

European Identity versus National Identity

Tomorrow's consumers are difficult people, and innovation alone is not enough to capture their attention. So how can our industry address products and services to these people? Can their needs be met, and even anticipated? And this is where the problem really starts, because people say one thing and do something totally different.

Cultural Imprint attempts to bridge the gap between what people say and what they actually do, and to discover why they do these things. The key to this problem is the cultural subconscious. People do not act on a subconscious level only as individuals. The culture to which people belong also imprints behaviour patterns. These behaviour patterns are taken for granted, because we use them all the time, but they affect the whole relationship with products and services.

Do the British feel pain differently from the Italians?

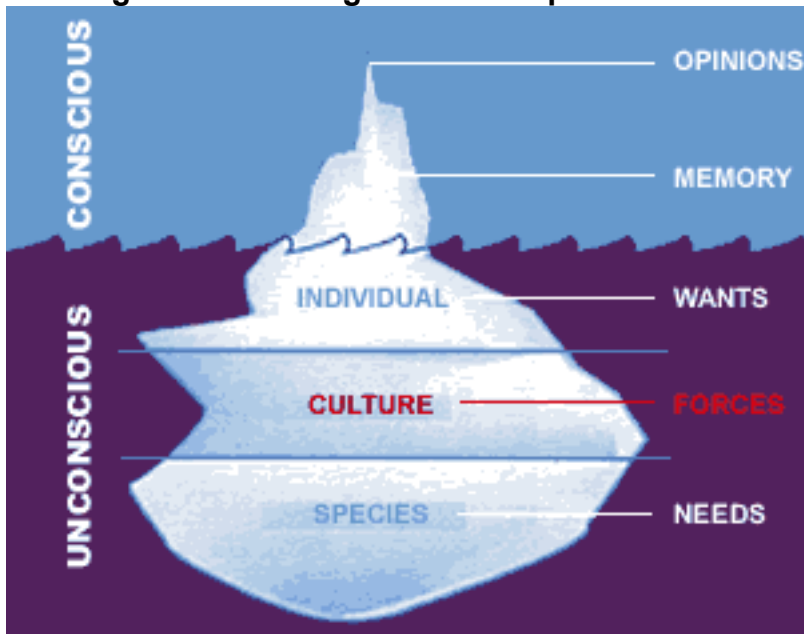
British culture provides a splendid example of the fact that people do something entirely different from what they say. We have here a striking paradox: the level of pain and the use of painkillers.

If we ask the British about pain we find that for them it plays a very subordinate role. "Pain is a part of life, you have to learn to live with it" They are not very forthcoming, and the more we press the less they say. On the other hand statistics indicate that these people consume an unusually high number of pain killers. These people, who are not at all concerned about pain take bucketsful of pain killers. How come?

Pain is not the real problem in Britain. The British endure pain very bravely. But as brave as they are towards pain they are so afraid of losing control of themselves, so they take pain killers long before they need them - just in case. It's almost as if the culture has imprinted on them an early warning system that detects when they are almost in pain and that's when they take their pain killers. So it is very important, in selling pain killers, to understand the hierarchy of the consumer's needs, and to offer to the British a product which helps to maintain control rather than eases pain. This example demonstrates that consumers only give half the reality. It is interesting that once the cultural imprint is understood the relation to products and services all of a sudden starts to make sense. Statistics appear in quite a different light. Statistics show that the incidence of migraine sufferers in Britain is low by European standards, in Italy on the other hand it is unusually high.

It is also very interesting how the cultural imprint of something like pain manifests itself in the language. Trying to express pain in the English language sounds almost childlike. The Italian word for pain, *dolore*, sounds almost like music!

Looking for the iceberg's hidden depth



Language really is one of the factors which have to be understood in order to decode human behaviour. What people say is just the tip of the iceberg, the conscious side. These are opinions, which change all the time.

It is amazing what contradictions are exposed when we investigate human behaviour at a conscious level. When interviewed on the subject of chocolate most people reply that "chocolate is bad for you. It gives you spots. It makes you fat. It gives you a heart attack". If we then ask whether they eat chocolate they say "all the time!"

When Lego was researched in the USA mothers were enthusiastic. "Oh! I love Lego, Lego is the best in the world, it makes your child intelligent. It's so much better than TV". When asked whether they bought it the answer was "once a year". This is a typical story: products with a good image are not purchased, whereas products with a negative image are bought all the time.

To try to make sense of people's behaviour we have to dig below the tip of the iceberg and analyse the subconscious. Right at the base of the iceberg we have the species level, with its biological constraints.

It seems here that we have to satisfy certain requirements: we have to spend around nine months in the body of a woman, we have to eat, we have to breathe, we have to keep warm, we have to communicate because we are social animals. These are unalterable requirements, and every time we fail to fulfil them something horrible happens.

