

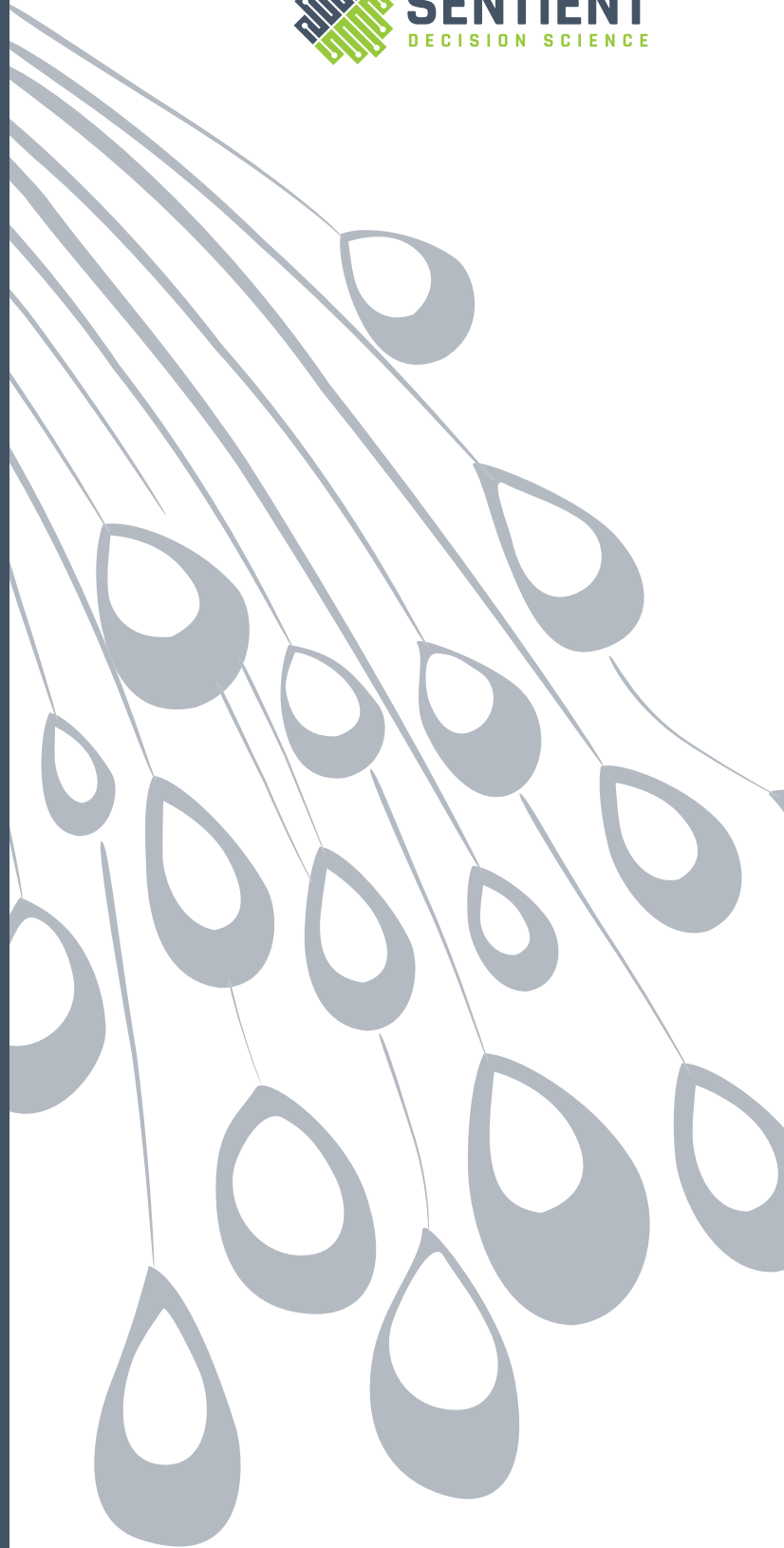


The Peacock's  
Plume & Dancing  
Birds of Paradise

# In Defense of Marketing

THE SENTIENT DECISION SCIENCE  
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Aaron Reid, Ph.D.  
Stephanie Halgren



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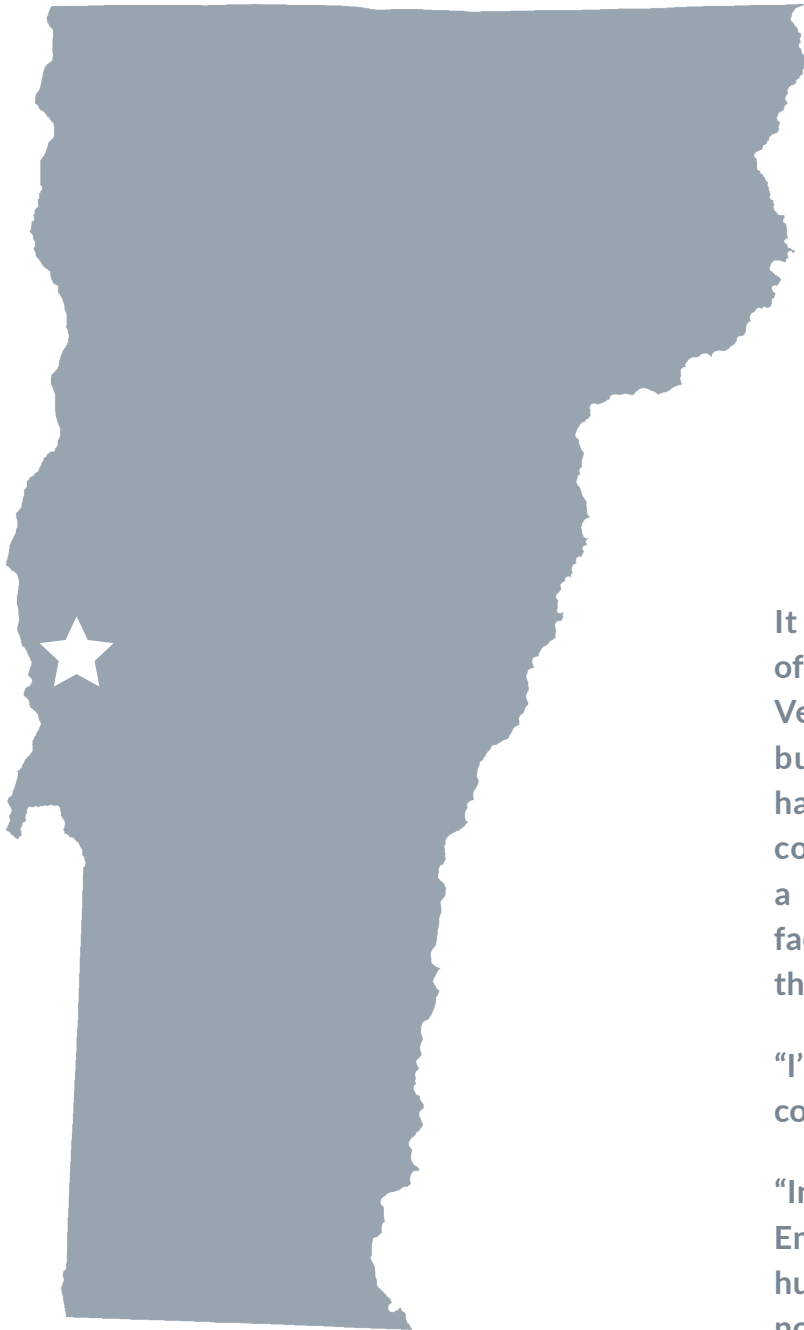
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# A Conversation in Vermont



It was early January, the second day of Winter term at Middlebury College in Vermont. I was at a reception in an old building on campus with creaking hard-wood floors under my feet and a cold drink in my hand. I struck up a conversation with a fellow visiting faculty member, “what are you teaching this January,” I asked.

