

Comparing High-Involved and Low-Involved Visitors: A Review of the Consumer Behavior Literature

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There are two ways we interact with the world. One is cognitive. This is the side of our brain function that deals with thinking and questioning. It is the part that reads our labels and learns from our exhibits. In general, it is the part museum professionals spend the most time trying to engage in their visitors. The other one is the affective side. It deals with feeling states and wonderment. It is the affective side that says, "Oh Wow!", or simply, "I like that". Exhibit designers like to trigger this affective part, but as a rule only if it leads to some action in the cognitive part. The way it seems to work is that the affective system has its antennae up all the time, and if it detects something personally relevant, it sets up a buzz and the cognitive system comes to check it out. The affective system cannot understand much on its own, but it can recognize people, things and situations that it has seen before, and it can tell the cognitive part if, when last seen, they were good or bad and how much so. The cognitive part can also have its antennae up, and be looking for specific information, but often the cognitive part turns inward, and ruminates on last night, or worries about tomorrow.

Our understanding of these two modes is not without controversy and disagreement. I am following mainly Zajonc (1980) in considering affect to include feeling states and thus to include more than implied by the term "evaluation", a contrasting position favored by some, for example, Eagly and Chaiken (1993). Yet I distinguish affect from emotion, which generally includes arousal, and thus I generally disagree also with Lazarus (1991). However, discussion of these points of view is beyond the scope of this paper. The weight of evidence supports a model like the one described above. A person can, in other words, be in two modes, either actively looking for information or, instead, sort of coasting cognitively yet monitoring the world affectively on an automatic level. The two modes

of cognition are labeled high and low involved. It should be noted here that a person is not a permanent member of one group or the other. Rather, we alternate between the two modes as the day progresses, and all of us spend considerable time in each mode, shifting back and forth as the situation allows or requires.

Central and Peripheral Routes of Processing

Just such a model was proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1983) when they first introduced the notion of two routes to persuasion and labeled them the central route and the peripheral route. They characterized the central route as more conscious, semantic and verbal than the peripheral route. It involved particularly "the comprehension, learning, and retention of issue -- or product -- relevant information" (p.135). In other words, the central route is essentially a cognitive route. Moreover, "attitude changes induced via the central route are postulated to be relatively enduring and predictive of behavior" (p.135). The peripheral route, on the other hand, was held to be at a low level of consciousness and more feeling based, that is, the affective route. It does not involve any extensive thought or argument, but rather attitude changes by this route are based on the affect (pleasure or pain) associated with incidental cues. Changes from this route are seen as relatively temporary and unpredictable of behavior. Petty and Cacioppo (1983) felt there was actually a continuum from the low-involved state to the high-involved one, not two separate states, so that people may be involved at intermediate levels as well.

It turns out that which route we use at a particular moment is a function of involvement, usually regarded as personal relevance. The "two routes model" predicts that when we are highly involved, we tend to use the central route, pay attention to the message, and be sensitive to the credibility of the source. In other words, when things are personally relevant, we become more cognitive and look for more information. On the other hand, when we are in a state of low involvement, we respond to affect not cognition. For example, we pay more attention to the communicator, and respond to his/her perceived expertise and attractiveness rather than to the credibility of the source (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983).

While the distinction was first made in reference to the process of persuasion, it became clear that they had essentially described the general high- and low-involvement situations, and that their findings would apply

as well to most informal learning situations. Considerable evidence supports the model, and the role that involvement plays. Recently, for instance, Johar (1995) confirmed that low-involved consumers do not read details, and do not become aware of disclaimers and qualifiers on labels, and thus will not be reading exhibit labels either.

But, while Petty and Cacioppo's model soon found considerable relevance in the advertising field, it has not been widely known in the museum field. This is possibly because exhibit designers do not realize that they are involved in the same enterprise as the advertisers. To make this clear, consider that both have a few seconds to catch attention and deliver a message, and both hope that it will be retained and affect later behavior. Their purposes and "products" differ, but the process does not. Indeed, except for the necessity of catching attention, the process is similar to all learning. Clearly, the museum experience is usually judged successful if it leads to information processing via the central route. Yet it also appears that most museum visitors arrive in a state much closer to the low-involvement one, in which they are processing only via the peripheral route.

