Is Market Research *Really* Getting Emotional?

Discovering What Implicit Metrics Actually Measure

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NAXION thinking

View point

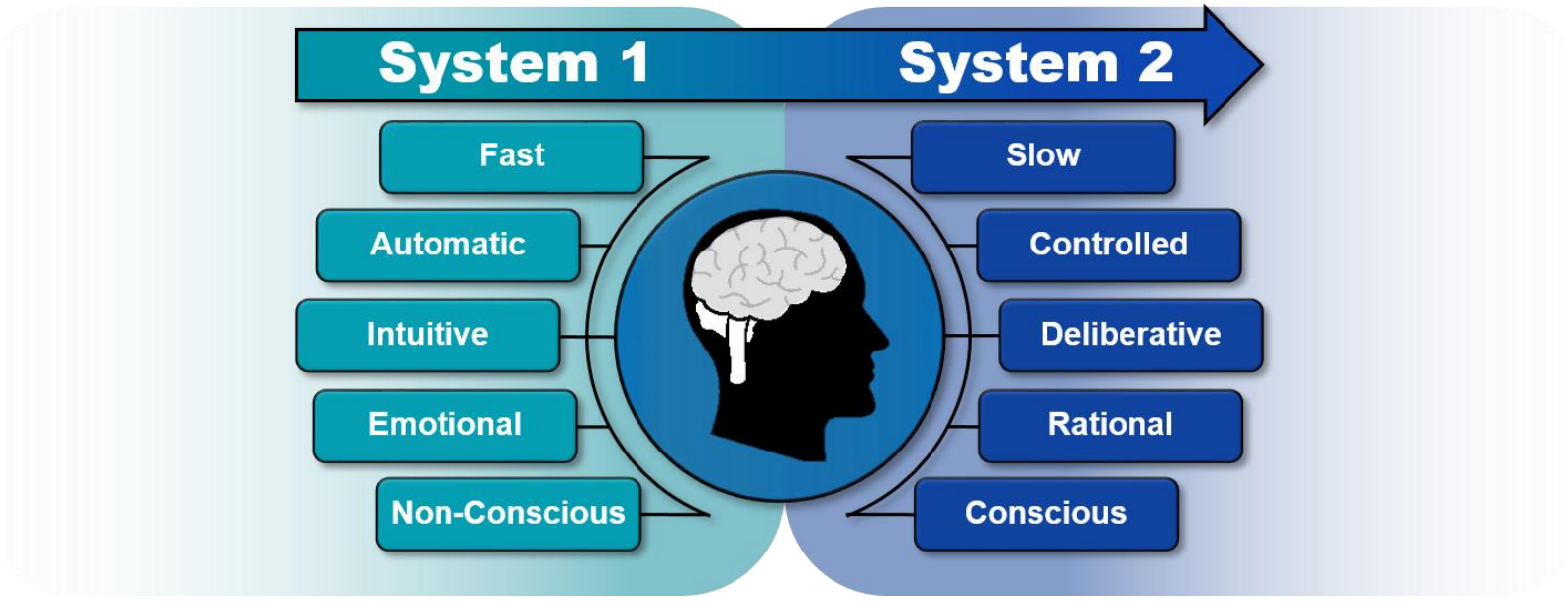
Why Get Emotional?

Traditional market research surveys attempt to understand and predict customer behavior through methods that encourage rational, reflective thought. This approach presupposes a causal theory of consumer preferences and buying behavior approximated by the following relationship:

"What I *think*" ➡ What I buy

More recently, marketing practitioners have tended to deemphasize the cognitive-rational side of consumer decisions in favor of non-conscious, emotional factors. The pivot toward emotions reflects an ever-greater pressure on marketers to predict behavior, and some disappointment in their ability to do so using traditional metrics. Our new interest in mind-mapping emotions reconnects marketing research with a long tradition in social psychology and other behavioral sciences emphasizing the diverse, powerful ways in which non-conscious processes can impact what we perceive, feel, and do.