“I’m teaching an interactive environmental course. How about you?”

“Interesting. I’m teaching a course called Emotion and Rationality. It’s about how humans make decisions. It explores the notions of whether we should “listen to our gut feeling” or alternatively “not let our heart cloud our mind”.

Whenever I tell people about that course, I get a lot of “hmm’s” and “ahh’s”, and “wow-that-sounds-interesting’s.” People are inherently fascinated by human decision-making. But this conversation was different.

We quickly began discussing the business of behavioral insight, and I got the impression that my colleague was fascinated, if not disturbed, by the notion that people actually get paid to predict what other people will do. This ultimately led my acquaintance to the question:

“How do you feel about the ethics of marketing? You know, basically trying to convince people to consume more.”

These types of questions usually raise my heart rate and cause my palms to sweat, as my body’s evolutionary structures prepare for confrontation through the instigation of my “fight” mechanisms. Keeping my voice from wavering in reply is usually a challenge.

“Marketing, itself, is something that is a fundamental part of the human experience,” I began. “It is in all of us. We all do it naturally. You may not agree with the values behind a specific marketing campaign, but the argument there is about values being marketed, not about the ethics of marketing itself.”

“Ah, I see. Well, that’s interesting” my colleague politely replied, “We’d better join the rest of the group before the reception is over.” I smiled and agreed, at this point my beer was getting warm from all the heat being produced in my palms anyway. Little did I know this conversation was just beginning.

A week later, I was sitting at my desk, watching the snow fall heavy on the rooftops of this small New England town, preparing a lecture on consumer irrationality for the next day, when my inbox pinged me with the arrival of a new message, “conversation in the hall...” the subject line read. I read on,

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## IS MARKETING INHERENTLY DECEPTIVE AND DANGEROUS?

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*“If you read on, you will actually hear the opposite. Yes, this paper is a defense of marketing, not only as a fundamental part of the human experience, but also as a necessary life propagation force.”*

“Aaron, I enjoyed our conversation at the reception the other night. There were some issues I skirted around that I’d like to dive into here...”

My colleague went on to argue how marketing might not be “a fundamental part of the human experience” as I had said, by detailing examples of people whom she felt do not market themselves. Native American shamans, the Dalai Lama, and Yoda were the human and Jedi examples that topped her list. Her argument was that these people exude a humility and power in their self that needs no “marketing”. The shamans, she argued, have a humbleness in their bearing that carries a natural power which other people often don’t recognize.



Even if many humans do market themselves, the shamans would be an example of human “anti-marketing”, in her opinion. Even the Dalai Lama has achieved fame as a side effect, she argued, as she expressed that he does not spend time thinking about how to sell himself. And the Yoda example? “Self explanatory, it is, hmm? Yeesssss.” I thought.

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### IN ESSENCE.

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*This white paper explores the nature and ethics of conscious and subconscious marketing tactics, details how subconscious marketing influences behavior through the automatic activation of values and goals, and discusses why we should embrace marketing as the spice of our lives rather than relegate it to the depths of the dangerous and deceptive. Furthermore, since subconscious marketing practices are by definition automatic and are universally practiced by humans, we argue that the influence of the subconscious on behavior needs to be more broadly embraced. Arguments on the ethics of marketing should be redirected to discuss the ethics of the values being marketed.*

# Let's begin...

## The exchange of goods

Common perceptions of marketing are generally associated with transactions involving physical goods and currency. The American Marketing Association defines marketing with the following sterility: “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” (2007).

In their book *The Greater Good: How Good Marketing Makes for Better Democracy*, John Quelch and Catherine Jocz define marketing as “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives” (2008).



Even more simply, evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller (2009) defines marketing as “a systematic attempt to fulfill human desires by producing goods and services that people will buy.”

Each of these definitions are broad and focus on the critical component of exchange. Yet, to the general population, marketing is usually thought of as the deliberate advertising of goods or services. From this perspective, the origin of marketing usually just points to the moment in time when humans began explicitly advertising their goods or services for exchange.

Historical evidence dates the origin of explicit advertising back to the Babylonians in the 3000s B.C. Archaeologists have discovered colorful signs drawn on walls that directed passersby to different

businesses in the ruins of ancient Rome and Pompeii. More recently, during the medieval period, a primary advertising method consisted of town criers who extolled the virtues of various products to passersby. Explicit advertising efforts evolved again with Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the movable-type printing press in 1450, which made the production of pamphlets and posters possible. And it is commonly thought that our modern marketing industry was established in earnest in the 19th century, following the launch of the first advertising agency in the United States by Volney B. Palmer in 1841.

All of these serve as good examples of advances in deliberate human marketing tactics, yet none of these milestones accurately captures the true origin of marketing as we seek to define it here.



*“Did marketing begin with Babylonian signs, Medieval Town Criers, or the Gutenberg Printing Press?”*

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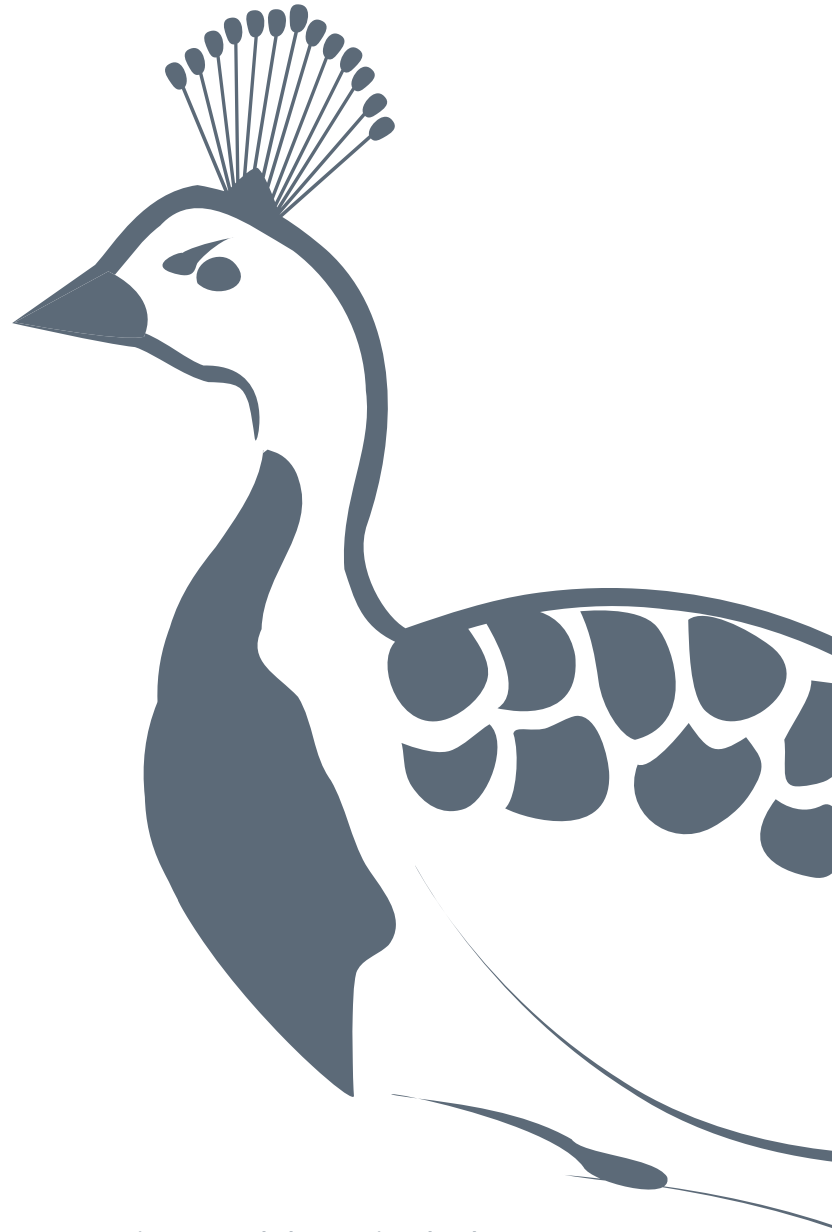
@SENTIENTINSIGHT

