MARKETING & THE HUMAN CONDITION - PAPER 01

THE BATTLE FOR SIGNIFICANCE

Feeling Matters First.

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BACKGROUND

SIGNIFICANCE: AN AUTONOMOUS MECHANISM

For any one thing to gain attention it must first become significant. This means that any one thing that has captured your attention today, in the past or in the future would have to have been deemed significant in some way. Regardless of whether you recognised this significance or not.

Equally, (the human brain is exposed to thousands of stimuli every day) there are thousands of things that didn't become significant, and due to the autonomous process of what is deemed significant, you won't realise you've ignored them.

This is an interesting mechanism that is worth exploring.
Understanding this will help better understand how significance is gained.

THE BATTLE FOR SIGNIFICANCE

THE MORE ABUNDANT SOMETHING BECOMES, THE LESS WE FEEL IT.

The human brain is exposed to thousands of stimuli every day.
Familiar sounds fade into the background.
Familiar smells become almost invisible.
Familiar views lose their wonder.
Abundance changes how we perceive.

This isn't a flaw in human perception.
It's one of the mechanisms that makes perception possible.

Our experience of

CONTENT IS NO DIFFERENT

Its growing abundance is causing us to adapt.

THE EFFECT OF ABUNDANCE ON COMMS

The more stimulus we experience, the less we feel

CONTENT: MORE STIMULUS

We're surrounded by more. More ads. More creators. More videos. More messages.

↓

CONSUMERS: WE ADAPT

The mind appears to adapt to this abundance by reducing sensitivity.

↓

COMMS → SIGNIFICANCE BECOMES HARDER TO EARN

Messaging struggles to bypass our filters. This reduces our capacity to be moved.

Content abundance has

EXPOSED A MISUNDERSTANDING

Marketing has long assumed communication begins with attention.

AN ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS

Attention doesn’t come first.

For a message to command attention,
it must first be judged significant.
Attention follows significance.

Content abundance hasn't changed this mechanism.
It has simply revealed it.

SO WHAT DETERMINES SIGNIFICANCE?

Significance is the threshold between exposure and attention.

Before we consciously choose what deserves attention, the brain has already determined what matters.

FEELING

The process that determines what becomes significant.

Marketing has traditionally understood communication like this:

Exposure → Attention → Feeling → Action

I believe the sequence has always been:

Exposure → Feeling → Attention → Action

Attention doesn't begin when something is seen.
It begins when something becomes significant.

Feeling determines what becomes significant.

Think of a fire alarm.
You hear the alarm and immediately give it your attention. But the alarm isn't the beginning of the process. Long before it sounds, smoke particles have been accumulating. The detector is constantly evaluating those particles against a threshold. Only when that threshold is crossed does the alarm sound. The alarm is the consequence—not the cause.

Communication works the same way.
We think attention is the beginning because it's the first thing we consciously experience. But attention is simply the first thing we consciously notice. Long before attention arrives, the brain has already been evaluating significance. Only when significance crosses a threshold does exposure become conscious attention.

ATTENTION IS THE ALARM, NOT THE DETECTOR.

FIRE ALARM

Smoke
↓
Detector evaluates
↓
Threshold crossed
↓
Alarm

COMMUNICATION

Exposure
↓
Feeling evaluates (significance)
↓
Threshold crossed
↓
Attention

FEELING MATTERS FIRST.

Feeling determines significance.
Significance determines attention.

This is why...

EVERY BRIEF ASKS FOR THE SAME THINGS.

Differentiate.
Be culturally relevant.
Build emotional connection.
Increase brand love.
Be authentic.
Create community.

Different words. Same problem.

We're all ultimately asking...

HOW DO WE MAKE PEOPLE CARE?

What still has the power to feel significant in a world of abundance?

Or more specifically...

WHAT CAN RESTORE
WHAT ABUNDANCE DESTROYS?

APPENDIX

This paper presents a conceptual model. The supporting evidence in this appendix is not intended as definitive proof, but as research that is consistent with the model proposed.

PROPOSITION 1
HUMANS ADAPT TO ABUNDANCE.

Supporting Evidence: Habituation

Habituation is one of the most established principles in psychology. It describes how repeated exposure to the same stimulus produces progressively weaker responses over time. As the brain becomes familiar with information, it allocates fewer cognitive resources to it, allowing attention to be reserved for stimuli that appear more novel or significant.

PROPOSITION 2
ATTENTION IS SELECTIVE RATHER THAN AUTOMATIC.

Supporting Evidence: Selective attention

Selective attention is one of the most established findings in cognitive psychology. Rather than processing everything equally, the brain continuously filters incoming information, prioritising stimuli that appear most relevant or significant while suppressing everything else. This suggests that attention is not an automatic consequence of exposure, but the result of an underlying process of evaluation.

PROPOSITION 3
EMOTION INFLUENCES ATTENTION.

Supporting Evidence: Emotional Salience

Research in affective neuroscience suggests that emotionally significant stimuli receive privileged processing within the brain. Emotional responses influence what is prioritised, remembered and acted upon, often before conscious reasoning occurs. While this paper proposes a broader conceptual role for feeling, existing evidence consistently shows that emotion strongly influences what becomes significant enough to command attention.

PROPOSITION 4
COMMUNICATION CAN CONTINUE WORKING BEYOND IMMEDIATE EXPOSURE.

Supporting Evidence: The Long and the Short of It

Les Binet and Peter Field demonstrate that communication can continue influencing behaviour long after exposure has ended. While their work measures the effect, this paper proposes a possible mechanism. Every communication is evaluated through feeling. The stronger the feeling it creates, the greater its significance. The greater its significance, the more likely its influence is to endure beyond the moment of exposure.

PROPOSITION 5
CONTENT ABUNDANCE REDUCES EFFECTIVENESS.

Supporting Evidence: Information overload

Describes the decline in decision quality and cognitive processing that occurs when people are exposed to more information than they can meaningfully evaluate. As the volume of content increases, individuals rely increasingly on cognitive shortcuts and filtering mechanisms to manage attention. This supports the proposition that abundance changes how communication is received, making significance progressively harder to earn.

PROPOSITION 6
SIGNIFICANCE PRECEDES CONSCIOUS ATTENTION.

Supporting Evidence: Pre-attentive Processing

Research in cognitive neuroscience suggests that the brain begins evaluating incoming stimuli before they enter conscious awareness. Characteristics such as novelty, emotional relevance, threat and personal importance are processed rapidly and largely outside conscious control. This paper extends that principle by proposing that significance functions as the threshold between exposure and conscious attention.