"Neuromarketing": Unethical Advertising?

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Should advertisers probe human minds as a means of boosting product sales? In a recent article in the online version of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, David Wahlberg describes a new use for an emerging technology that has some people scratching their heads. Using sophisticated MRI scanners, doctors at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia are studying changes in brain activity that occur as people process images. Instead of striving for the laudable goal of understanding mental illness, they are seeking to determine what advertising images will promote higher sales of soft drinks, food, and automobiles. Some accuse these researchers of searching for the "buy button" in the brain and decry the realization of such pursuit as an abuse of medical technology--a form of "Orwellian" mind control--and note that in the recent science fiction movie Minority Report just such mind-reading was employed to control society.

Basically, the "neuromarketing" development on which Wahlberg reports can be described as follows: Subjects were shown visual images while their brains were being viewed with powerful MRI scanners and other imaging modalities. When the brain's medial prefrontal cortex lit up, indicating increased neural activity, the advertisers knew that the particular image displayed was a "winner" since this area of the brain reportedly represents "an area associated with preference, or sense of self." Product-associated images that are processed in this area are believed to be more likely to prompt purchases by consumers; thus, if advertisers can discern which product images cause a response in the medial prefrontal cortex, they should be able to bolster sales. Is this a manipulative, underhanded way to sell unneeded products to unsuspecting buyers? Or conversely, is it just a new, more scientific form of consumer interest research?

As Christians, we are called to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." As leaders in Christian bioethics, we have a responsibility to examine new applications of biomedical science to determine if our fellow believers, and society at large, are at risk of immediate or eventual harm. We do indeed have a protective role to fill. On the other hand, if new technologies offer great potential for helping humankind, we have a responsibility to help promote these new instruments for good. So, how should we feel about the latest neuromarketing advance? I think
that we should be careful not to "cry wolf", but to instead keep a vigilant eye on these types of developments. In support of this, I offer the following:

- Consumers' responses have long been carefully observed as a means of gauging how to target advertising. Focus groups are a type of social science, if you will, and have been used for ages. Neuromarketing techniques do not deviate radically from this method.
- The information obtained about neural responses is in the form of group, and not personal, data and can be gleaned through other less technological ways. Rather than probing people's minds a la Orwell, the taste patterns of populations of people are merely being identified.
- The technology, per se, is not noble and doesn't "belong" to medicine. It is, rather, an application of physics and biology. Like all technology, it may be used or abused, but is itself essentially neutral.
- To those who call the resultant advertising "coercion," I respond by pointing out that to hold this is to assume that the consumer is a bumbling, mindless individual, who will be swayed by whatever new and sophisticated advertisement comes along. This is insulting. People aren't, and won't be, this vulnerable to the power of suggestion.
- The potential upside to this technology--a better understanding of addiction, depression, schizophrenia, and other "mental illnesses"--is phenomenal. If this development offers an increased potential to treat people with bipolar disease or alcoholism, we should by all means pursue it. Unlike embryonic stem cell research, this technology does not involve the destruction of human life and is not likely to ever do so. Since there is no convincing evidence that it is ethically wrong and further research in this area may prove very helpful to many hurting people, the argument could be made that we actually have an obligation to pursue this technology.
- Current advertising primarily focuses, directly or subliminally, on sex, power, self-glorification, and greed. While we get appropriately angry about Janet Jackson's nudity on prime-time TV, we don't make much of sensuous women in suggestive attire hawking pizza, autos, and widgets. Similarly, why aren't we more upset about all the new car and truck advertising? Such ads fuel the greed of millions of people, driving them and our nation ever deeper into irresponsible spending and debt (not to mention the fact that they shift our focus from the Creator to the created--in a sense fostering a form of idolatry.)
- In Minority Report, Tom Cruise's character demonstrates that the belief that individual human behavior can be predicted by genetics and computerized projections is fallacious, as he acts in a way that the technology did not predict. Human beings are not only the product of their genes or their medial prefrontal cortical neurons, but of their environments, wills, and (for Christians) influence of the Holy Spirit.
- The marketplace relationship has never been a level playing field. Caveat emptor. Neuromarketing is another method to try and torque the buyer, to be sure; however, only the most naïve could believe that the seller ever gives the buyer all the information. (Interestingly, Proverbs talks about the deceptions carried on between sellers and buyers 1000 years before Christ.) We should assume that sellers are "spinning" their products, and factor this into our decisions.

Whenever new technologies emerge, we need to ask ourselves several questions. Does Scripture specifically address the technology itself or its underlying assumptions? If so, how? Where might the underlying science lead us? What good or evil may result? If a technique has
the potential to harm God's creation, we must be watchful and wary. Alternatively, if there is potential promise of curing illness, assuaging pain, or delaying physical and/or mental decline within morally appropriate bounds, Christians should be supportive of further exploration. We must remain wise, closely watching forthcoming developments, but we should also be eager to help the hurting in morally legitimate ways.

That is how I view cognitive neuroscience--despite some of its commercial overtones.

References


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