The return of the hidden persuaders

Driven by a booming economy, a corporate obsession with brand-building and a feel-good philosophy, a motley crew of ex-grad students, starry-eyed admen and hypnosis gurus are probing the consumer unconscious to sell soap.

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BY RUTH SHALIT

Sixtus Oeschle, manager of corporate advertising for Shell Oil, was at his wits' end. For months, he and his team of researchers had pumped the consumer psyche, desperate to uncover the real reason behind a decade-long sales slump at the $26 billion conglomerate. For months, they'd come up empty. "We tried psychographic memory triggers," Oeschle recalls. "We tried dream therapy. We tried what I'll call tangible manifestation exercises." All to no avail. "We weren't generating anything that was breakthrough," he says. "It was all kind of the same sort of stuff." At one point, respondents were given mounds of wet clay and urged to mold figures that expressed their inner feelings about Shell. When that, too, proved a dud, Oeschle passed out sketchbooks and Crayolas. "We said, 'Draw what Shell is to you,'" Oeschle recalls. "Then we said, 'Draw what you would like Shell to be to you.'" The results, while eye-opening, were not particularly useful from a marketing standpoint. "I can't tell you what they drew," Oeschle says glumly. "Let's just say it was something so magisterial, so huge, that there was almost no way a corporate entity could do that."

It was time, Oeschle decided, to try something radical. "All the techniques I've just mentioned -- they're all legitimate tools for arriving at consumer insight," he says. "But they only operate on the surface level." To craft a more potent appeal for its brand of gasoline, Oeschle concluded, Shell would have to go deeper -- much deeper. Oeschle decided to call in Hal Goldberg, an Irvine, California-based consumer researcher who specializes in focus groups conducted under hypnosis.

The decision to put respondents in a trance, Oeschle recalls, was a controversial one. "My own research staff fought me on it," he says. "A number of people at Shell said, 'What the hell is this?' They thought it was unethical. They gave me all the reasons I shouldn't even embark on it."

The results, Oeschle says, wowed even the skeptics. "I've got to tell you, it was fascinating, fascinating stuff," he says. After dimming the lights, Goldberg asked respondents to fix their eyes on a green spot on the wall. Then he took them back, back -- back to the last time they purchased gasoline. "What were you doing?" asked Goldberg. "What were you thinking?"
Goldberg didn't stop, Oeschle recalls, until the participants had regressed to a state of mewling infancy. "He just kept taking them back and back," he says. "Until 40 minutes later, he's saying, 'Tell me about your first experience in a gas station.' And people were actually having memory flashbacks. I mean, they were going there. They were saying, 'I was three-and-a half years old. I was in the back of my dad's brand new Chevy.' It was like it was yesterday to them. I was stunned."

The real breakthrough, however, came after the respondents awoke out of their trance. "When Hal brought them all back out, he asked them who'd they prefer as a gasoline purveyor," Oeschle says. "What staggered me was that, to a person, it was always linked to that experience in their youth." One woman volunteered that she always made a point of filling her engine at Texaco. "We asked her why," Oeschle recalls. "And she said, 'I don't know, I guess I just feel good about Texaco.' Well, this was the little 3-and-a-half-year-old in the back of her daddy's car speaking."

Shell is now in the process of coming up with some new customer-catching techniques -- derived, Oeschle says, from the insights gleaned from his groups of mesmerized motorists. "It dawned on us, as a result of this process, that we'd better figure out how to favorably impact people from an early age," he says. Where Shell had gone wrong, it seems, was in reasoning that, since people don't start buying gas until at least age 16, there was no need to target the tiniest consumers. "They weren't even on Shell's radar," Oeschle laments. To remedy that oversight, the company is now moving forward with a "multifaceted campaign" aimed at conditioning youngsters to be loyal enthusiasts of Shell products. Oeschle politely declines to divulge the specifics of the company's plan to mold young minds. "Some of the things we're going to do down the road, I can't talk about right now, because they're still in the potential launch phase," he explains. "I'm not interested in tipping my hand before we launch a program. We want to own this position. We don't want to be running up a mountain against somebody else."

