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Research: Hypnosis Brings Groups Into Focus

Behind-the-scenes hypnotists help get to the bottom of brands.

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By Kenneth Hein

Volvo equals safety. In focus group after focus group, participants said the same thing. So, Euro RSCG Worldwide, New York, did the obvious thing: It called in a hypnotist.

Members of these unique Volvo focus groups were asked to test-drive the car. Immediately afterwards they were hypnotized and asked their true feelings about the brand. It wasn't pretty: Many revealed that Volvo also equals being middle-aged. That idea "for some people was suffocating," said Michael Fanuele, head of planning at Euro. "Hypnosis helped get past the clichés. We needed the conversation to get to a deeper, more emotional place."

Volvo's not the only one going to that place. Focus group hypnosis is increasingly becoming a "secret weapon" for Fortune 500 companies and ad agencies alike, said Susan Spiegel Solovay, owner of Brandvisioning, New York. A former Grey exec, Solovay has been hosting such groups for a decade. Her clients include about dozen brands including blue-chip beer, soda and telecom companies as well as 20 different agencies.

A session, which consists of no more than eight subjects, takes two hours. The first 25 minutes are dedicated to introducing them to the process and getting them relaxed. "We need to ease the nervousness of what they've seen on television," said Solovay. "Everyone asks if we're going to make them quack like a duck. I wish stage hypnotists would stop doing that."

Once they are in an "alpha" state of relaxation, the hypnotist will ask them individually about topics like the first time they experienced a product. "We want to find out the imprint of the brand," said Hal Goldberg, owner of Qualitative & Quantitative Research, Laguna Hills, Calif. Goldberg, who trained Solovay, is a former Leo Burnett exec who has been conducting these groups for 35 years. "People can describe the cookies their mother made them when they were 5 in great detail. This drives adult behavior."

Avrett, Free & Ginsberg, New York, has been using focus group hypnosis for clients like Dewar's and Domaine Chandon for more than a decade. "I reach for this, depending on the client, whenever I can," said president Stuart Grau.

He says it's particularly useful when consumers don't have negative feelings about a product, but just aren't predisposed to buying it. Four sessions cost about the same as a typical round of focus groups (\$50,000-75,000).

It's not for every client though, said Grau: "Some aren't comfortable with it. To some extent there could be some ethical concerns associated it." Goldberg and Solovay both stressed that being under the power of suggestion can't prompt consumers to say or do anything against their will. "It's not like we're asking people to take off their clothes and crumble Ritz crackers on their bosoms," said Fanuele, whose clients include the cracker brand. "It's about getting emotional content that is so much more vivid and colorful."

Others question the utility of focus group hypnosis. "It's worse than nonsense. It's a part of the continuing trend of American businesses moving away from

actual expertise," said Douglas Rushkoff, author of *Get Back in the Box: Innovation from the Inside Out* (Harper-Collins). "They are wasting their marketing dollars."

Marc Babej, partner with the consultancy Reason, New York, concurs: "I have a particular venom for this area. These subconscious attitudes have little to do with purchase decisions. Most consumers navigate the marketplace based on the tangible benefits of the product."

Though no one tracks the overall industry, Goldberg expects to have his best year ever and new entrants are hitting the scene. Hypnotherapist Keith O'Neill, based in Newport Beach, Calif., jumped in three years ago. "Somebody at an ad agency asked me to do it," he said. "It's great because it removes the high school mentality of focus groups. Usually cliques develop: There is the bully, the shy people and those that just want to fit in with the group."

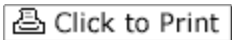
How deeply ingrained taglines and ad jingles are into people's minds was one surprise for O'Neill when he began working the field. "You ask them what the first thing they remember is and they say, 'Plop plop fiz fizz' or 'Where's the beef?'" Solovay uses Coca-Cola as a warm-up exercise because "everyone has Coke memories." Fanuele understands the skepticism. "A year ago I thought it was a silly little gimmick, but now I've been converted."

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