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Making brands more successful with contexts

If you want to understand buying behaviour better, it pays to look at the relevant context of the customer. This is the view of Ralf Ohnemus and Dr. Uwe Lebok from K+A BrandResearch and they use examples to show why looking at the brand without the right context is misleading.

May we bother you again with the C-word? With Corona? It's important to us because the pandemic is such an exciting context for this technical article. It's about exactly that, no, not Corona, but contexts and why the power of contexts is so often overlooked in marketing.

And the Corona context is a very good, current example.

Contexts are not the focus of marketing. There are many reasons for this. Market research, for example, likes to deal with emotions, wears deep psychological glasses with conviction and wants to get to the drivers (traits) of human behaviour by drilling deep. Do you like the behavioural-scientific glasses better? We also like them very much.

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This is often particularly entertaining because the focus of behavioural economics is the rather cute irrationalities or even bizarreness of our behaviour - and how we can exploit them in marketing. The sociologists additionally hold out the social glasses to us. It's also very nice when we understand that we are herd animals, that we orient ourselves much more on the behaviour of others than we are aware of and than we would ever admit. And there is currently another modern version of these social glasses: the trend gurus predict that we will behave in a much more charitable way in the future. In other words, the WE instead of the I will determine our behaviour, and we will consciously weigh up which offer is more beneficial in terms of sustainability, environmental protection, animal welfare and the common good, and accept disadvantages in terms of convenience and prices in return.

We know all these "spectacles" very well, but we have always lacked a model that can more plausibly bring together seemingly erratic human behaviour. A model that does not simply dismiss unexplainable changes in behaviour as erratic, schizophrenic or more benignly multi-optional.

In our psychodramatic research we have noticed how surprisingly strongly the context shapes people's decision-making behaviour. In K&A psychodrama we playfully change situations and then observe how emotions (state) and behaviour change. Therefore, we focused mainly on understanding the emotions. Until we started to focus more consciously on the contexts. As a result, we had many a eureka moment. Just like you don't understand language until you know the context. "I did a lot of surfing yesterday." Sea? Internet? Wind?

Wikipedia defines the term context as follows: "It is a weaving together of different facts, i.e. a linking, a connection. In sociology and also in marketing, one often speaks of situational context." People have learned to recognise different behaviour as appropriate in different contexts. Let's look at the example of alcohol consumption and the workplace: is it normal working hours, an official party, a colleague buying you a drink, is it a company event, an after-work meeting or the canteen? (In Bavaria, some places allow beer to be served in the canteen at lunchtime). And it is not only the fact whether alcohol is acceptable or even expected that varies, but also the type of alcohol will be context-appropriate. The celebration during the day is more likely to be celebrated with ONE glass of sparkling wine, perhaps even non-alcoholic. In the evening, it is more likely to be wine and beer. At the Christmas party, there may be unrestrained consumption. It is always the same company, it is always the same people, but the contexts are different and the behaviour is learned, adapted to the contexts. Let's stay with the keyword sparkling wine. Which brand of sparkling wine do you like to buy? This question certainly comes up in many questionnaires, but it is meant by the brand and not really helpful for the consumer's understanding, because it has no relation to real life. We get an answer to this question, of course, but if we observe the buying behaviour of the respondents, we would find that they have bought several brands. The common explanation then is: consumers are not loyal or have made erratic decisions. But this is wrong because buyers associate different brands with different levels of quality for different situations. Depending on the context, other brands come to mind as suitable. Our question about the preferred brand can only be answered correctly by most people when they know for which context they will buy the sparkling wine. For the more everyday consumption of sparkling wine, Rotkäppchen sparkling wine might be suitable for one respondent. But when it comes to that important milestone birthday, it might have to be Mumm or a Fürst. And if you order a Faber on a date with a high emotional context, you have to be able to live with the consequences.

Understanding buying behaviour through context

If you want to understand buying behaviour better, it is worthwhile to first specify the relevant contexts and then ask what the respondent spontaneously thinks of as the best solution. And this will often not immediately be a brand; the category - sparkling wine or champagne - may be the first answer.

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Another example: When I have an important health question, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Make a doctor's appointment? Maybe one of the newly learned video consultations? Or call the mother? Search the internet? Consult a health app? Or does a brand immediately come to mind? Understanding this fully automatic problem-solving process provides a better basis for brand strategy than asking about the brand.

The great advantage of strategic thinking from the context is that one suddenly understands concrete consumer behaviour much better and does not shrug one's shoulders and think "non-loyal", "schizophrenic", "multi-optional". One no longer capitulates to the seemingly inexplicable. Contexts explain how needs, emotions and the social glasses are specifically linked with each other to produce the appropriate behaviour for the situation and thus automatically open up stimulating perspectives for brand work.

In the context of a survey, sustainability, animal welfare, good salaries for shop assistants, healthy food and more are very important to many. But is this really behaviourally effective? How often have we gossiped on the balcony without lasting consequences? Which brings us to the Corona context. Corona has drastically changed the context of our lives, but by no means uniformly. On the one hand, the individual classification of personal threat has an impact on one's own behaviour. Is one a Corona sceptic and considers oneself invulnerable - cue Corona parties - or does one panic and avoid all contact with others? Then there is the economic concern. Do you even profit from the Corona crisis, like some IT service providers, shippers, logisticians, or is the crisis an existential threat, like test studios, restaurants, artists, dentists, hotels, red light?

Since the beginning of the pandemic, countless studies have been published, some of which also contain forecasts for a lasting change in people's attitudes. These studies are based on a consciously decisive view of humanity and assume a WE-optimising homo economicus. For the majority of people, this is guaranteed to be wrong. Instead, we see the enormous influence of the currently changed individual context. And every behavioural scientist knows: people return to their learned behaviour patterns. It would be fatal to draw conclusions about future behaviour from temporary contexts, such as the Corona crisis. If the contexts change, all today's answers are wastepaper. Experienced market researchers know this.

Thinking from the context shows us which drivers of brand growth have sex appeal. If one's brand does not come up as a spontaneous solution in a significant context, or only rarely, one has to think about how to design a better offer with a more efficient benefit for this specific context. The American psychologist Professor Tory Higgins has proven that in their daily automatic decisions, people are much more oriented towards what promises them an effectiveness or even efficiency advantage, i.e. what supports them in coping with far too many everyday tasks as easily as possible. Because we have known for a long time that convenience works. That repurchase has little to do with loyalty, but a lot to do with cognitive relief. That we like to buy special offers, but mostly not to actually satisfy a hunting instinct, but because we know that this increases the possibilities (effectiveness) of our wallet.

We are lazy and don't want to think too much

Behind this simplification motivation ultimately lies an almost banal organic reason: our brain consumes too much energy during focused thinking. The brain jumps back into the fluid state of autopilot, system 1, as quickly as possible. The American marketing professor Scott Galloway puts it this way: To launch Apple TV Plus on my iPhone, I only need three clicks. To start a Netflix film, on the other hand, 17 clicks. And people, given the choice, will always choose three clicks. We are lazy.

"We are lazy". An attribute that describes in an ingeniously simple way how our brain works in system 1 mode. If we make a selected context a little easier for customers, they will instinctively choose it.

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Just as FinTech companies make complex financial transaction processes much simpler, faster and more visually appealing than traditional banks. Once you've experienced that, you don't want to go back. Our conclusion: Those who understand contexts and the corresponding efficiency dimensions in their market will find it easier to design successful brand offers. ■

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