketing success and increasing ROI - through the most comprehensive email, mobile, and social media marketing automation solutions, in combination with our unrivalled deliverability expertise.

Our worldwide network of regional offices ensure client success and satisfaction in their local markets, as well as supporting the growing multi-region requirements of our global client base.

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