

Brain takes less effort to recognize strong brands

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By Anne Harding

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - People's brains respond more easily to well-recognized brands, and have a tougher time reacting to less famous ones, regardless of the product involved, German researchers report.

Brain scans with functional MRI, an imaging test that measures how much energy the brain is using, revealed that volunteers' brains worked harder when they evaluated a so-called "weak" brand, and that activation occurred in areas tied to negative emotions. Conversely, strong brands elicited less activation, centered on brain areas involved in self-identification, rewards and positive emotion.

Dr. Christine Born of Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich and an interdisciplinary team of colleagues, including advertising and marketing professionals, conducted the first-ever test of "brain branding" in 20 men and women.

Participants were shown a typical advertising image representing the brand, along with its logo, for three seconds, and pressed a button in response to a question about how they perceived the brand.

The brands they evaluated -- automobile manufacturers and financial services firms -- had been rated on their relative strength or weakness by a separate group of volunteers.

Born and her team theorized that the brain would respond similarly to "strong," more famous brands no matter what product was being sold, with the same being true for "weak," less well-established brands.

The volunteers' brains indeed reacted similarly to well-known brands, the researchers found, with activity localized in parts of the brain involved in self-identification, rewards, and positive emotion. This suggests, Born said, that the stronger brands were "more fixed in the brain" and "perceived more easily."

But for the "weak" brands, activation was diffused across the brain to a greater degree and brain activity was stronger overall, suggesting it spent more energy recognizing these brands. Weak brands also produced more activation on the right side of the brain, which Born says is involved with "more negative emotional input and conflict-solving strategies."

The findings were presented today at the annual meeting of the Radiological Society of North America in Chicago.

According to Born, this technique may be useful in helping to market products more effectively to groups that are traditionally ignored by advertisers, such as elderly individuals, who may have plenty of money to spend.

She and her colleagues are planning additional research in more diverse groups to investigate how brand perception may vary with age, gender and other factors