At first blush, petroleum gasoline might seem a humdrum commodity, an improbable receptacle for consumers' hopes, dreams and misty hidden yearnings. But Shell is only the latest blue-chip company to conclude that the secret to a healthy bottom line lies not in tracking surveys or usage studies, but in the murky depths of the consumer unconscious. Ironically, even as Freudianism is increasingly viewed as suspect in society at large, it has been worshipfully embraced by no-nonsense, jut-jawed captains of industry. A growing number of CEOs have become convinced that they cannot sell their brand of deodorant, or deli meat, or automobile until they first explore the Jungian substrata of four-wheel drive; unlock the discourse codes of female power sweating; or deconstruct the sexual politics of bologna.

Far from being consigned to the maverick fringe, the new psycho-persuaders of corporate America have colonized the marketing departments of mainstream conglomerates. At companies like Kraft, Coca-Cola, Proctor & Gamble and Daimler-Chrysler, the most sought-after consultants hail not from McKinsey & Company, but from brand consultancies with names like Archetype Discoveries, PsychoLogics and Semiotic Solutions.

David Bostwick, director of market research at Daimler Chrysler, is one of the beleaguered executives struggling to adapt to the new order. An engineer by trade, Bostwick is frequently
called upon to decode the all-embracing parables of Dr. Clothaire Rapaille, the Palm Beach-based Jungian whose "archetype research" inspired the design of Chrysler's latest sports-utility vehicle, the PT Cruiser. Asked how the company settled on Rapaille, Bostwick, a genial, soft-spoken man who rose to his current executive position from the shop-floor ranks, rattles off trendy academic models with the ennu of a harried grad student. "There is so much out there," he says. "For a while, we had a collagist working with us. He was trying, through collages, to have people express certain cognitive and emotional connections. Then there was linguistics. Basically, you take the words that people say, and try to find a pattern." Boldly rejecting the work of Saussure, Sapir, and Chomsky, Bostwick proclaims linguistics "a disaster." "Linguistics doesn't get you anywhere," he says. "It provides you with what I call a 'map of ignorance.'"

In search of a new theoretical synthesis, the Chrysler crew happened on Dr. Rapaille. "He takes traditional Jungian archetypes and applies them to a business situation," Bostwick explains. "He helps us figure out a thought process." But Rapaille's real value, it seems, is in reassuring Chrysler executives that their products actually mean something; that they serve real human needs; that they form part of a greater whole. "The more we learn about American culture, the more we see how these vehicles fit into our psyche -- the more we see how it is that we fit into the overall scheme of living," Bostwick says happily.

Under Rapaille's tutelage, Bostwick says, the Chrysler team has come to understand why their old consumer research was bound to fail. "We told people to make collages, but we didn't understand the deep structure of what they were thinking," he says. "We were using the logic of logic, not the logic of emotion." Thanks to Rapaille, Bostwick and his colleagues now employ a kind of Freudianism Lite in all their market research. "Our theory now is that people express things according to patterns," he says. "And so, in focus groups, we listen differently. We listen for slips of the tongue. We listen for changes in inflection. We listen for long pauses. We ask, Why did they pause? Our assumption now is that nothing happens by random chance or accident."

Rapaille's greatest triumph came last February, when the consultant was asked to preside over the design of the PT Cruiser -- a Mad Max-type vehicle described by the Wall Street Journal as "part 1920s gangster car, part 1950s hot rod, and part London taxicab." The vehicle, which hits dealerships in January 2000, is a focus group on wheels -- an actual, chrome-and-sheet-metal incarnation of the popular will. "We didn't set out to create a market," Bostwick says earnestly. "We just tapped into what people had in their heads in the first place."

To ensure maximum lovability, prototypes were spot-checked against the collective unconscious at every stage in the design. Rather than convening traditional focus groups, Rapaille used a proprietary method known as "archetype research," in which participants lie on soft mats and free-associate in the dark. The idea, says Bostwick, was to recreate the same brain activity you have when you first wake up from a dream. "It's a very special brain activity," he says. "It allows us to actually access some of those unconscious thoughts."