*“We argue that none of these important milestones represent the true origin of marketing. We need to go much deeper into history to find the genesis of marketing.”*

## The true origin of marketing

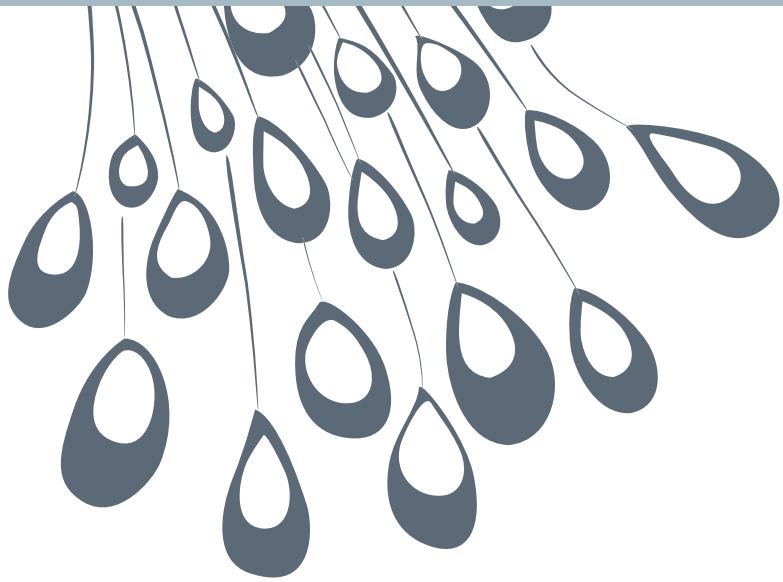
What is glaringly absent from this historical record of marketing is the origin of how organisms first began to advertise themselves in the marketplace for genes. In today's world we know that we consciously market ourselves in order to attain goals such as securing employment, meaningful social and romantic relationships, or the dissemination of our ideas. In fact, we are in a constant state of marketing what we have to offer to social groups, family, friends and potential mates. With this insight, we might define the origin of marketing as the point in time when humans began to interact within markets for ideas or other social currency.

But personal marketing didn't begin with the human species. We need to look at our ancestors to begin to understand the true origin of marketing.



Darwin argued that animals choose mates to endow their offspring with good genes, thus creating a market for genes (1859). Animal species have specific marketing tactics hard-wired into their behavior and physical development in order to successfully compete in this market for good genes and ensure the propagation of their genes into future generations.





A flashy example of marketing genes can be found in the plumage of the male peacock. These birds are burdened with elaborate plumes that they must display in order to attract mates (Miller, 1999). This inconvenient and heavy plume actually reduces a peacock's individual chances of survival, so its presence on mature males suggests to females that the male possesses exemplary skills and genes (Barber, 1995). In other words, the peacock's plume serves as an advertisement of having "resources to burn" and this is attractive to the peahen who finds "available resources" desirable in a mate. Interestingly, many evolutionary psychologists argue that humans market themselves in a similar way when they flaunt extravagant consumer products (Tierney, 2009).

Another colorful example of natural marketing tactics can be found in the jungle of Papua New Guinea. Male birds of paradise also have glamorous plumage that they display in elaborate mating dances to find a partner ([watch it here](#)).

We don't need to travel to Papua New Guinea or Darwin's Galapagos Islands to find more illustrations of gene marketing. Examples like these can also be witnessed in our own backyard in the form a bird as common as a house finch. Male house finches may range in color from pale yellow to bright red, and females prefer their brightly colored counterparts. The brighter coloring indicates genetic quality and a stronger degree of parental investment, which are valuable traits in this monogamous species (Miller, 1991). Birds that lack these glamorous features are much less likely to reproduce.

Of course this phenotypic version of marketing also appears in the human species. According to the Theory of Resource Exchange, humans market themselves in order to gain valuable social interactions (Hirschman, 1987). Exchange in social interactions is not limited to goods and money—it can also involve items and concepts that fall into the categories of services, love, status, and information. Thus we have market for the dissemination of our ideas as well as the dissemination of our genes. The human mate selection market thrives of the necessary marketing forces as people market, develop preferences and match up with other individuals having equally desirable traits (Hirschman, 1987). Women and men each choose romantic partners according to specific traits that suggest superior survival and reproductive assets relative to the choice set that is available to them.