Levels of Processing Theory

The main task, as I have discussed at earlier conferences (Webb, *in press*, b; Webb, 1993), is to get attention and move the low-involved visitor to higher levels, so that cognition can operate. Here I want to focus more on the uninvolved state. The level of attention that is operating when one is uninvolved appears to be the one called by Greenwald and Leavitt the preattentive level, but we need a brief digression to introduce their theory. In an influential paper, that followed the pioneering work of cognitive psychologists Craik and Lockhart (1972), Greenwald and Leavitt (1984) distinguished four levels of processing: preattention, focal attention, comprehension and elaboration. They also theorized that increasing amounts of involvement were necessary to motivate one to move to the higher levels of cognition, a point confirmed by Celsi and Olson (1988) and others. As we move to higher levels of cognitive functioning, increased attention is required, but there is correspondingly increased retention in memory. Each of the lower levels of processing, in their model, will activate the next higher level if the content is determined to be important enough. Importance, in turn, seems to come down to involvement, that is, personal relevance, often detected as affective assessment. Lower levels

produce the representations that the next higher level will use for additional processing.

Preattention is their lowest level of processing. It seems to represent a monitor of sensory input for those features we know as attention-getting, but material at this level will not be retained. A person at this level will be attracted by motion, bright color, novel sounds and familiar words, and by affective content, but not by cognitive meaning (see Webb, in press, b). Because they considered affect a type of meaning, Greenwald and Leavitt maintained that affective connections (that is, gut-level reactions such as "Wow, neat!" or "Ugh, gross!") do not occur until the second level of processing. However, considerable research suggests that affective meaning comes at the earlier stage (Zajonc, 1980; Zajonc & Markus, 1982; Zajonc & Markus, 1985). In other words, it seems likely that affect is indeed detected at the preattentive level, but only if the stimulus has been encountered before and its affect recorded. A kitten, for example, triggers a strong positive attraction because we have cuddled kittens before. If you had never even seen a kitten, the affect would probably not be aroused because the stimulus would not yet have any affective meaning. The common sense view would dictate that one would have to register consciously "that is a kitten" before the affect could be elicited, but the research surprisingly shows otherwise.

What seems to happen is that as we assess stimuli, categorizing them and giving them meaning, we also tag them with affect, that is, good, bad, painful and so forth. The next time we encounter the same stimulus, we do not have to go through the appraisal process to know whether they are dangerous or good; we just read the tag. This can apparently be done before we even are conscious that the stimulus is there. Affect thus detected is probably the principal director of attention, and the principal hook that begins the involvement process. In other words, if we detect strong affect, we look more closely. It is also likely that very simple words, which have been previously encountered, can be unconsciously recognized in the preattentive state. However, it remains possible that it is the affect they are signalling that is getting recognized. The question in the case of verbal material is still a bit cloudy.

Focal attention is the second level of processing identified by Greenwald and Leavitt (1984). In this level an image may be formed. This is probably when we form the distinction of figure and ground that the Gestaltists found was the earliest step of perception. Here a viewer may be able to point, and may stop to look carefully to see what something

is. At this level, however, the viewer could probably report only that something was there, and not what it was. Images may be retained at this level, but viewers will retain little else if they turn away, because they have not had enough time for processing. Turning away would be caused in turn by the lack of involvement. That is, they do not stay with the stimulus long enough to retain it. Meaning cannot be introduced until the next level.

Comprehension is the third level, and introduces, according to Greenwald and Leavitt, "propositional content" (i.e., what things are). We would recognize familiar things, but identification of new things would not be complete, since the stimulus is not yet connected to other ideas or retrieval cues. This level would be characterized by, "Look at the bird!", but memory would be limited to familiar things. Thus, if one did not stay with the stimulus, one might remember that it had been an unfamiliar bird, but not exactly what it looked like. At this level of processing, multiple connections with our personal past occur. If involvement is strong enough, it will lead us to make the effort to retain. In other words, when these personal connections occur, there will usually be a search for more information, and a tendency to move the cognitive processing up to the highest level, elaboration.

Elaboration is the fourth and highest level of processing, and full retention of cognitive information can only come about at this level, where integration of new material with existing memory takes place. Elaboration means thinking about things. As information is stored, associations are built between the new material and old material. It is a process one can do more or less of. The more associations made, and the more variety in those associations, the better will be the recall later. In addition, when these connections occur, there may be a search for more information and a tendency to invest even more cognitive processing, and so on, keeping us at the level of elaboration.

Generally, elaboration means to think about things. It involves thinking about the material any one of a number of ways, such as, inventing a story, creating an image of some sort, or noticing connections to things we already know. We might notice that "this is the same as...", "this explains why...", or "this must be what happens when...". The more connections we make, the better the new material relates to what we know. This is what we mean by understanding. This is why leading questions on flip boards produce better learning: they require thinking about the topic.

