

Like it or not, brainwaves don't lie

More firms using device that measures brainwaves to analyse reactions to ads

By CHERYL FAITH WEE

AN UNUSUAL-LOOKING piece of headgear has been helping Singapore companies market themselves.

It gets to the truth of how the public views their advertisements by measuring the brainwaves of people in target groups and showing how interested – or bored – they are.

According to global market research firm Nielsen, demand in Singapore for the use of neuroscience technology by its Singapore clients has tripled in the last two years. They also come from a wide range of industries – from baby and personal care products to telecommunications and financial companies.

The technology has been applied in marketing for more than a decade in Britain and the United States but is just reaching these shores, and is particularly useful in the Asian context, according to neuroscience expert George Christopoulos.

"In the US, focus groups will tell straight to your face that they do not like the product. In Asia, people might be unwilling to express insulting negative opinions. Neuroscience can unmask real preferences. Yet, companies should be careful about misinterpreting results," said Dr Christopoulos, who is the research director at Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) Culture Science Institute.

Nielsen has tapped technology that is commonly used in the study of the brain and nervous system – electroencephalography (EEG), which measures brainwave activity through sensors. This is usually integrated with a device that can track eye movements.

The readings are then interpreted by neuroscien-

tists and other experts.

Mr Kaushal Upadhyay, who is Nielsen's head of consumer neuroscience in South-east Asia, said: "Consumers typically say things that are socially acceptable as they do not want to say anything wrong or controversial. But how their brain reacts is more real.

"We can capture which part of the brain is responding and pick up on three main factors – attention, memory activation and emotional engagement."

For instance, a company was trying to pinpoint why customers responded favourably to its television commercial but ended up going to a competing brand instead.

Through EEG technology, Nielsen's researchers found that the colour of the product in the advertisement reminded people of a competing brand's logo.

The company changed the colour of the item and the effectiveness of the commercial improved.



Nielsen declined to say how much it charges its clients for the use of this technology but said that it was "comparable to conventional research methods".

Advertising agency TBWA has seen more of its clients wanting to use neuroscience to test the effectiveness of advertising. None used it two years ago; now, around 10 per cent do.

TBWA Singapore senior strategist Felix Pels said: "While it remains in the minority, we expect to see its use grow, especially

A man wearing the headgear that can measure people's brainwaves.

PHOTO: NIELSEN

as it becomes more widely accepted as an industry benchmark."

According to Dr Christopoulos, tracking brain activity through a headset like Nielsen's is not without its limitations.

This method monitors mostly the surface of the brain where information about attention, arousal, fatigue and surprise can be gathered. Brain signals, which are critical for decision making, are located in deeper parts of the brain, and these are not clearly picked up.

And research that uses high-tech medical equipment can be expensive – at least double the cost of conventional methods – and difficult to implement on a large scale, said NTU visiting professor Gemma Calvert. She is also a fellow at the university's Institute on Asian Consumer Insight and the founder of an agency called Neurosense, which has specialised in neuromarketing since 1999.

Her company has developed a range of online implicit tests, in which participants are required to respond to cues about brand attributes, concepts and images in less than a second – a time frame too quick for the brain to conjure up a socially conscious response.

She said: "A vast amount of our behaviour is driven by subconscious brain responses, and conventional market research approaches, such as focus groups, only capture the tip of the iceberg in terms of the many brain processes that influence our decisions."

"By combining conventional and neuromarketing methods, companies are able to get a 360-degree perspective on what consumers really want."

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