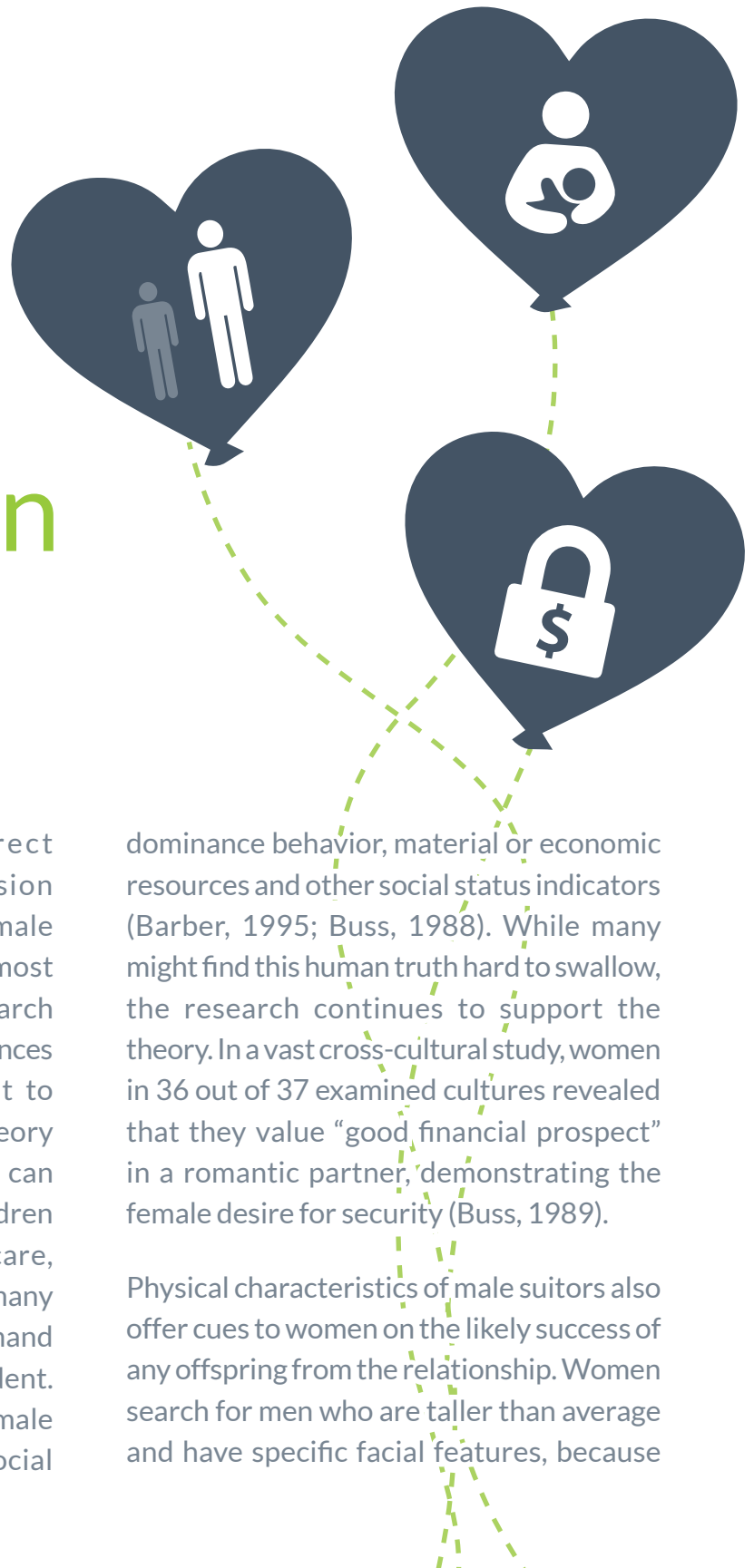
## The Human Mate Selection Market

# Women prefer men who can...

Today's hyper-politically-correct environment has made discussion and debate around basic male/female differences difficult outside of the most objective academic circles. But research continues to reveal fundamental differences between the sexes that are difficult to dispute. Preeminent evolutionary theory claims that women prefer men who can invest in children because human children require a significant amount of care, including 9 months of gestation and many years of protection and resource demand before they are functionally independent. The ability to invest in children is a male trait that can be represented by social

dominance behavior, material or economic resources and other social status indicators (Barber, 1995; Buss, 1988). While many might find this human truth hard to swallow, the research continues to support the theory. In a vast cross-cultural study, women in 36 out of 37 examined cultures revealed that they value "good financial prospect" in a romantic partner, demonstrating the female desire for security (Buss, 1989).

Physical characteristics of male suitors also offer cues to women on the likely success of any offspring from the relationship. Women search for men who are taller than average and have specific facial features, because



these traits suggest higher social status, maturity, masculinity, and industriousness. Prominent cheekbones and a large chin imply social domination, while large eyes and a large smile indicate sociability. Along with body symmetry, these features also indicate disease resistance, a lack of illness during development, and good physical health (Geary, 2009). All of this non-verbal communication serves as information for the woman choosing between options in the market for genes, and as such constitutes a fundamental form of marketing.



*“Men are attracted to women who display youthful*

*facial features such as large eyes, small nose, small chin and full lips.”*

*(Geary, 2009)*

Similarly, men have specific cues that provide information on mate value in the market for good genes. Men concentrate on physical attractiveness in women; preferring women with a youthful appearance, because this indicates a greater degree of fertility and suggests reproductive success (Barber, 1995). In the

same cross-cultural study mentioned above, the results showed that men value physical attractiveness and youth more than do women across all 37 cultures studied (Buss, 1989). As a result, women “bear the burden of physical advertisement,” unlike other species (e.g. the peacock), in which the males exhibit burdensome desirable features (Barber, 1995). Men are attracted to women who display an hourglass figure (a low waist-hip ratio), body symmetry, and youthful facial features such as large eyes, small nose, small chin, and full lips (Barber, 1995; Geary, 2009). There is good reason why collagen injections and Botox are so wildly successful as “beauty” products.

The application of makeup, the choice of flattering clothes or the enrollment in a weight loss program are all conscious or subconscious attempts to emphasize the traits necessary to attract a mate. Consequently, men and women who find romantic partners have done it as the results of successful advertisement of their most desired traits during the courtship process.

Of course, all marketing is not happening at the subconscious level. In addition to the automatic display of desirable physical traits during courtship interactions, men and women explicitly advertise themselves through personal ads or participation in dating programs to find compatible partners. In these deliberate marketing attempts, men and women pay to advertise their desirable traits so that potential

partners have the opportunity to select them (Hirschman, 1987). Successful personal marketing requires the same kind of differentiation from the field of choices by matching “product” traits with the specific market segment that values those traits highly.

eHarmony serves as a great example with its claim to “narrow the field from millions of candidates to a highly select group of singles that are compatible with you,” (“Why eHarmony,” n.d.). Similarly, studies of people who participated in antiquated videodating showed that this format of personal marketing allowed for concrete regulation of the projected image through editing self-descriptions and carefully selecting photographs to display (Woll & Young, 1989). These programs provided “strategic, carefully controlled ‘impression management’ or ‘self-presentation’” forums as people advertised certain attributes that they believed partners would value (Woll & Young, 1989).

Facebook and other social networking sites are full of great current examples of deliberate personal marketing tactics. This same controlled impression management behavior can be witnessed on millions of Facebook pages as people create a specific image to project to their social network. People on social networking sites are marketing themselves in order to gain desired social interactions, build relationships and in some cases find potential mates. Members of these communities spend hours carefully crafting an image, including biography data, photos and video that project a desired image.

While difficult for some to admit, these are some of the same marketing principles that are at play in the market for consumer goods and services: essentially, we are communicating something of value to a target audience.

## The Subconscious Influence of Your Smile

# Smiling is a form of personal marketing...

“...because it influences the outcome of social interactions, often without the necessity of conscious awareness by either party...natural smiles subconsciously show a person’s inclination toward altruistic behavior and they promote cooperation by influencing the perceiver’s internal state. In fact, subconscious exposure to smiling faces has been shown to result in enhanced physiological signs of well-being in the recipient of the smile.”

While social networking sites are often deliberate, conscious attempts to market our desirable traits a wealth of our personal marketing occurs below the level of conscious awareness. Humans automatically engage in subconscious attempts to win favor by marketing characteristics of themselves that would be desirable in order to promote positive social relationships. The most simple example comes in the form of your smile.

Smiling is a form of personal marketing because it influences the outcome of social interactions, often without the necessity of conscious awareness by either party. The “Duchenne smile” (i.e. real smile) serves as an “advertisement of intentions relevant to the good functioning of...relationships” (Mehu, Grammer, & Dunbar, 2007; emphasis added). These natural smiles subconsciously show a person’s inclination toward altruistic behavior and they promote



cooperation by influencing the perceiver's internal state. In fact, subconscious exposure to smiling faces has been shown to result in enhanced physiological signs of well-being in the recipient of the smile (Dimberg & Ohman, 1996). And smiling has been shown to have a positive influence on job interviews, because it indicates good will and conveys trust (Freiberger, 2008).