Whether we remember or not is a function of how much of this elaboration we do with the new material, not a function of whether we intend to learn or not. As long as we engage in the same mental activities when intending to learn as when not, the memory performance will be identical (Anderson, 1990). The reason they look different is that people who intend to learn tend to do more elaboration.

We now return to low-involved visitors who are operating at the preattentive level. Certain stimuli will get their attention. They will respond to any familiar affect-loaded stimuli, or even to strong stimuli of unknown affect, because they may be threats. They also respond to simple written stimuli, but probably only to those that have some affect-loading. It may, however, be the case that the preattentive level will also be sensitive to specific information that the higher center has a need for. Needed information may in some way become affectively tagged, but considerably more research is needed on this point. Still, a few principles seem to have been discovered. To begin with, not every instance of low-involvement is the same.

The Goal Problem

A closer look at the nature of the low-involvement state shows that there may be at least two distinct types. Gardner, Mitchell, and Russo (1985) have distinguished two causes of low involvement, and argue that the results of the low involvement are different under these two conditions. In the first type, people are in a state of low involvement because they are thinking about something else, or nothing in particular. They are characterized as inattentive, but this usually means that their attention is directed inward rather than outward, and they are therefore not gathering information. This is the type of low-involved visitors who respond well to attention-getters, because, once attracted, they move easily to higher levels of cognitive functioning (see Webb, 1993).

The second type of low involvement, however, adds the factor of goals. Gardner and colleagues argue that the goals the viewers bring to the event may be what is producing their low involvement. They write:

“Individuals may direct their processing toward some other type of goal, such as entertainment. Perceiving an advertisement [or in the museum field, an exhibit] for its entertainment reward may be undeliberate, but the

entertainment reward is what maintains the viewing behavior and, in this sense, is the viewer's goal. Although entertainment may be the most common nonbrand [extraneous] goal, there are others. For example, parents viewing an advertisement with pre-teen children might well evaluate its 'appropriateness', a censorship goal."

(Gardner et al., 1985, p.5-6)

In other words, viewers may be looking for different information than an exhibit is dealing with, or they may simply be seeking to enjoy, an affective goal. Gardner et al. (1985) call this the processing strategy factor, and the point they are making is that this factor does not work by reducing attention, as many other factors do. Rather, it seems that viewers are paying attention, but they are looking for different information; they have a different set, to use a perceptual term. Thus, they do not process the information intended at a level above comprehension. In the language of information processing, they will have done inappropriate elaborative processing, will not have made the proper linkages in memory, and poor retention will result. They will retain some information of having seen the exhibit, but they will have processed the information contained in it in a very different way, and will likely not have remembered what was intended. In other words, if their goal was entertainment, they will remember that the exhibit was fun, and they will recognize material from it, but they will not remember the factual material contained in it. If their goal was social, they may have spent their attention resources on worrying about, or trying to impress, one or more other people. Teenagers are particularly peer oriented, as we know. Getting attention while ignoring goals is not likely to be as productive as it would seem. We are likely to get attention, but not hold it, because the "attractor" does not deliver the particular information or affect being sought.

What this means for the evaluator is that tests for exhibit effectiveness must allow room for the visitor to tell us just what they came for, and what they did learn. What a person carries away is very much a function of what he/she came for. A too narrow test will lead us to conclude that visitors took nothing away, and we might erroneously conclude that the exhibit failed. Must all visitors have our goals? Are we upset if someone comes just for entertainment, for example, or are we bothered that a small group is using the museum as a place to socialize with one another, paying little attention to our exhibits? And what about

the potential visitors who never come, because their goals mismatch, or they think they will mismatch?

Reaching the Low-Involved Visitor

Our concern here is with those who come, but whose involvement does not seem to be raised at all. What happens when, probably for alternative motivational reasons, viewers stay at the low-involvement level, and we are simply unable to move them to the ideal cognitive elaboration level? Will any learning take place? Can we get any information to them at all? As you might imagine, advertising researchers have eagerly sought this answer before you, since many viewers of magazine ads and commercials are among the low-involved. It turns out that one can have an impact on them, but the general rule in the case of reaching the low-involved is to use affective appeals, even as levels of processing theory would predict.

Affective material is more likely to have an impact, even if it does not trigger movement to higher cognitive processing. Since low-involvement is characterized by low cognitive engagement, extensive verbal materials are not available, because they take cognitive engagement to read, but two simpler things will get through. First, simple familiar words will be processed, and remembered, such as brand names in the marketing field. This may be why headlines work well. Scanning well constructed headlines gives us some information, as well as catching our attention to seek more information. Second, affect-loaded pictures will be remembered. In advertising, affective appeals depend on pictures, and stress the image of a product rather than its attributes. Low-involved viewers will remember image even when they forget content (Gardner, Mitchell & Russo, 1985). Let us look more closely at those pictures.

