



Bruce Hall, research director at Howard, Merrell & Partners in Raleigh, with a sculpture representing Phineas Gage. Gage survived an explosion that sent a rod through his brain, causing an injury that prevented him from drawing on his emotions to make intelligent decisions. Hall is studying how emotion affects consumer responses to advertising.

STAFF PHOTO BY MEL NATHANSON

Adding science to gut check

Ad agency says it has method to measure emotional response to advertising

BY DAVID RANII
STAFF WRITER

Advertising agency Howard, Merrell & Partners is getting more emotional about its business because it's the rational thing to do.

The Raleigh agency is marketing a new tool it developed, called AnswerStream, that measures the visceral response consumers have to advertising.

What's the point? "The fundamental issue is, our emotions drive behavior," said Bruce Hall, research director and partner in the Raleigh agency. Or, as he wrote in an article published last year in the *Journal of Advertising Research*: "It is why great food advertisements make you hungry, great car advertisements give us the feeling of driving, and great travel advertisements make us feel like we are on vacation."

Consequently, the thinking goes, understanding consumers' emotional response to messages and images provides a better measurement of an ad's effectiveness. Even more importantly, it can test concepts early on that will help it develop better ads from the outset.

Since it became available last year, AnswerStream has been used by CorningWare and another company, to formulate better ads and evaluate coming products. And Howard, Merrell, is hoping

to capitalize on surging interest in the emotional component of advertising. The Advertising Research Foundation and the American Association of Advertising Agencies are sponsoring "The Emotional Response to Advertising Project," which aims to advance understanding of the interplay between emotion and ads.

That initiative itself is thrusting Howard, Merrell, into the spotlight, because Hall is among the top researchers from the business and academic realms tapped to participate in the project. Mike Donahue, the association's executive vice president, called AnswerStream "a pretty cool technique."

Advertising research, Donahue said, has traditionally focused on measuring rational responses: Do you remember the ad? Would you buy the product? But the emotional aspect has been mostly ignored, and that's a major gap.

"We believe this will lead to asking better questions and making better decisions," said Bill Cook, senior vice president of research and standards at the Advertising Research Foundation. In an early stage of the project, researchers used a variety of methods to measure emotional response to beer ads. The latest stage involves answering ques-



COO Cobb says people respond emotionally without realizing it.

convention. It's unclear whether the results will be published later, said Hall.

AnswerStream uses technology licensed from Quantum Intech of Boulder Creek, Calif. By attaching sensors to the fingers, AnswerStream measures physiological responses to ads, including the heart rate and the rate at which electrical impulses are conducted by the skin. An algorithm is used to translate the measured response into the level of engagement and the degree of enjoyment stimulated by the ad.

Why not just ask people? Because they don't necessarily understand their own responses.

"We respond emotionally to stimulus without really knowing it," said Jim Cobb, chief operating

officer at Howard Merrell. Are some ads emotional and others rational? Hall's take on that issue: "Everything is emotional at some level."

The research results will be presented in New York City later this month at the foundation's annual

convention. It's unclear whether the results will be published later, said Hall.

But there is an intellectual component to AnswerStream as well. The physical data is supplemented by a follow-up interview or questionnaire that asks consumers their opinions on issues — such as "Did the ad change your perception of the product or brand?" — to further analyze the effect on the consumer. After all, said Hall, we don't always act on our emotions.

Given that AnswerStream research costs \$50,000 and up, its market is major advertisers with multimillion-dollar budgets. To broaden its market beyond its own clients, Howard, Merrell, has created an affiliated business, also called AnswerStream, which already has attracted one ad agency as a customer. Hall declined to say which agency. Clients of Howard, Merrell, include Sappi Fine Paper and two divisions of Kimberly Clark.

But Howard, Merrell's overarching goal is to use AnswerStream to distinguish itself from the competition and help it win new clients. That would be an emotional victory — and a financial one.

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