The difficult human truth here is that all people use subconscious marketing tactics, even in the simple form of a smile, in order to promote a certain image, market the spread of our ideas, or gain followers to ultimately reach our goals.

This brings us back to the case of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama has one of the most beautiful, welcoming smiles in the world. His Duchenne smile immediately engenders trust and communicates altruism.

It happens automatically, at a subconscious level and has a desired effect on his target audience.

Beyond his genuine smile, the Dalai Lama is particularly effective in marketing his ideas. The Dalai Lama recently attended a professional football game, where his presence was noted by journalists remarking on the power of his personal brand, characterized by "his trademark mix of gravity and whimsy," and marketed the practice of religion (Moskowitz, 2009; emphasis added). There is a brand "Dalai Lama", and it possesses attributes that a target audience values. Furthermore, the Dalai Lama brand effects change in people using both conscious and subconscious marketing tactics. A review of the ubiquity of the influence of the subconscious on our lives will help illustrate the necessity of subconscious tactics in marketing.

## Do We Really Know Why We Do What We Do?

# Lost in thought

At least twenty years of research in the behavioral sciences has shown that we are generally unaware of the underlying motivations behind our actions (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

### Research has shown that:

- We automatically & continually evaluate our experiences as we navigate our days
- Our perceptions directly influence our actions without higher cognitive involvement, and most importantly
- We automatically pursue goals

In fact, most of our actions on a daily basis result from mental processes that occur outside the realm of conscious awareness. Bargh and Chartrand (1999) argue that our conscious selves may only guide behavior about five percent of the time.

To illustrate, think of the last time you were on the highway driving and you became lost in thought - 10 minutes passed and suddenly you were at your exit. In this case, your mind literally steered you to your desired destination without you being aware of how you got there. Now think about how often you get 'lost in thought' throughout your day, while you still complete numerous mindless tasks.

The subconscious mind not only steers us while we're lost in thought, it also plays a role in affecting our moods, preferences, behavior and even in one of the areas our conscious minds hold so dear: our goals.



## The Subconscious Impact on Moods

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In 1996, behavioral psychologists Ulf Dimberg and Arne Öhman sought to test if the human mood could be effected through subconscious exposure to environmental stimuli. Their study investigated whether subconscious exposure to smiling or angry faces would have an effect on the participant's mood. At Sentient, we affectionately call this study: Why am I so Happy? And the answer, as you will clearly see is, "I have no idea."

Dimberg and Ohman used cognitive priming as a method to test the effects of exposure to positive and negative stimuli at a subconscious level. The specific priming technique used in this study is called backward-masking, where an image is digitally flashed in front of the participant long enough for processing at the subconscious level, but not long enough for conscious recognition of the object. The participant is then immediately presented with a neutral image after the prime to literally "mask" the conscious recollection of the prime.

The researchers primed participants with facial expressions, ranging from happy to angry, including images of different sexes and ages. After priming, participants' emotional wellbeing was measured indirectly through the recounting of either a positive memory or a negative one and physiologically through the use of electroencephalography (EEG).

The results revealed that people unaware that they were primed with a smiling face showed significantly elevated feelings of well-being and happiness than those of the control group. Those who had been primed with angry or fearful faces revealed feelings of lower self-esteem and unhappiness. This stands as remarkable evidence of the influence of the subconscious processing of stimuli in our environment on our moods.



## The Subconscious Impact on Preference

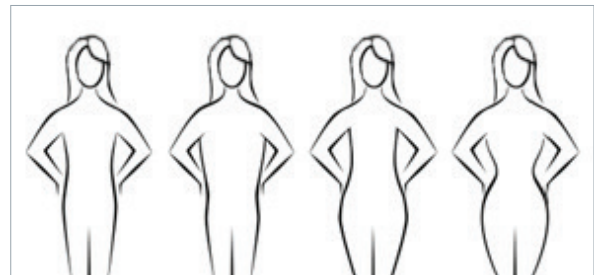
Beyond our general mood, it turns out that the subconscious has a substantial impact on the formation of our preferences. This influence can be easily witnessed in trivial preferences like the type of toothpaste we prefer. But what about more significant preferences? Surely who we choose for a sexual partner would be based on our conscious preferences, right?

The answer is actually, “perhaps not as much as you think”. In fact, the power of the subconscious is so substantial that recent research has shown that male preference for romantic partners can be dependent on how much change (\$) we have in our pockets at the time of evaluating a mate for selection.

In a brilliant experimental manipulation, Nelson and Morrison (2005) found that male preference for ideal weight of a romantic partner actually depended on whether participants had money on their person when asked the question.

The inspiration for their research came from the observation of cross cultural differences in male preferences for the ideal weight in a romantic partner. While there are human universals in attractive mate attributes, body weight in women does not hold a standard pattern across cultures. In lower socio-economic-status

(SES) cultures the ideal weight is heavier than in higher SES cultures. Nelson and Morrison sought an explanation for this phenomena in the evolutionary psychology literature which argues that heavier weight is a sign of resource abundance, while very thin physiques communicate resource scarcity.



The researchers wondered whether the reason behind cross-cultural differences in ideal body weight preferences in women for men was actually perception of resource abundance versus scarcity, and if so could it be shown at the individual level?

To test this thesis, they devised a simple experiment. They simply placed participants in a study where they first asked men if they had any money on their person (making their immediate monetary resources salient to them) and then they asked a series of questions related to mate preferences, one of which was about the ideal weight of a romantic partner. In analyzing the results,

they split the participants into two groups: one that had money on them during the experiment, and one that had no money on them at the time.

The results were striking! Men who had no money on them during the experiment preferred heavier than average women, and men who had money in their pockets during the experiment preferred lighter than average women. This finding was replicated across four experiments manipulating both money and hunger as measures of resource scarcity (if you're wondering, hungry men prefer heavier women).

But wait! If we are consciously making all of our choices, why would our preferences for weight in a sexual partner be dependent on whether we have a few bucks in our pocket or not? Don't we know why we like what we like? Aren't our preferences stable (as rational economic theory argues)? The answer to each of these latter questions is 'not always.'

More evidence for the dramatic influence of the subconscious comes in the form of subconscious influences on our physical behavior.

*“If we are consciously making all of our choices, why would our preferences for weight in a sexual partner be dependent on whether we have a few bucks in our pocket or not?”*