Pictures convey affect well for four reasons: first, they are processed almost all at once, and thus, more rapidly than words. Words of any number require attention time, but pictures require very little. Second, pictures can convey more information per unit time than words. Pictures really are worth a thousand words. Third, both images and affect are processed in the right hemisphere of the brain, so that affect is aroused directly, not indirectly. Fourth, pictures are remembered more easily than words, particularly when they have affective content. Thus, pictures are good

attention-getters, can be remembered easily, even at the preattentive level, and can transfer affect.

One solution to the task of reaching the low-involved is to use high impact pictures or dioramas to tell a story. The war correspondents of Life Magazine were experts at doing this. By just looking at the pictures, and not reading the text, one came away with a lot of information. Reaching the low-involved visitor involves the same principle -- music too conveys affect subconsciously and triggers affective response in a given situation (see Webb, in press, a), but it is often difficult to use in a museum setting. To better perceive the transfer at this level, you might ask yourself what people carry away from your exhibit, if they cannot read, or in this case, if they won't take the time to read? Is a story being told nonverbally, or will the visitor simply become confused?

Pictures are particularly good at putting objects in context with minimum involvement. At the Blue Mountain Lake Museum in the Adirondacks of New York, there is a well-done diorama of Teddy Roosevelt being informed that he had just been elected President of the United States. It shows him beside a horse-drawn carriage reading by lantern light. At the end of the short label it says, "The carriage he rode in at high speed, 38 miles in the dark, to get to this historic meeting is standing to your right". You are startled. You look to your right and, sure enough, there is a carriage. You look back at the diorama, and there it is in miniature. In this instance, both the short dramatic label and the diorama were adding affect to the carriage and, because of the strong affective content, the carriage and the events are remembered. I could not draw a picture of the carriage, but that moment in history was affectively implanted in my memory with a minimum of cognitive arousal. Yes, one had to read the short label, but it was a story, not simply facts, and was dramatically told in few words. It contained strong affect, in other words, and was given immediacy by the real carriage's presence. Moreover, the reading was stimulated by the involving diorama that effectively motivated me to want to find out what it represented.

For viewers who remain at the low involvement level to remember facts, beyond the ability to simply recognize objects, will require considerable repetition, unless affect aids the process. In other words, if involvement does not move the viewer to a higher cognitive level, factual information will be almost impossible to transmit. Krugman (1965) suggests that there is cognitive learning at a low level of involvement, but it will consist of very simple information, such as "this museum room has

large abstract pieces", or will be repeated a number of times. The museum setting is not particularly well suited to repetition, but it might be beneficial to consider the affective aspect of learning at this level.

Affective learning at a low level of involvement will certainly lead to the retention of some information and will register the museum as an experience, good or bad. It may produce affective connections which could change a viewer's perceptual framework, thus changing future perceptions. For instance, the advertising process is to attach affect to an object or brand name, and in the future the viewer will like it without knowing why. But there is a second benefit. When affect is attached to things they are better remembered, probably because there is good survival value in this happening. Important things are labeled as such by the affect that is attached to them. In other words, we can influence even the low-involved to like or dislike things, and in the process to make things more important than they were. This is why many ads today are simply a picture and a brand name. Both of these are processed in a preattentive level and are apparently connected at a level below awareness as well. The technique is used simply because there are not many alternatives, because their viewers tend to be the low-involved. Museum marketers, of course, can use this, and probably already do, but exhibit designers can use it as well. The low-involved, even if they stay uninvolved, will come away feeling differently about the topic, though not retaining facts about it. As Petty and Cacciopo (1983) showed, their attitudes are likely to change through the peripheral route.

I would argue here that the visitor is often getting information and qualities that we do not test for, because the traditional museum approach has been to measure exhibit effectiveness by a content-oriented test of some sort. However, the fact that exhibits can be experienced at all levels is one of the strengths of the museum experience. Moreover, visitors often carry away affect even though they fail to get the facts. To experience something, to get a feel for it, whatever that means, is generally possible in a museum in a way not possible anywhere else. Facts come from many sources today: school, television and the Internet, for starters. Museums, however, provide an affective component in the real thing that triggers the imagination and stimulates cognition, though not always exactly in the channel we have in mind. We have only recently begun to explore what the affective nature of the museum experience is, and we certainly have no technique for measuring it. Recently Roberts (1992) summarized some of the aspects of affective learning and argued that the affective

side of the museum experience has unrealized potential. To find a way to measure these other levels of experience is the ongoing challenge.

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