The youngest branch of this academic tree, now in fullest flower, is Behavioral Economics, a discipline that takes on the challenge of explaining discrepancies between what economists have deemed "rational" behavior and the way consumers may actually behave. The behavioral economic model explains our judgments and decisions via two types of mental processing – "System 1" and "System 2" – with sharply divergent characteristics.



The updated behavioral economics model takes more explicit account of emotions in conceptualizing the buying decision:

"What I *think*" x "what I *feel*" ➡ What I buy

Of course, no one has ever subscribed to a purely rational theory of buying behavior but it's fair to say that market research techniques have historically emphasized the System 2 (conscious, *reflective)* side of our mental lives over the System 1 (non-conscious, *reflexive*). As a result, efforts are now being made to expand our research toolkit to selectively access System 1 and measure the specific characteristics that appear to make it unique.

What's in the Toolkit – and how well are the tools working?

In general, System 1 measurement tools replace verbal responses with other metrics that are fast, automatic, and/or less likely to be monitored consciously by System 2. "Biometrics" have seen increasing use in advertising research with small, qualitative samples, but it is not practical to apply them to the large study populations required for satisfaction research or customer experience modeling.

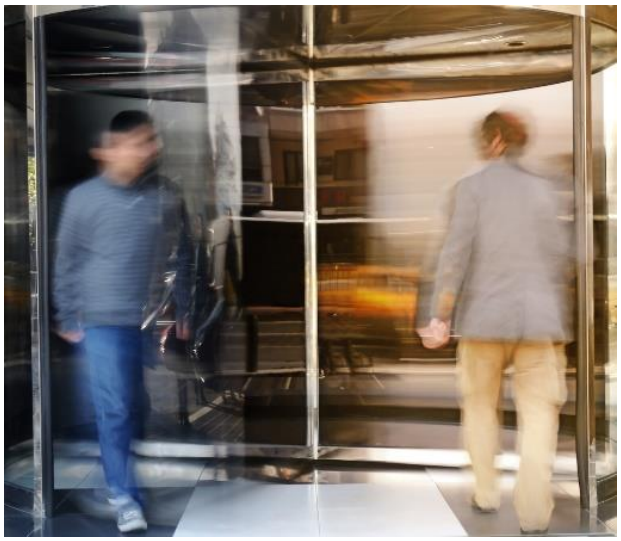
Emotional measurement techniques more suitable for survey research require respondents to *do* something (rather than be passively monitored via Galvanic skin response or other physiological metrics). While they vary in their particulars, all survey-amenable tasks involve some near-instantaneous action that links a stimulus with either a positive or negative signal. An interesting example is the *Go/No-Go task* in which respondents press a button as quickly as possible if a word describes how they feel when using a product or brand and do nothing if the word does not.

Despite a lot of marketplace buzz about the promise of these techniques, there is a striking paucity of literature and open forum discussion coming out of applied commercial research. As a result, it's difficult to distinguish hype and hoopla from real advancement in tool effectiveness. The measurement challenges reflect not only limitations in our tools but also limitations in the theoretical premise. A simple System 1 vs System 2 dichotomy tends to understate the complex interplay of cognitive processes.

I Think, Therefore I Worry

Although the differentiating characteristics of System 1 and System 2 are called out vividly when we talk about them, the two systems are, in fact, closely in touch with one another. As early social psychologists have shown, *human emotions are not always primal. They are often the result of experiences that are not themselves intrinsically emotional.* System 1 output influences System 2 judgments/decisions, while System 2 decisions may also have feedback effects on System 1.

For example, the more intense our anxiety about a possible event such as an airline accident (System 1 reaction), the more probable it will seem to be (System 2 judgment).



But the direction can just as easily be reversed: the more often we choose to experience an event (System 2 output), the more our System 1 is apt (all other things equal) to like it. In music, it is often said that the ear loves best what it already knows – the familiar tune. There is a body of research to support the view that familiarity breeds affinity. In other words, it would be incorrect to imagine System 1 as a one-way entrance through which stimuli are processed en route to System 2. It's more accurate to think of the passage between them as a revolving door. To that extent, disentangling System 1 from System 2 in research (just as in life) will be difficult, since the two systems are intrinsically correlated and the feedback loop between them often continuous.