Asked to respond to an early prototype of the vehicle, the somnolent participants expressed a desire for a more pronounced retro look. "They said they wanted to go back to a simpler time,"
Dr. Rapaille told me. Apparently unfazed by the possibility that the respondents might have fallen asleep watching reruns of "The Untouchables," the designers changed the prototype to incorporate protruding fenders and big, bulbous headlights.

Traditional Jungian archetypes came into play as well. "Freedom, in America, means something different here than it does anywhere else," Rapaille told me. "It is tied in to this notion of wilderness. We like to describe where we live as the wilderness, whether it's suburbia or downtown. We have to have wilderness, so that we can point to it, and say, 'It is a jungle out there. But I am in the wilderness.' If there is no wilderness, there is no America. Do you understand what I am saying?" No, actually; but never mind. "What that said to us is that people are looking for something that offers protection on the outside, and comfort on the inside," Bostwick clarified. "We communicated that to our design team."

As the Chrysler engineers scrambled to respond to these atavistic stirrings, tempers were quick to flare. "You have to understand, this was such a learning experience for those of us who participated in the analysis," Bostwick says. "We all came back with a great deal of enthusiasm, because we personally found this such an effective tool. We felt like we had to solve the mystery of the universe, and we only had 10 days." The problem, Bostwick reflects, is that some of the findings "were very hard to explain to the rest of the crew. I mean, we were talking about deep structure, and the logic of emotion. We were saying, 'Hey, the stuff we're doing here is related to Jung. It's layers.' And they were saying, 'Well, should the windshield be on a 15-percent grade or a 12-percent grade?"

Nearly 50 years ago, sociologist Vance Packard shocked the nation with "The Hidden Persuaders," a stinging indictment of advertisers' attempts to massage and mold our inner thoughts, fears and dreams for profit. The slim volume, with its unsettling portraits of slimy "depth men" rooting about in the consumer subconscious, provoked widespread outrage. "We have reached the sad age when minds and not just houses can be broken and entered," concluded the New Yorker. Thundered the Saturday Evening Post: "The subconscious mind is the most delicate part of the most delicate apparatus in the entire universe ... It is not to be smudged, sullied or twisted in order to boost the sales of popcorn or anything else."

Hearings were held, legislation was introduced -- though never passed -- and "motivation researchers" Louis Cheskin and Ernest Dichter, both former academics who had used the tools of psychiatry and the social sciences to support the admen in their trickery, were publicly admonished as traitors to their profession. By 1959, Packard himself had cause for confidence that the mind-molders and psycho-probers whose tactics he had exposed would soon be consigned to the dustbin of marketing history. "Eventually -- say, by A.D. 2000 -- all this depth manipulation of the psychological variety will seem amusingly old-fashioned," chuckled the sociologist in a preface to the paperback edition.

Of course, it hasn't quite worked out that way. In fashionable marketing circles, it has become acceptable again to speak openly about harnessing consumers' brain waves for commercial ends. These days, the marketing history of the 1950s is being relived as farce, as corporations fall over
themselves to spelunk the minds of shoppers, and a new generation of depth men seizes on the subconscious as prime territory for subliminal appeals.

A charmingly retro school of brand psychoanalysis, which holds that all advertising is simply a variation on the themes of the Oedipus complex, the death instinct, or toilet training, and that the goal of effective communications should be to compensate the consumer for the fact that he was insufficiently nursed as an infant, has taken corporate America by storm. "It's a very competitive environment out there," says Dr. Sam Cohen, president of PsychoLogics, a New York-based brand consultancy. "I don't think the market has ever been so flooded with brands. Companies realize that if they can't own a piece of the consumer's mind, they won't make it today." Cohen has deployed his proprietary technique, which he cheerfully refers to as the "Psychological Probe," for a range of clients, including Toyota, Northwest Airlines and General Foods. "I'm an ego psychologist, a post-Freudian analyst," Cohen says, adding with pardonable pride, "I go where Freud would have gone if he had lived. I've developed my own model, my own way of tapping into the subconscious processes." As an specialist in object-relations theory, Cohen says, he considers himself especially well-positioned to probe the purchasing decisions of consumers. "Object relations theory is all about learning about the self in relation to the object world," he explains. "The original object, of course, would be the mommy." Brands, he says, "fit beautifully into the theory of object relations. Brands carry with them symbolic meanings or unconscious meanings, which the consumer can then use for his own well-being."

