

The Old Model of Attention

The maze at Hampton Court in London is one of the most famous hedge mazes in the world. It lies on a grassy expanse behind a palace once inhabited by Henry VIII, a half mile of hedges twisted into a complex labyrinth. The maze, which looks like something directly out of *Alice in Wonderland*, also happens to be the perfect place for a study about memory.

Researchers took a chronic amnesiac to the maze, and asked him if he'd ever been there. No, he replied, he had not. They gave him a whistle, and had him wind his way through the hedges. Upon reaching the center, he blew his whistle. Researchers recorded the time. The next day, they did the same thing. They asked the amnesiac if he'd ever been to the maze, to which his reply was no. Off they sent him again with the whistle, and again they timed the speed with which he reached the center.

Day after day, same thing. Again they asked if he'd ever been to the maze, again the reply was no. Again they timed how long it took him to reach the center.

Though the patient had no recollection of his time in the maze, something strange happened. Each time the patient made his way through the maze, he did it differently. Specifically, he did it faster. Without actively remembering the maze, he was subconsciously learning. Over time, he built up a mental schema of the labyrinth.

Memory, the scientists learned, works whether we realize it or not. All day, we passively take in messages from the world around us, even if we're not conscious of those messages. Enough messages, drilled in over decades, will eventually shape our actions. It's inefficient, but for several decades in the twentieth century, it's how advertising worked. Like the amnesiac in the maze, consumers have passively absorbed brand messages, cumulatively, over the course of years, without realizing it.

Sound a little crazy? It's why you remember jingles from your childhood, and why you gravitate toward the brands you remember fondly from your youth.

What happened since then? Why is it no longer good enough to jingle your audience to death?

The Modern Marketing Maze

Today, the maze changes every day, making a marketer's job far more difficult than it was in the good old days. Unless you have the biggest budget of all your competitors, it no longer works to repeatedly drill in messages. You must fascinate.

Here's a prime example: In 2010, a new product was introduced into the market, and, upon release, it received some resoundingly harsh criticism. A year later, the *New York Times* recapped the public flogging:

"An utter disappointment and abysmal failure."

—ORANGE COUNTY WEB DESIGN BLOG

"Consumers seem genuinely baffled by why they might need it."

—BUSINESSWEEK

"Insanely great it is not."

—MARKETWATCH

"My god, am I underwhelmed."

—GIZMODO

Wow! That's a tough set of reviews. What kind of lemon was this product, exactly? Well, it was Apple's iPad. The fastest-selling gadget in the history of electronics. How could an "utter and abysmal failure" colossally break sales records? That type of success simply isn't rational. It can't be predicted and plotted on a graph.