Answers to traditional, reflective survey questions will be unavoidably colored by System 1 reactions – which means that when we pose survey questions, we are already capturing System 1 in rational System 2 drag. *As a result of that multicollinearity, models built on more traditional explicit measures may show little improvement when implicit measures are added.*

Saying it Doesn't Mean Feeling it

There's yet another challenge – a tendency to treat System 1 reactions as equivalent to emotion. But fast, automatic responses of System 1 can also be cognitive/perceptual in nature, with no emotional component. A powerful example is how reading word colors can interfere with naming those colors when there is a mismatch: Reading clearly does not involve emotion (other than, perhaps, frustration at the difficulty of the task) but it does bear other distinguishing hallmarks of System 1: fast, automatic, and non-conscious.

Blue	Yellow	Green	Red
Green	Red	Blue	Green
Red	Green	Yellow	Blue
Yellow	Red	Yellow	Blue

Examples like this argue for careful interpretation of rapid response measurements that aspire to measure emotion. They may, instead, do a rapid, efficient job of tapping *non-emotional*, associative processes. System 1 is a "cognitive space" where things happen quickly – but not all those things are emotional.

Emotions Can Be Fleeting

Let's assume, though, that some System 1 tools *do* measure emotions. What kind of emotions could they be tracking? Discussions generally focus on variations in emotion *quality or character* – for instance, love, joy, anger, or sadness. Less often considered is the distinction between emotions that are ephemeral (e.g., momentary irritation or gratification) and those that are more stable and enduring (e.g., parental love). It can get pretty crowded in System 1: along with rapid, non-emotional reactions, System 1 houses many different kinds of emotions, and the current scheme is not structured to isolate them or measure their distinct implications.

Even if we figure out how to measure consumer emotions, we can't readily know, for instance, whether we are tapping transitory emotions or durable ones; nor do we know whether/when those ephemeral emotions will become fixed feelings or attachments. We may be annoyed by people we love without ceasing to love them, and we may similarly be irritated by a favored brand without losing faith.

The insensitivity of our measures to this critical distinction between transitory and stable emotions may in part explain why meta-analyses in the academic literature have found that System 1 metrics can be unstable. The same person can respond inconsistently when assessed twice during a relatively brief period, even one as long as two weeks. This instability may be due to the immaturity of our instruments for assessing System 1, but it may have as much to do with our over-simplified model as with our metrics. Until models and corresponding metrics are equipped to handle these nuances, it will be difficult to assess or predict the effectiveness of marketing efforts directed at System 1.

Theories about the interplay between System 1 vs 2 (and the perceived need to do a better job of accessing System 1) are intriguing and their implications may be important. There are, though, some critical questions to be answered if we are to bet on the right metrics and fully understand the role of implicit measurement in the study of brand. To understand how best and where to apply System 1 measurement – and what specific metrics work best for what applications – we need to share data openly so that best practices emerge and thrive in the marketplace of ideas.

- ***What are we actually measuring – emotion or high-speed associations – with the rapid-response metrics in current use?***
- ***Can we use implicit metrics to improve brand affinity diagnostics beyond what we currently achieve with traditional explicit metrics?***
- ***If so, are we also able to use System 1 metrics to measure more nuanced emotional content – not merely positive vs negative valence – in a way that helps us discern the finer contours of brand perception?***

These are questions that deserve the benefit of rigorous empirical testing. In our next piece, we'll be sharing more empirical data on this topic, including results of ongoing work at NAXION that speak to these issues.

About NAXION

NAXION is a broadly resourced, nimble boutique that relies on advanced research methods, data integration, and sector-focused experience to guide strategic business decisions that shape the destiny of brands. The firm is distinguished by a truly effective synthesis of authoritative market research and consultative marketing application, and a dedication to solving problems in ways that are both inventive and pragmatic. NAXION's hybrid "enterprise DNA" is rooted in our origins as the world's first business intelligence firm and subsequent decades as the National Analysts division of Booz•Allen & Hamilton. And our exceptional commitment to partnership reflects a unique, employee-owned organizational culture scaled to provide highly effective solutions to clients' most challenging marketing problems.

About the Authors

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