*-Aaron Reid, Ph.D.*

*(finding from Nelson & Morrison, 2005)*

## The Subconscious Impact on Behavior

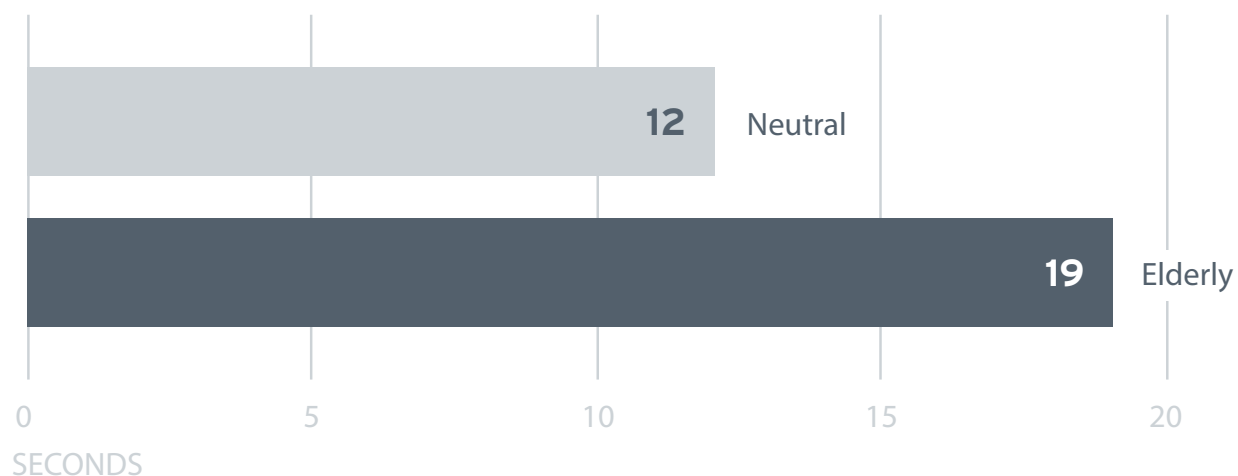
The subconscious can even effect the speed with which we walk. Bargh and Chartrand demonstrated this effect during a study they were completing on stereotypes. These researchers were particularly interested in the Elderly stereotype and whether it could be activated subconsciously and if that activation had the power to effect subsequent behavior without people knowing.

The researchers had participants come into the lab and complete a series of exercises. Their experimental manipulation was quite simple. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to a control condition, where they unscrambled words to form sentences. The other half were randomly assigned to the Elderly subconscious priming condition, where they unscrambled words to form sentences that included primes such as “Florida”, “wrinkles” and “bingo”.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this experiment was the dependent variable. The researchers had a disguised experimenter record the time it took for each participant to walk down the hallway after the study was over. Remarkably, those people in the elderly subconscious priming condition took longer to walk down the hallway (average 19 seconds) than those in the control condition (average 12 seconds). And of course, the key here is that they were not aware that they had been primed with concepts related to the Elderly stereotype.

Apparently our subconscious mind can even effect the very nature of our gate.

So what of that last bastion of our conscious will: our ability to determine and activate our goals. Could even our goals be activated subconsciously?



## The Subconscious Impact on Goals

Goals are typically prized as being personal and actively chosen according to our long-term values. However, research has shown that even the pursuit of goals can be activated automatically without conscious awareness.

Bargh and Chartrand (1999) demonstrated that people can be primed with the goal to “achieve” by simply being presented with a word search task that involved words related to the concept of “achievement”. In subsequent tasks, these people outperformed those who had not been primed. Furthermore, they did not realize that they were trying to best their peers; in fact, they were completely unaware that the priming task activated the goal to outshine others.

Not only do people who are primed with the achievement goal perform better, they also work harder on tasks than do those who are not primed with this goal. In an experiment where participants were given three minutes to create as many words as possible from seven Scrabble letter tiles, 55% of the people who were primed to “achieve” continued to work after the time limit, compared to only 21% of the people who were not subconsciously primed with the goal to achieve.

A C C O M P L I S H M E N T  
 C H H K F I R S T F N I W L  
 T N E M E V E I H C A Y U U  
 T Y Z K R O W D R A H O W V  
 M A J B I D L S S E C C U S

Accomplishment  
Achievement

First  
Hard Work

Success  
Win

## Free Will and the Fallacy of Reason Based Choice

Even with all of this evidence of the subconscious influence on moods, preferences, behavior and even goals, we still believe in the concepts of free will, choice based on reasons, and the power to control our actions. Indeed, we are able to exert conscious control over some of our actions - it is a skill that makes us uniquely human. Yet, consciousness, the phenomenon that gives us this very skill, also leads us to believe that we can consciously direct every aspect of our lives. And this is where the problem lies.

Consider for a moment the absurdity of the notion that we can consciously control all of our behaviors. Don't get defensive, now - you can consider this a blessing. If you consciously controlled every blink of your eyelids (about 23,040 each day), and every breath you take (20,000 to 25,000 each day), you would find yourself utterly unable to concentrate on anything else.

Do the same principles apply beyond basic biological functions? Yes. In fact, the same holds true for what is classically considered reason based choice. Imagine if we needed to consciously consider all reasons for or against a specific choice. How long would each pro and con list be, and how many would we compile in a single day? Moreover, how would we know which reasons should carry greater weight, if we did not have automatic emotive evaluation mechanisms helping us process our worlds? The fact is, we need a great deal of our choices and actions to be automatized in order to have the luxury of periodic free will. Interestingly, the philosopher A.N. Whitehead believes that society only moves forward when we perform more tasks without thinking about them (as cited in Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

This brings us back to marketing and the importance of recognizing the subconscious influence of marketing on our behavior and how it actually helps us navigate our days.



*“We need a great deal of our choices and actions automatized in order to have the luxury of periodic free will.”*

*-Aaron Reid, Ph.D.*

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## Conscious vs. Subconscious Marketing Tactics

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The notion of being influenced subconsciously by companies trying to hoc their wares is disconcerting to most. We tend to feel a strong desire to maintain our sense of free will. The perception that we have freedom to choose is a defining characteristic of who we are as individuals. Thus, the idea of subconscious influence on our choice can feel like a violation.







While most types of marketing are viewed with healthy skepticism, we generally do not respond as negatively to conscious marketing campaigns, which affect viewers by presenting explicit rationale for buying specific products and services. These types of advertisements typically convince viewers with a list of reasons asserting the desirability of the advertised product.

For example, the advertisement displayed to the right, provides a list of the advantages associated with a product. It highlights attributes that people look for, and demonstrates superiority.

We are generally more accepting of such conscious marketing techniques because we think we are aware of how the ad is trying to influence us. This awareness reassures us that we maintain a sense of free will and control over our purchases.

### 6 Reasons Customers Buy from Us

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-  Fast & Free Delivery
-  Free 800 Helpline
-  Knowledgeable Product Advisors
-  Dedicated Customer Service Team
-  25 Years of Trading History
-  Over 60,000 Happy Customers

However, the vast majority of marketing is influencing behavior through the subconscious activation of goals. The impact of the subconscious on goals in marketing works in the following way. When consumers choose to buy a certain product, their motivation stems from the benefits that the product provides. These benefits are end-states of goals that the consumer believes s/he can reach through the consumption of the product (van Osselaer et al., 2005). Marketing primes the importance of these goals, and thereby activates the pursuit of these goals, which influences behavior resulting in purchase of the marketed product.

## Beer, Body Odor and Politics

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To illustrate, let's review some television ad campaigns that prime certain goals that the viewer subconsciously believes he can achieve with the advertised product.

Consider Bud Light's "Drinkability" campaign, a version called "Backyard" shows a socially dominant man holding a Bud Light in the middle of the screen who is surrounded by other people ([www.budlight.com](http://www.budlight.com)). The implicit suggestion of the image is that the viewer himself can become popular and be the center of attention through the consumption of Bud Light. The camera also presents shots of this young man adjacent to attractive women, essentially making the subconscious connection between the consumption of Bud Light and the belief

that he will appear attractive and find many potential romantic partners if he drinks this beer.

This is the beauty and power of the subconscious ploy. It works because the target audience, beer drinking men in this case, value social dominance and "getting the girl". These are very important goals to this audience. Thus, when the viewer next enters a grocery store to buy beer, his implicit associations with the brand include social dominance and attractiveness at a subconscious level and he is much more likely to choose Bud Light due to the goals that the brand now activates subconsciously.