Even more interesting is the cultural dimension, the level of the subconscious

imprinted by our culture. In this dimension we have forces like magnetic fields that are imprinted and give meaning to everything we say and do. Only at the level above this do we reach the individual subconscious, which provides us each with a personality, desires and styles.

The cultural dimension pre-organises everything we say and do. It is as if our culture were a survival kit that adapts the biological dimension of the human species and preordains how individuals perceive reality.

However the individual in Britain may feel pain, for example, there is one structure already imprinted there: namely that losing control over oneself is much worse than pain itself. The circumstances of our own personal experiences are totally unique; on the cultural dimension we have a great deal in common. It seems to create the frame of references that we use over and over again.

Now, it is impossible to understand the software of human experience without thinking about the hardware, the brain, and how it perceives and stores memories and observations.

Neurosciences teach us that experience perception seems to be pre-organised by earlier perceptions. The brain does not see things in isolation. If I now think about tea I refer back to my earlier experiences of tea because that provides the frame of references to tell me what tea means. The Nobel Prize winner Francis Crick hit the nail on the head when he said, "If you don't have this frame of references of past experience, the brain cannot even see." This means if we did not already have the imprint of people we would only see each other as dots. This is shown in the case of a person blind from birth who after surgery is suddenly able to see. At first he cannot see, he sees only dots, because the brain actually bases seeing on previous experience. And these early experiences are imprinted by our culture. So my experience of tea in Britain is different from my experience of tea in France. It is as if neural pathways are used.

Also the manner in which we communicate is imprinted by our culture. Communication is so important that it is equally important to know the rules of the game prevailing at the time. In Britain there is a totally different way of conveying expertise than in France. A famous British mathematician who wants to convey how clever he is, first of all understates the situation. He almost pretends that the simplest ideas are new to him and then immediately afterwards he slips in the fact that he has written ten books and is a Cambridge professor. And then his audience marvel at him: "Oh! He's so clever that he doesn't even have to show off!"

On the other side of the Channel we find just the opposite. If a similarly qualified mathematician is discussing the same topic he puts his knowledge much more to the fore. And the way in which the French do this is very peculiar. They show breadth of knowledge, so that if you are a mathematician you do not talk about

maths but about philosophy, for example, and the audience say : "Oh! He's so clever, he doesn't even have to talk about maths!"

When it comes to conveying expertise the British and the French can't stand the sight of each other, but this is cultural dislike, not at all personal. It is simply that they are not receptive to each other's way of communicating. If the British hear the French mathematician they will say, "these people are so pompous." The French on the other hand would say about the British, "What reactionary people. They are so devious."

So, if we wish to sell our products outside our own countries we have to take account of peculiarities of communications, otherwise our efforts are destined for failure.

People do not buy a product, they buy a product or a service in combination with their subconscious relationship to it, which is laid down by the cultural dimension. If we do not serve that subconscious relationship we are not clearly perceived. People see only dots, because there is no reference, no framework in their subconscious. So we have to sell the whole thing, product or service plus this immensely important subconscious relationship.

Why the Swedes finally voted to join the European Union

There was an interesting example of the paradoxical behaviour of a whole nation with the developments surrounding the EU membership referendum in Sweden. The Swedish government had done a really good job. They had conducted a marvellous campaign talking about the benefits of joining the European Union. Sweden exports more than 50% of her production so it was assumed by the government that the people would understand the need to join the EU. However, the more advantages the government put forward the more emotional the Swedes became. The more factual information they received the more uncertain they became - and asked for even more information. This was given, they became even more uncertain, reacted in a more negative way, demanded more information, and so on....

A cultural imprint analysis showed that there is absolutely no cultural imprint of European identity in the Swedish collective mind, no previous experience of Europe, only hazy memories from schoolbooks (and these generally refer to disunion) or from brief holidays.

They do have however a very strong mental pathway of Swedish identity, and are afraid that this will sink in the EU. The thought of Europe provokes in them a quite negative reaction. The only way to win them over to the European Union is to start from a Swedish identity base. The Swedish people have in their collective mind a very rural and idyllic picture of their country, where life is simple and worth living but where only hard work ensures survival. The fact that Sweden today is a highly industrialised country seems not to influence this image.

It is therefore essential to follow the right sequence in communicating. The starting point must be the Swedish identity ("Because we are Swedish ..."), making it a little negative ("... and we work very hard"), and then lead from the negative to the positive. When you look outwards from Sweden towards Europe, putting Swedish-ness in a European context, everything looks different, the national identity can append to itself a European identity. It is like adding a new surname - European - to ones own forename - the culture: a Swedish European, a British European, a French European.

