



Emotional vs. rational thinking: Are assumptions affecting your research?

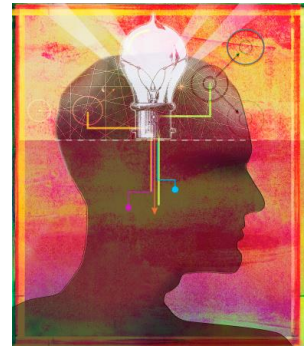
| By Jerry W. Thomas

Perhaps nowhere in the marketing domain is our thinking more flawed and fuzzy than the ongoing debate between the rational and the emotional. Variations of the phrase “rational vs. emotional” are found in textbooks, articles and everyday conversations in marketing and marketing research spheres.

And, as with so many other topics, we tend to copy what others are saying and writing without stopping to think about what it all means. All too often in books, magazines, blogs and conference pronouncements the assumption is made that emotions are non-conscious and all rational thinking is conscious. What’s the harm in that?

Assuming that all emotions are non-conscious can lead us into quicksand. If we assume that consumers can never consciously explain their emotions (as some behavioral economists would have us believe), we are likely to ignore or not give adequate weight to what consumers are trying to tell us.

It is true that some of our emotions are non-conscious and that those non-conscious emotions do affect our thinking and behavior. But, if we assume that all emotions are non-conscious, it might lead us to put our faith in witch doctors or shamans (or neuroscientists, gurus, soothsayers, etc.) to reveal the invisible inner-depths of human emotion.



Based on reasoning

Before I discuss the role of emotion in greater detail, let’s explore rational thinking. Rational is defined as logical, based on reasoning. Most people would agree that rational thinking is a conscious process. We have a problem to solve, we think about it consciously and come up with a solution. But is rational thinking an exclusively conscious activity? Suppose that you are trying to solve a difficult mathematical, engineering or statistical problem. You may be stumped for quite a while and decide to work on other tasks, when suddenly the solution or a strategy pops into your conscious mind. The non-conscious parts of your brain have given you the solution, or the key to the solution, and you weren’t even aware that your brain was still working on the problem.

History is replete with examples of mathematical and scientific problems being solved by the answers popping into one’s consciousness or solutions evolving from dreams, including Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity, Niels Bohr’s theory of quantum mechanics and Dmitri Mendeleev’s creation of the periodic table of elements. You yourself have probably experienced this same phenomenon, where a dream or sudden inspiration helped you

solve a rational problem. So, rational or logical thinking is both a conscious and a non-conscious process. The non-conscious processes of the human brain are part of the genius and greatness of the human mind. This same pattern is also evident in human emotions.

Conscious and non-conscious emotions

Emotions may be best defined as feelings. Emotions can be conscious or non-conscious, just like rational thinking. For example, you may feel great joy when you receive a nice compliment from someone. The joy is mostly conscious – you know what your emotional response to the compliment is and you know the reasons for it. You may feel anger toward your neighbor because he borrowed and failed to return your lawnmower. You are fully conscious of this anger and know the source of it. You may feel fear at the prospect of giving a speech to a large audience. You know exactly what the emotion is and can talk about it even though you might not fully understand its underlying origins. These are examples of conscious emotions.

However, at other times you may have a gut feeling or a gnawing doubt about someone or something that you cannot bring to consciousness or fully explain. We have all experienced these nebulous feelings of unknown origin – non-conscious emotions are at work and we cannot pinpoint the exact causes or sources. Dreams are another window into non-conscious emotions, where we experience bizarre stories, plots, characters, images and symbols (accompanied by strong feelings) that we cannot explain or understand.

So emotions can be conscious or non-conscious. Emotions can also be rational or irrational. Anger at your neighbor over the unreturned lawnmower may be perfectly rational. Your fear of speaking to a large audience may be rational or largely irrational.

