Scientists Say They Can Predict Buzz Based on Brain Activity

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Every marketer knows that it’s all about the buzz – that special something that makes people want to talk about it, share it and sing songs about it. The trouble is, there’s no way to predict whether or not your next campaign will start a buzz or not. So you take your best shot, throw money at it and let it lose in the world. Then you sit back and hope for the best.

In the future, your first stop will be a brain mapping center because UCLA psychologists say they’ve discovered the buzz indicator in the brain.

Matthew Lieberman, a UCLA professor of psychology and of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences and author of the forthcoming book “Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect” explains:

“Our study suggests that people are regularly attuned to how the things they’re seeing will be useful and interesting, not just to themselves but to other people. We always seem to be on the lookout...
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Lieberman and his colleagues came to this conclusion after examining the brains of 19 UCLA students. The students were set up to have functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans while they listened to pitches for TV show plots. (UCLA is in Los Angeles, of course it’s about TV!) They were told to pretend they were studio interns and it was their job to convince producers to develop the shows people will like.

Then, the students were asked to make video taped assessment of each pilot idea and those tapes were shown to 79 more students. Then those students were asked to assess the pilot ideas. Follow?

Finally, the scientists went back to the brain maps to track the reaction to each pilot. Here’s what they found:

When the first students first heard about a show that excited them there was increased activity in the temporoparietal junction (TPJ) of the brain. These were the same shows that the second group chose to highlight. (They call it the Salesman Effect.)

Now, you could say that the initial reviewer was simply excited by an idea so he convinced others to be excited but the researchers say it goes deeper than that. The TPJ is the brain’s "mentalizing network." It’s the part we use when we’re trying to judge how other people feel.

Lieberman says:

"As soon as you hear a good joke, you think, ‘Who can I tell this to and who can’t I tell?’ Making this judgment will activate these two brain regions. If we’re playing poker and I’m trying to figure out if you’re bluffing, that’s going to invoke this network. And when I see someone on Capitol Hill testifying and I’m thinking whether they are lying or telling the truth, that’s going to invoke these two brain regions.

So, this kind of brain activity indicates a desire to share what I know with others because it will make them happy or help them in someway. Ipso facto – it predicts buzz.

That means, if you had access to a brain-mapping center, you could test all of your marketing ideas and see which ones the subject wanted to share and which ones were a flop.

Oh my gosh! What if you were a politician and you did this? You could totally force the outcome of a race in your favor. That’s scary.

The researchers were hoping people would use it to help stop public health problems and teach people not to drink and drive. I guess in that case, we can allow this study to continue.

The question is – if every marketer had the ability to produce only buzzable campaigns – would we then become immune to buzz and stop buzzing completely?

Ponder that while you enjoy your weekend. See you back here on Monday.