Neuroimaging Techniques – Promising Research Method Also For Practical Marketing Research?

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Neuroscientific techniques, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), magnetoencephalography (MEG), and electroencephalography (EEG) have become dominant research tools within contemporary psychophysiology. Very recently, consumer behavior research has recognized the potential of these techniques to complement the range of adequate methods for consumer behavior issues. As the advantages of these techniques are quite obvious from a scientific point of view, this is not necessarily the case regarding practical marketing research. The present working paper is about an empirical study aiming at gaining information on marketing professionals’ opinion on these techniques. We will address industry’s willingness to support and pay for cooperative projects as well as practical areas of interest for which neural knowledge is appreciated.

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Very recently, marketing research has recognized the potential of the so-called “neuromarketing–approach” (see for an overview Lee, Broderick and Chamberlain 2006, Lee and Broderick 2007; Kenning, Plassmann and Ahlert 2007a; Kenning, Plassmann and Ahlert 2007b; Aholt, Neuhaus, Teichert, Weber and Elger 2007). Neuroscientific techniques, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), magnetoencephalography (MEG), and electroencephalography (EEG) have became dominant research tools within contemporary psychophysiology (see e.g. Cooke, Peel, Shaw and Senior 2007). The advantages of applying such techniques also within consumer behavior research are obvious. Psychophysiological information complements traditional methods of investigating human behavior and especially human decision-making. The so called “black-box” of the consumer is no longer an “unreachable sphere.” Neuroimaging techniques can contribute to fundamental research in terms of a better conceptual understandig of latent constructs in consumer behavior. They explore physiological correlates and thereby contribute to content and construct validity of traditional measures in the social sciences in general and in marketing research in particular. This knowledge will contribute to overcoming the obstacles traditional quantitative marketing research had to deal with and will help to establish sound and valid measures to capture e.g. cognitions, emotions or attitudes. However, we assume that these approaches cannot fully replace conventional questionnaire-based measurement. In practice, only the latter can provide quantifications of latent variables on a large scale in “real world”-situations (Brenner, Koller and Salzberger 2008). Nevertheless, to gain a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of the relevant phenomena in order to be able to develop sound measures (e.g. applying advanced item response theory), investigations using neuroimaging techniques are inevitable.

From a scientific point of view, there is an obvious need for more studies in this respect. From a practitioner’s point of view, this is not necessarily the case. As far as our knowledge from initial literature review, there is no accurate data on industry’s opinion about these new techniques to gain fundamental knowledge which contributes to their practical market research activities. There are two major reasons why there are still only few experimental studies applying e.g. fMRI in marketing research: a) funding and b) need for cooperation with medical and brain research teams. Cooperative projects involving industry would help financing such complex and expensive experimental studies and would provide new insight for marketing research and practice alike.

Within our present working project we want to address these obstacles that constrain empirical endeavors applying neuroimaging techniques by taking a closer look at possible stakeholders. As a first stage of research, we are going to conduct exploratory qualitative interviews with marketing professionals and medical research institutions providing the technical equipment. Data collection is planned to take place during March and April 2008. Expert interviews with marketing professionals will cover the following topics: general knowledge and opinion about new techniques available, willingness to support and pay for a cooperative project, perceived strenghts and...