So, by changing the approach from extolling the virtues of Europe to acknowledging the difficulties, the Swedes were persuaded to vote for EU membership.

How the British are persuaded to eat more ice cream

We now look at the collective imprint in relation to a specific product. A particularly impressive example comes once again from British culture. A perplexed ice cream producer established the fact that, "we live in a society that values pleasure. We produce ice cream, and eating ice cream is pleasure. We know that from our surveys. But we have a problem here. The more we show pleasure in our advertising the more people ration their consumption." A cultural imprint analysis can help here.

Several groups were interviewed and it became clear that, for the British, ice cream is one of the nicest foodstuffs.

They link it to early memories and a happy childhood, with long summers during which they could stuff themselves with gooey ice cream. But being greedy and messy would not be tolerated for long in the British culture. Children are taught early on to try to emulate their parents in their behaviour, and to show self control. These people will not hear of a public display of indulgence. It would smack of a childish lack of self-control, and that is frightening.



A product in isolation is not really perceived

So what is pleasure in one culture can be painful in another. It is interesting to understand how we become imprinted with this pattern of behaviour. It seems as if there are certain moments when we are ready to be imprinted. What is ice cream? What is quality? What is a bank? - language is the vehicle, emotion is the energy. Without emotion there are no memories. The first neurones we lose are those imprinted without emotion. What is imprinted really is a packet of associations. Mother does not arrive with a dictionary and give us definitions of ice cream, of quality or of bank. We learn through experience. And these early experiences are being reinforced all the time. Children do not do anything just once. They go on repeating things and lay down a pattern of behaviour. It is totally outside of awareness but it is the frame of reference which guides everything we feel about the purchase of products.

So if you want to sell ice cream to a British person you must provide him with an alibi so that he can enjoy it without remorse. You must somehow disguise the pleasure which he obtains from eating ice cream as something more practical. You have to camouflage it so that he can go from self control to pleasure and back to control without pain.

A perfect example of such disguise is the slogan "A Mars a day helps you work, rest and play". Have you ever heard anything more boring? Is it a doctor's prescription? The thing is of course as sweet as it could be, it is sticky and messy. But it is not eaten for pleasure, but because it is necessary- the perfect disguise! Now the fascinating thing about British males is that they accept as a disguise almost anything that children do not do. So you can break the rules and still be within the rules if you know the right mental path- ways. There are lots more such disguises. Once the structure is known the content can be varied as required.

Is there such a thing as a European identity?

There is a code being imprinted whenever people learn about products and services. This code is in the subconscious, but a product is seen through spectacle lenses ground by the culture we grew up in.

If this code is unlocked everything that you say makes sense, and more importantly, you know what to say first to keep people receptive to your message. If you cannot open the door to cultural imprint then your actions are subject to trial and error - sometimes you are right, sometimes you are wrong.

So, is there something like a global or even a European identity?

To speak with some meaning across cultures it is necessary to find common ground. Symbols, such as the sun and the moon for example can be used to convey the ideas of femininity and masculinity, let's say, in the area of cosmetics. In France *le soleil* (the sun) is the symbol for masculinity, and the French see it as perfectly rational that this should be the case: the word itself is, grammatically speaking, a masculine noun, the sun shines with knowledge, like men. In France

they even had the 'sun king'. *La lune* (the moon), a feminine noun, is the symbol for femininity.

She is subject to cycles, she is most active at night, and does not shine with her own light but borrows her light from the sun....

On the other hand, in Germany the sun is a feminine word, the moon masculine. And the Germans will explain to you quite rationally why this is so. In Japan it is the same as in Germany. We therefore have different perceptions, so we have to be careful.

We might also use a concept such as 'quality' to unify these multi-cultural aspects. But this too is a minefield because perceptions of quality vary from culture to culture.

In America it is allied to defect. If you want to convey quality in your message you have to show what happens when something goes wrong, not least because of the American bias towards action of some kind. In America the culture does not punish you for your mistakes as long as those mistakes are put right quickly. So the perception of quality there is linked to service.

In Japan quality has to do with perfection. It is very important there to do something right first time. Closely allied with the perception of quality is the product's appearance. It is the visible sign of quality. Furthermore the care and preparation taken in developing the perfect product are seen as very important. In Australia there is a lot of insecurity around the purchasing of products and services, since people are not convinced that they will receive a quality product. A relationship, a rapport needs to be built with consumers in order to make them feel 'looked after', 'cared for'. In these circumstances if a mistake occurs and is quickly put right it builds reassurance and lifelong trust that is difficult to break.

Will we find a European identity? Maybe.

What we must do is systematically analyse the present differences. Possibly the first step is accepting the diversity.