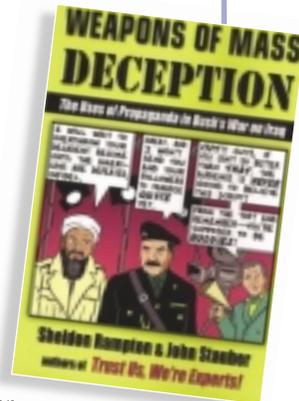


The Bushwhacking of the American Mind

When I read the clipping from the June 15th edition of *The Salt Lake Tribune*, I was appalled. “Many Misinformed About Iraq, Sept. 11 Attacks” the headline read, and the article that followed featured some jaw-dropping results from a national poll conducted by the University of Maryland:

- One-third of Americans surveyed (between May 14-18) believed US forces had already found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.
- 22% said Iraqi forces used chemical and biological weapons during the war.
- One-half surveyed *before* the war believed Iraqis were among the hijackers on September 11th.

Assuming that some of these respondents weren't watching the Fox News Channel, you've got to wonder how so many people could be so wrong. *Weapons of Mass Deception* by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber provides one answer. Subtitled “The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq,” the book is a thorough exposé of the current administration's Orwellian manipulation of the truth about our involvement in Iraq.



Chapter Four, “Doublespeak,” should be of particular interest to communications professionals as it exposes the way the Bush team bends, twists, and abuses the English language to deliberately obscure meaning. Memorable phrases such as “axis of evil,” “coalition of the willing,” and my personal favorite, “preemptive defense,” come under the kind of scrutiny you won't find in commercial mass media – and it's about time. *Weapons* is eye-opening, sobering, entertaining and depressing. Order it before John Ashcroft figures out a way to ban it. ■

Free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. For a free subscription, send your request to: andy@agoodmanonline.com or call 213.386.9501. Back issues are available on the web at www.agoodmanonline.com

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Why Your Message Needs Emotion

A scientific study of human brain activity provides new evidence of the significant role emotions play in the decision-making process—a noteworthy finding for anyone competing for hearts and minds.

Let's say I offer you two dollars.

To keep the money, simply respond “I accept,” and it's all yours—no strings attached. Unless you're an unduly suspicious type, you'd probably take the money and run, right?

Now let's change the context slightly. This time, a third party hands me ten dollars and instructs me to share the money with you in any way I like. Once again, I offer you two dollars. If you accept, you keep the two bucks and I keep eight. If you reject my

offer, however, neither of us keeps anything. What's your decision now?

This second scenario is based on the “Ultimatum Game,” and by observing how people play it, scientists are learning more about the surprisingly strong role emotions play in decision-making. Economists are already paying close attention to this research, hoping it will help them incorporate more of the “human factor” into their models of marketplace behavior. They aren't the only ones, though, who can benefit by better understanding how people make up their minds.



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▶ As in the example on the cover, the Ultimatum Game requires two participants. The player who is given ten dollars to share is called the “proposer.” The second player is called the “responder.” There are only two rules: the proposer can offer any amount he (or she) sees fit. And both parties are allowed to keep the money only if the responder accepts the offer.

Using traditional models of marketplace behavior, economists make three predictions about how people will play the game:

- First, they predict that most proposers will offer five dollars, the fairest split of the money.
- Second, they predict that a significant percentage of proposers will offer less than five dollars. This group, the economists say, sees an advantage in their position and exercises it. Reasoning that their responders should be happy with *something*, these proposers take a calculated risk and will make a lower offer in the hope of keeping a few extra dollars for themselves.
- Third, economists predict that responders will accept virtually any offer because all offers represent a net monetary gain. Or in plain English: who would turn down free money?

What makes the Ultimatum Game

particularly interesting is that the third prediction is wrong. In a recent study of the game, an overwhelming majority of responders who were asked to accept two dollars or less rejected the offers. “On the basis of participant reports,” said the researchers

who wrote about this study in the June issue of *Science*, “it appears that low offers are often rejected after an angry reaction to an offer perceived as unfair.” In other words, while the dispassionate, “rational” side of their brains may have perceived “free money” just as the economists predicted, the emotional side saw something very different – i.e., an insult – and overruled.

Thanks to a team of Princeton scientists, this interpretation of the inner workings of the human mind is now supported by visual evidence. By having participants play the Ultimatum Game inside an MRI scanner, scientists were able to observe brain activity in real time. Like watching portions of the night sky light up during an electrical storm, the researchers were able to clearly see which portions of the responders’ brains were activated as decisions to accept or reject offers were made.

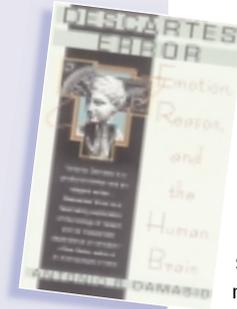
The MRI images showed that when players accepted an offer they judged as fair, circuitry in a section of their brains associated with deliberative thinking was activated. When they received a very low offer, a different area of the brain associated with negative emotions such as anger, distress and distrust lit up as well. This second “activation” was consistently followed by a decision to reject the offer.

“Models of decision-making,” the scientists concluded, “cannot afford to ignore emotion as a vital and dynamic component of our decisions and choices in the real world.” Bearing that in mind, let’s return to the realm of public interest communications where, in my opinion, nonprofits often play their own version of the Ultimatum Game.

When you conduct a public education or advocacy campaign, you offer your audience information, the analog for money in this version of the game. Reasoning like economists, you assume your audience will accept this information because it comes from a credible source and represents a net gain in their understanding of a given subject.

Don’t Walk Away, René

“I think, therefore I am,” declared René Descartes, the eminent French philosopher. Not so fast, replies Antonio Damasio, director of the neurology department at the University of Iowa. In his book, Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain, Damasio contends that emotions are as intrinsic to the human experience as purely rational thought, and that a more accurate statement would be, “I feel and think, therefore I am.” Damasio supports that assertion with a well-researched but highly readable book that’s worth pursuing if the science behind human thought and decision-making interests you.



(This assumption is detectable the moment you hear someone say, “We need a public education campaign to give people the real facts.”) Just like economists, however, you are failing to take into account the emotions that come into play during this “transaction.”

If the Joe Friday “just the facts” approach worked, people wouldn’t smoke, the environment would be healthy, government would spend more on education and public health than weapons of war, and the world would be a very different place. But human beings don’t make decisions based on facts alone. They will, in fact, turn down free money, because their emotions get involved. And they will ignore the facts if they don’t *want* to believe.

So take another hard look at your next public education or advocacy campaign. As currently configured, will it connect with your audience in a way that positively engages their emotions? Or will it simply present facts that one part of their brains may accept, only to be overruled by another part? The Ultimatum Game provides a useful reminder that people do not live by information alone. Like it or not, we are emotional creatures, and we do not rise to action until our hearts have heard the call. ■

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