Cohen's clients love it. "It gives them such an advantage over their competitors," Cohen tells me. "When they own the consumer mind -- when they create such a perfect fit with her underlying identity needs -- they become that much more powerful ... It's fascinating to see how far companies have come in recognizing that."

Hal Goldberg, the California-based hypnotist who conducted the focus groups for Shell, agrees that today's far-seeing executive will route all appeals through the consumer subconscious. "The issues that people have with brands are so deep-seated," he says. "If I can get people to go back in time, go back to when they first experienced the brand and the category, I might find something that a client can make use of ... Perhaps there's something about the first experience with the category that affects adult behavior. If my client knows that, and their competitors don't, they might be able to penetrate that intense imprinted memory and make a sale."

The old tools of the subliminal hard sell -- skin probes, galvanometers, high-speed tachistoscopes urging movie patrons to "Eat Popcorn" and "Drink Coca-Cola" -- had about them the distinct whiff of hucksterism. In contrast, the new-style methods boast a faddish academic gloss. The literature of the new, highbrow brand consultancies bristles with references to "emergent codes," "meaning systems" and "syncretic nonlinearity." In marketing departments across America, cheerful maxims about teamwork have given way to po-mo aperçus. "Put Your Own Subjectivity On the Line!" exhorts a wall poster at DDB-Needham Worldwide, a New York-based advertising agency. "It's the only way into the Other's subjectivity!" Another consultancy informs prospective clients that "Consumers are Made, not Born ... Any brand that doesn't exploit the 'Normalizing Ideology' is lost in 'cultural space.'"
The most successful outfits promise an irresistible fusion of Jung, Freud, and TQM-style system-worship. "Phase Three: Following the last imprinting session in this phase, the third meeting with the Archetype Team is held," reads a typical passage from a brochure put out by Archetype Discoveries, the Palm Beach consultancy presided over by Dr. Clothaire Rapaille. "The results of the second-phase imprinting sessions are analyzed, and a new orientation is established ... The Archetype Team Leader meets with the Core Team. We begin to understand the archetype, and to 'break the code.'" Clients include Coca-Cola, Kellogg's and Kraft Barbeque Sauce.

There is another important difference between today's captains of consciousness and the psycho-probers of yesteryear. According to Packard's account, the sociologists, anthropologists and clinical psychiatrists who toiled for the agencies were conflicted, even tortured about their place in his rogues' gallery of persuaders. They brooded constantly about the implications of their endeavors, and claimed to be wracked with guilt over the morality of using social-scientific methods to manipulate mass audiences. Today's consciousness wranglers, in contrast, are a far more upbeat lot. Weaned on the latest cultural-studies theory, which holds that Disneyland is a text, and which refuses to privilege Graham Greene over the Jolly Green Giant, they hardly feel they are slumming when they make the jump to the dark side. After all, if you're going to write a dissertation on the semiotics of Playtex, you might as well get paid for it -- by Playtex.

"Once clients look at things in a semiotic way, they never go back," says Virginia Valentine, president of Semiotic Solutions, whose clients include Coca-Cola, Mazda, Safeway, and SmithKline Beecham. "My own degree is in critical theory and literature. The theory base we use comes from the French, from Saussure and Levi-Strauss, with a healthy dose of Levinson, British cultural studies, and Russian formalists, who were of course the great theorists of carnival ..." Her voice drifts off knowingly. "We're very proud of what we've been able to do here. We have, I believe, taken the whole body of semiotic theory and adapted it to consumer brands. We've fit the semiotic project within the commercial process without losing the rigor, without losing the systematic approach, and still staying true to the theoretical principles."

Valentine explains how this works in practice. "It's all about how brands make meaning," she says. "And how meaning is literally deconstructed and reconstructed. It's quite fascinating, actually. We've worked on a number of retail projects. And what we've found is that everything signifies. Everything. Whether it's sanitary protection or the interior design of a supermarket or the viscosity of a product, it will all signify. And advertising is only going to work if it taps into a ready-made coding system in the consumer's head."