Wait a minute, you might argue, emotions are not conscious because we can't fully explain where and how they arise or because we don't fully understand the physiology of emotions. Good points but the same arguments are true of rational or logical thinking. Virtually all humans are logical, even small children. We can't fully explain the physiology of our rational or logical thinking, but that does not mean that most rational thinking is non-conscious. Let's try to visualize these interactions by imagining a three-dimensional space:

- X-axis: The degree of rational or logical thinking.
- Y-axis: The degree of a single emotion or feeling, anger, joy, love, etc. (weak to strong emotional feelings).
- Z-axis: The degree of consciousness (from non-conscious to conscious).

All of our mental processes are some combination of these three fundamental variables. Visually, these three variables create a polyhedron or cuboid (think of a rectangular box). The size of the box and its shape represent how we think and feel at an instant in time. However, all three variables are in constant flux or agitation, like the electrons inside an atom. Let's call this imaginary shape a quantum polyhedron or quantum cuboid.

Have we arrived at ultimate reality? Not exactly. The truth is much more complex than a simple three-dimensional polyhedron model. The problem is the emotional dimension. No one really knows exactly how many unique emotions dwell in the human brain. Philosophers, poets, priests and scholars have argued over the number and types of emotions for millennia, but no one really knows. For example, there are more than 100 different types of fear and many types of joy, love, anger and happiness. But it doesn't really matter how many unique emotions we experience. It is sufficient to acknowledge that human emotions are numerous and

exceedingly complex. All of these human emotions are intertwined and commingled – rarely do we ever observe or experience a single emotion all by itself.

If we think of each emotion as represented by its own quantum polyhedron, then our overall mental processes and behaviors can be explained by some merging of multiple quantum polyhedrons. Imagine a space with 15 to 20 (or maybe 100) of these quantum polyhedrons, and assume that each polyhedron can either function independently or merge and function in conjoint with one or more other polyhedrons. This collection of commingled quantum polyhedrons, as a visual model, leads to an appreciation of the complexity of human thinking, emotions and behavior.

Why it matters

There are several implications for marketers and researchers:

- The human mind and its processes are exceedingly complex. We may never completely understand the mind's full depths and dimensions, regardless of advances in technology.
- Humans have remarkable language capabilities and communication skills. Consumers have an amazing ability to talk and tell us what they are thinking and what they are feeling, and much of human thinking and human emotion is accessible through traditional survey research. We can tap into this conscious knowledge and communication capability with all types of surveys. While people are capable of exaggerating and telling lies, we've known about this for thousands of years. Market researchers can adjust for distortion, lies and overestimation.
- Not all human thinking and human emotions are conscious. There are parts of the human brain that we cannot reach with surveys or superficial group discussions. There are questions people cannot answer because of a lack of self-awareness or lack of self-knowledge. Many cultural influences are beyond our awareness and outside our consciousness. Just as the fish is not aware of the ocean, we are typically not aware of the cultural ocean in which we swim. There are also motives and desires hidden in our brains that we choose to hide, deny or repress. Qualitative research techniques, in the hands of experienced and perceptive investigators, can help us access these non-conscious or marginally conscious motives, emotions and cultural influences. Projective techniques, ethnography and semiotic techniques can help us discover obscure areas of the human mind. Neuroscience measurements may help us at some point in the future, when we better understand the output.
- As marketers and researchers, we must integrate knowledge of the conscious and the non-conscious, the rational and the emotional. Maximum value comes from understanding the interactions of these different aspects of the mind.
- Marketing decisions take place amid an economic environment, industry trends, technology changes, competitive forces, influences, corporate goals, aspirations, budgetary constraints and product-category variables. Understanding human emotions and human rationality – conscious and non-conscious – are only parts of the knowledge base that lead to good marketing decisions.

The human brain is an incredible visual and symbolic computer of endless power and creative brilliance. Do not dishonor it with oversimplifications or imprecise characterizations – pay tribute to its elegance, beauty and complexity. Let us listen to what humans are trying to tell us.

Editor's note: Jerry W. Thomas is president and chief executive of Decision Analyst, a Dallas-based research and consulting firm.