*"As market researchers we have a responsibility to understand the consumer subconscious. We have over 30 years of research in the behavioral sciences, revealing a significant inability by consumers to self-report the true drivers of our behavior. With this kind of evidence, how can we look at ourselves in the mirror in the morning if we're advising clients on what products to make, what ads to run, and what messages to emphasize based on self-reported "importance" data alone?"*

*Essentially, if we don't study the consumer subconscious we are laying the foundation for profound consumer dissatisfaction and monumental waste of our client's resources."*

*-Aaron Reid, Ph.D.*

Importantly, all of the processing goes on at the subconscious level—and it needs to happen there in order to be effective. Imagine if the Bud Light brand made a serious argument listing the reasons to buy Bud Light including that drinking Bud Light would gain you social status and win you the girl. The consumer's conscious mind wouldn't buy it. In fact, there is a good chance that the consumer might be offended.

This tactic of eschewing a reason based argument for a subconscious ploy has been brilliantly brought to life by two other male targeted brands: Dos Equis and Old Spice.

"The Most Interesting Man in the World" campaign from Dos Equis is so effective because it is so absurd. Customers will not respond to a conscious argument that suggests that drinking this beer will make you the "Most Interesting Man in the World". So the creative genius here is to keep the audience laughing at the absurdity of it all, while implicitly making the connection between this beer and being perceived as different, attractive and mysteriously engaging to women.

### *"Stay thirsty my friends"*

Pushing the envelope on absurdity even further is the recent brand revitalization campaign by Old Spice. In these ads the wickedly handsome man is seen with his shirt off showing off, his perfectly portioned pectoral muscles, and the width of his shoulders. He is seen turning sand

into diamonds, and even riding a horse on a beach in white tights. If Old Spice tried to make this argument explicitly on a conscious level, by arguing that using Old Spice is going to make you the pinnacle of masculinity, they too would be laughed out the door. But again here is where the brilliance of the subconscious ploy is found.

By turning the humor around, and making the associations so absurd, the brand gives the target audience the permission to consciously laugh at the idea that a deodorant could bring you all of this hypermasculinity, while simultaneously making the subconscious connection between hyper-masculinity and the Old Spice brand. Again, an explicitly made conscious argument of these connections between masculinity and the deodorant verges on the offensive.

Subconscious marketing tactics are not limited to beer and deodorant ads. Compelling examples of subconscious marketing ploys can be found in political campaigns as well.

As the economy was falling apart at the end of 2008, the political marketing advertisements focused in on activating the goal of living in a thriving society. Advertisements for the Obama and McCain campaigns focused on the creation of new jobs and the use of alternative energy in order to evoke positive feelings associated with a lifestyle without worry. Images of hardworking people suggested that the advertised candidate would repair the



economy's problems and restore America's prowess. Bright colors and smiling faces induced hope and gave the impression that the advertised candidate would create a better world - a world that the viewer connected with at an emotional level. (see the "[Global](#)" and "[Hands](#)" ad from the 2008 campaigns). These images subconsciously activate the goal to live in a flourishing society, which the viewer could thereby pursue by voting for the particular candidate.

All marketing can influence the viewer on a subconscious level, but when people become aware that they are being influenced on a subconscious level, there tends to be a knee-jerk reaction to take offense, especially if the values behind the product being marketed are contrary to the viewer's values. Incidentally, people are not as offended when they become aware of subconscious marketing if they agree with the values being marketed.

The value content of beer and political advertisements are meaningfully different. Most people do not find fault with political marketing that endorses positions that they value, (e.g. hard work and prosperity). We do not feel as manipulated when advertisements reinforce our conscious values. However, the subconscious activation of goals in commercials for addictive substances, such as beer or tobacco, can create a different reaction. Tobacco and alcohol can ruin lives through disease, depression and death,

and subsequently many people protest the subconscious activation of goals to motivate behavior in the advertisement of these products. Others do not have negative associations with these products and simply see them as conducive to social activity and therefore do not have the same negative reaction to the marketing.

So, if our offense at the subconscious influence of advertising is dependent on whether we agree with the values being marketed, we must revisit the ultimate discussion of the ethics of marketing. This brings us to the crux of our argument: since subconscious marketing is a universal and unavoidable aspect of our nature, the question of ethics is more appropriately based on the ethics of the values being marketed, rather than the ethics of marketing itself.



*"Since subconscious marketing is a natural life propagation force, ethics questions are better focused on the values being marketed"*

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## Many shades of gray

The American Marketing Association's Statement of Ethics asserts that marketers should "do no harm," and maintains that this may be achieved through honesty in advertisements, the avoidance of deception, and respectful treatment of buyers (n.d.). In fact, marketing is protected by the free speech provision in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Yet, the ethics of marketing involve many shades of gray.

Many people argue that we should not have free rein to market a product in any manner that we choose (Johnson, n.d.). In fact, Nebenzahl and Jaffe (1998) suggest that the ethicality of a marketing campaign may be determined by the extent to which it inflicts harm on the viewer through:

- (1) violation of autonomy by control or manipulation
- (2) invasion of privacy and
- (3) the violation of the right to know



These are good guides for marketing practice, but the notion of violating autonomy by control or manipulation is particularly difficult to define given what we have just reviewed on the ubiquitous influence of the subconscious on behavior. The question quickly becomes how do we define human autonomy if we are largely subconscious processors of our worlds?

Unfortunately, these types of ethical arguments are not always clear cut—the activation of subconscious goal pursuit may violate autonomy by control, but it can just as easily produce benefit as it can harm. The subconscious activation of goals can drive pro-social behavior.



## Marketing Brand “You”

Stephanie Halgren  
Behavioral Science Intern

Think back to your last job interview. Waking up early in the morning, you stared at yourself in the mirror, meticulously analyzing every inch of bare skin. You rehearsed responses to the hardest questions you could anticipate. You applied deodorant once, twice, three times maybe; each time convinced that it was the first and only application of the day. Yanking item after item of clothing out of your closet, you crafted your appearance to project all the attributes of yourself that you

wanted to portray: the suit communicated “confidence”, the glasses communicated “smart”, and the shine on your shoes communicated “attention to detail.” Indeed, the Western cultural maxims of “dress for success” and “clothes make the man” indicate that appearances play a key factor in attempts to move forward in life. Like peacocks with their heavy plumes and dancing birds of paradise, we subconsciously market our way to success every day. Is this unethical?

Many marketing campaigns use subconscious techniques to encourage society to work toward a greater good. Research within the category of social change has shown that when people view disturbing images, they are immediately aroused with anxiety (Hastings, Stead, & Webb, 2004). However, when subsequently presented with positive images and recommendations, viewers become motivated to act (Ray & Wilkie,

1970). These postscripts create hope and provide methods for the viewers to become involved, in order to ensure action. In these cases, the manipulation into action by the subconscious activation of goals doesn’t seem so bad. Consistently, the reason there is less objection here is that we tend to agree with the values that are being espoused through the subconscious priming.

## Hitler, Reagan and Obama

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To provide a harsh counter example, consider the marketing skill of Adolf Hitler. (It's hard to even write that sentence without cringing!) Here is an example of very effective subconscious marketing that came in the form of terrible propaganda and led to the death of millions. The same subconscious tactics were used as in pro-social campaigns described above, but in this case we don't agree with the values that were being marketed, and so we object. People generally take this as evidence of the potential evils of marketing but it is not the marketing tactics that are to blame here, they are the same as those used in pro-social marketing, rather it is the values that are being marketed that are the problem.