I ask Valentine if she is troubled by the fact that many of her favorite theorists developed their theories as a weapon against capitalism; that the interpretive tools on which she relies were originally intended to expose the structure of advertising as a system of power and oppression. "It's an interesting point," she says. "It's certainly true that my understanding of brands is essentially a Marxist understanding. It has angered some academics that this theory, which was originally presented as revealing the strategies behind advertising and marketing, is now being used in the service of advertising and marketing."
Like so many of her theory-drenched contemporaries, Valentine gets around this difficulty by reasoning that, unlike the old-style manipulators, her mind-meddling will have socially constructive results. "My belief is that, as our personalities get more fragmented, products and brands can work with us," she says earnestly. "We are not at all about creating needs that people don't have. We are about meeting wants that people do have. If we can understand the way people want to live their lives -- the way they want to see themselves -- and then put brands to work in the service of that, I think that's a beautiful thing, actually."

Valentine is hardly the only lapsed academic to fall back on this therapeutic view of market research. The view goes as follows: Unlike the old depth men, who were megalomaniacal, full of aggressive contempt for the consumer, the new depth men -- and depth women -- are crusading idealists, bent on spreading love, happiness and goodness. They make no distinction between brand potential and human potential. By selling us on our own wishes -- by helping us decide to do what we already wanted to do -- they not only grow the economy; they "enhance the functioning of the individual," in the words of Sam Cohen.

"I might be kidding myself," says Dr. Robert Deutsch, a neuropsychiatrist and cognitive anthropologist now employed full-time at DDB Worldwide. "But I really do believe that advertising can do a better job at providing communications that offer an anchor point and an uplifting to the Volk, as I would call them respectfully." Dr. Deutsch, a genial, bearded man, is sitting in an outdoor cafe, munching on Wellfleet oysters as he expounds on his revolutionary approach to merchandising. "See, you can't give consumers a new message that they have to take in," he tells me. "Then, at best you have a fad. But if you communicate to people -- and do it in such a way as to make the familiar novel to them -- what you do is you open up the self, in an insightful and authentic and mysterious way." Dr. Deutsch orders another glass of champagne. "To me, this is what advertising is all about," he says. "It's all symbolic. It's all in the service of propping up the self." At the end of the meal, Dr. Deutsch presents me with a copy of a speech he has just delivered. "Strip-Searching the Mind of the Consumer -- Lovingly," reads the title page.

Dr. Sam Cohen, president of PsychoLogics, also represents this holistic, humanistic breed of hidden persuader. "I'm asked that question all the time: 'Here you are, on the one hand, dealing with therapy and truth. Aren't you, on the other hand, dealing with insight and manipulation?'" he says. "Where I've come to terms with that, in my own mind, is understanding what I call the 'prop' quality of brands." To hear Dr. Cohen tell it, brands actually act as teeny-weeny-therapists -- enhancing our self-esteem, curing us of infantile hang-ups, helping us manage conflicts between pleasure and guilt. "Brands assist people in their day-to-day functioning," he says. "That's not something I invented. Brands are already used by the consumer in that way. The question is, which brand gets to own it, and make better use of it?" To illustrate what he is talking about, Cohen mentions one of his current clients, Poland Spring Water. "I can use my Poland Spring water to quench my thirst," he says. "But I may unconsciously use it as a cleansing ritual, to rid my body of bad thoughts. If I can take my spring water, and actually think of it as a cleaning ritual -- and as a result, feel cleaner, purer inside -- doesn't that help me in my day-day-living? It's almost like good therapy."
Dr. Cohen is growing animated. "If Poland Spring is the best prop to help me get rid of bad feelings -- which maybe I don't know how to do so well -- aren't we doing a service, both to the brand and to the consumer? What we're doing here is we're making brands more meaningful. Which is helpful, because we don't all have time for therapy anymore. HMOs make it nearly impossible. And so, from a clinical perspective, brands can be used as a sister, an assistant, in promoting people's better functioning."