On the positive side again, consider the marketing genius of Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama. These great orators had and have a special knack for evoking strong emotion in their audiences to produce behaviors that are intended to improve our country and our lives. Their campaigns were riddled with subconscious marketing tactics, and depending on which side of the fence you fall, you may not object to their subconscious marketing tactics. The reason there is less objection in these cases, is because the target audience agrees with the values being marketed.



## Subconsciously Marketing Local Values

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We don't have to focus on the most positive and destructive marketing campaigns in history to make this argument. This reality is true even at the more mundane levels of marketing around everyday consumption. Let's take the market for food as an example.

There is a significant growing proportion of the US population that has an interest in local food production and consumption. The arguments against "big business" in these discussions will sometimes focus on the evil marketing tactics "big business" uses to influence people to buy their products.

Consumers who value local food may eschew these marketing tactics and argue against the evils of big business subconscious branding tactics. Yet, these same consumers are influenced

subconsciously when they walk into the farmer's market full of stands of smiling farmers, displaying their shiny red peppers for sale. These farmers are influencing behavior through subconscious marketing just as big business is - and the reason they are, is because it is part and parcel of who we are as humans. Yet, there is less objection to these marketing tactics among this audience because they agree with the values being marketed.

Example after example demonstrates that the debate here shouldn't be on whether the marketing tactics are ethical but rather that the debate is rightly placed on the ethics of the values being marketed. The fact is we can't avoid influencing people at a subconscious level - we do it automatically when we smile.



# Conclusion

At Sentient, we're interested in understanding fundamental human truths. Our view on the ethics of marketing is rooted in the origins of marketing. Our argument here is that the origins of marketing began with the evolution of behavioral choice. We posit that marketing and choice evolved in tandem, and that one cannot exist without the other. If marketing is, in fact, ultimately a mechanism for gene propagation, it's roots may derive from when the first organisms began to reproduce sexually. The specification of sexual reproduction is important because single-cell prokaryotes and eukaryotes reproduce asexually, and therefore do not market themselves in order to find a mate. Thus, marketing for gene propagation can only have existed since the onset of sexual reproduction with intrasexual competition. In a sexual selection market, the genes that will pass on to the next generation are those that can communicate their virtue most effectively. An organism needs cues from the market in order to choose between a number of potential mates. And with the biological clock ticking, marketing allows organisms to efficiently make their mate selection so that gene propagation can continue.

This analysis leads to the conclusion that the concepts of marketing and choice evolved together; you cannot have one without the other.

Consider the following thought experiment from French philosopher Jean Buridan. In his classic description, a donkey stands equidistant from two stacks of hay. The stacks of hay are identical and the donkey cannot perceive any difference between the two. Without some distinguishing information on why he should choose one stack over another, (e.g. marketing information) the donkey starves to death in the middle, because he cannot rationally choose to eat from one versus the other. Considered in this light, marketing serves as an adaptive phenomenon that allows us to make decisions in a reasonable amount of time. Imagine a world in which humans had the ability to choose but there was no marketing. Behavior would be random, and could we really claim to have the power to choose? Following this argument marketing is a force that gives us the very joy of choosing. Rather than a force that attempts to limit our free will, it is the force that provides it. Marketing is the spice of life!

And this is a turning point at which the debate on the ethics of marketing needs to shift. If we can establish that marketing is a fundamental life propagation force - that both conscious and subconscious marketing tactics are part and parcel of our natural human experience - then we can shift the debate on ethics to where we believe it rightfully belongs: on the values being marketed.

## What this Means for Market Research

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This brings us to the conclusion that we have a larger responsibility here. As market researchers, we have a responsibility to understand consumer preferences at the subconscious level. Right now, as an industry, we are relying heavily on self-reported data on why people like what they like, and why they do what they do - yet, we have over 30 years of research in the behavioral sciences, including thousands of studies, telling us how notoriously inaccurate and unable we are to self-report the true drivers of our behavior. With this kind of evidence, how can we look at ourselves in the mirror in the morning if we're advising clients on what products to make, what ads to run, and what messages to emphasize based on self-reported "importance" data in our surveys?

In total, this is strong evidence of why we can't rely on traditional research methods to understand why consumers like what they like. We can't rely on self-reported measures from consumers to tell us why they do what they do - we simply don't have conscious access to all of the influences on our behavior, and therefore we cannot report them via traditional research methods.

We have a responsibility to our clients who are relying on our results for the viability of their businesses. To the consumer, we have a responsibility to be providing the right information so companies can create

products and services that are truly valued by consumers and to get the right message to the right consumers in the right way. So, if market research is intended to figure out what consumers want and why, and the industry is largely relying on self-reported measures from consumers to tell us why they like what they like and do what they do, then we are in essence laying the foundation for profound consumer dissatisfaction.

We have a responsibility to advance this industry in its methods and its thought leadership in order to understand the subconscious motivations behind consumer preferences. Only then can we expect to be connecting brands with consumers at a meaningful emotional level. Only then can we expect to be producing products that are truly desired by the market. Only then can we feel satisfied in the job we are doing for our clients and our industry.

As we get deeper into understanding the consumer subconscious, we are inevitably going to be faced with questions about the ethics of marketing to the subconscious. In the very least, we hope this paper can serve as a stimulus to that discussion, and hopefully turn it to a discussion of the ethics of the values being marketed rather than subconscious marketing itself.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### Aaron A. Reid, Ph.D.

Chief Behavioral Scientist  
Sentient Decision Science, Inc.

As an entrepreneurial consumer psychologist, Dr. Reid founded Sentient Decision Science, Inc. to bring the visionary advances from the behavioral sciences to business in a practical and accessible format. Sentient is a leading behavioral science based research and consulting firm providing best-in-class implicit research technology, applied behavioral economics and marketing science based brand consulting to optimize product, pricing and promotion development and emotionally differentiate brands through strategic positioning and communications.

Dr. Reid is an expert in how emotion influences choice and the subconscious drivers of behavior. His publications include mathematical models of consumer irrationalities in top peer-reviewed psychology journals, such as the Journal of Experimental Psychology and the Journal of Behavioral Decision Making as well as industry leading recognition

We'd like to recognize **Stephanie Halgren** (*Behavioral Science Intern, Sentient Decision Science, Inc.*), for her work involved on In Defense of Marketing.

from ESOMAR. His landmark publication of "Emotion as a Tradeable Quantity" was the first to quantify how emotion influences choice as a behavioral weighting mechanism.

Under Dr. Reid's direction, Sentient Decision Science has developed patent-pending, cloud based, globally scalable implicit research technology that quantifies consumer emotions and neural network associations with brands, products, packaging and advertising. This technology was recognized with the EXPLOR award in 2011 as the most impactful application of technology in market research. By quantifying these gut-feelings, and integrating with rational trade-offs in a single unifying choice algorithm, consumer behavior predictions are significantly more accurate.

Since 2007, the Sentient Consumer Subconscious Research Lab, has been a pioneering R&D force in the development of advanced implicit research methods, most recently demonstrating the unique neural signature of implicit self-identification with brands. The lab houses state-of-the art eye-tracking, EEG biometric and implicit affective priming technology.

More writing by **Dr. Reid** on how behavioral science principles are applied to real world behavior can be found on:

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