

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

# How We Decide

Recently, I was asked to explain the difference between being a salesperson and being a customer whisperer in one sentence. Of course, a customer whisperer is a salesperson. But there's a difference: A salesperson is interested in persuading clients, whereas a customer whisperer is interested in guiding clients through a decision-making process.

We need to understand how this decision-making process works if we're really going to help our clients. Ever since Plato suggested that the soul is divided into two conflicting spheres, humankind has been intrigued by the dichotomy between reason and emotion. Reason and emotion are precisely the factors that govern our decision making. As salespeople, we assume that if we provide a compelling presentation of facts or, conversely, an evocative demonstration, we can sway people into our way of thinking and be rewarded with a sale. Both of these strategies work occasionally. But to serve clients effectively, we need to shift our focus and consider the experience from their perspective.

Fortunately, Jonah Lehrer provides insight into this process in his excellent book, *How We Decide*. Those of us in the music business are at least casually aware of the right-brain/left-brain theory about artistic creativity versus logic. Lehrer explores the upper-brain/lower-brain continuum of reason and emotion. The book is chock-full of hard science elegantly simplified and moderated with fascinating real-world examples that can help us

learn to better serve our clients and our employers.

"Emotional," though, is probably not the best word to describe the processes that occur in our lower, more primitive brain. It's more like *gut feel* or *instinct*. On the other hand, analytical precisely describes what goes on behind our foreheads. The cerebral cortex is where we do math and analysis. There are limita-

tions, however, to our capacity to analyze. Few people, other than geniuses, can solve problems with more than six distinct variables. Most people can only handle three.

## THE DANGER OF TOO MUCH INFORMATION

The lesson for a customer whisperer is if we present too many facts, our clients' rational thinking starts to shut down. They'll come right out and tell us they are confused as they are leaving our stores without making a

purchase. And it's not their fault. It's ours. We presented too many variables, and we made the decision too hard.

Here's an example of decision making in a common shopping experience. A 14-ounce box of Cheerios costs \$4.29. That's about 31 cents per ounce. The same-size store brand costs \$2.49, or 18 cents per ounce. The name brand is on sale at two for \$6, or 21.3 cents per ounce. (I had to grab a calculator to figure that out.) Fortunately, my grocer has the cost per ounce posted on a little sign, except for the two-for-\$6 offer. Analytically, it's simple math unless you start calculating the marginal cost of the extra box — \$1.71, or 12 cents per ounce.

Few of us would do that much math for a box of cereal. More likely, our back brain would get right to the marginal cost and decide that two boxes for a little more money is a deal, or that oats are oats and there's no reason to waste money. Gut feel then is your back brain doing the math automatically and factoring in the sum of your life experiences, biases and preferences. Gut feel is highly reliable. And once you get past three variables, it's more reliable than your analytical abilities. Unfortunately, too often we don't trust our gut, and neither do our clients.

Consider shooting a free throw. If you had to calculate



**Jonah Lehrer's new book, *How We Decide*, helps us help customers**

the force necessary to achieve the correct speed of the ball, the angle of the arc, how the spin would affect the other two variables, and, if you were playing outside, the wind direction and speed, the game would be over before you even took a shot. A proficient player, who has practiced the shot a thousand times, can step up to the line, bounce the ball once and swish it through the net. It's all lower brain.

A customer has many, many variables to consider when selecting a musical instrument. In addition to barely quantifiable factors, such as the look, feel, sound and touch of the instrument, he might be thinking about what friends or fans will think and where the money will come from. It's more analysis than any customer can do in his head, even if he could quantify the unquantifiable.

**THE PROBLEM WITH FACTS**

Lehrer shows decisions are really made through the interaction between our analytical and emotional selves — he even has a chapter titled “The Brain Is An Argument.” We are always seeking agreement between the two poles. To make matters more interesting, when shoppers see an item they might consider purchasing, another part of the brain releases dopamine, giving them a feeling of pleasure. This, of course, directly contradicts the idea that customers will come to a decision by carefully considering tangible facts. The amount of dopamine released is in direct proportion to the client's desire for the item. A customer whisperer must closely observe his client's nonverbal response to both his products and his words. (Dopamine

may be flowing.) Having made a decision, most people stop considering or dismiss contrary evidence and actively seek confirmation. They want to keep the dopamine coming and avoid that unsettling feeling of anxiety. Who wouldn't? It's classic pain avoidance.

Lehrer calls this the Certainty Trap. When our clients start to tune out conflicting data, they are close to making a purchase. This is apparent because they begin to rationalize their decisions. They find little reasons to proceed. They might comment on the frequent flyer miles they'll get if they use a certain credit card or how they can have the product in time for a party or a gig. The emotional brain has just won the argument.

Isn't it ironic? There's nothing less rational than rationalization. Nonetheless, when rationalization starts, a customer whisperer reaches for his pen. It means people are getting ready to buy.

**FOCUS ON BENEFITS**

Once a customer whisperer understands a little about the neuroscience behind the decision-making process, he needs a strategy to apply this knowledge to help guide his clients.

First, he must accept that he's unlikely to prevail *exclusively* on the basis of facts and figures, no matter how compelling they are. And second, he must understand that his clients are distrustful of blatant emotional appeals, in general, and their own gut feel, in particular.

Unaware of the inner workings of the human brain, classic sales methodology has evolved two standard practices that conform perfectly to what Lehrer has revealed. Presenting

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a product feature and quickly connecting it to an important benefit to the client makes the analytical part easy. Clients automatically store a conclusion their subjective brains will later draw upon. If a customer whisperer presents a blue guitar as looking cool, it's just his opinion. But if he presents the blue guitar as bringing out the color of his client's eyes, he's planting an idea that his client may subconsciously draw upon when it's time to make a decision.

**ALWAYS GIVE CONFIRMATION**

The customer whisperer must also understand the importance of confirmation. If customers ask what you think, they are seeking confirmation. (They are trying to keep the pleasant rush of dopamine flowing.) This is *not* a time to be shy, show off your expertise or express an opinion. It's an opportunity to provide the reassurance your clients are seeking. Every saleswoman at a

department store cosmetic counter understands this, but for some reason, music store clerks often waste the opportunity to confirm and instead brag about their favorite ax or simply demur. If a customer seeks confirmation and you provide it, you are helping make the connection between the rational and emotional brain. You may even provide a little shot of dopamine.

Too many times, I have heard a customer ask for confirmation and seen the salesman fail to provide it. Except for bombarding a client with too many facts, it may be our most common error. Many salespeople are genuinely surprised when prospects ignore their argument and make a purchase elsewhere based on emotion. Well, of course they did! When you blast someone with facts, the upper brain gets overwhelmed and shuts down. And when you deny confirmation, the client has a hormonal crash. It's easy for the next salesperson to get the sale on a rebound.

I can't do complete justice to *How We Decide* in one column, but I highly recommend it to customer whisperers interested in learning more about how their clients experience the process. For those interested only in application, keep your facts few and focused on benefits important to your client. Pay close attention to visceral reactions to products and the things you say. And when asked for your opinion, swallow your pride and don't give it. Clients don't care about your opinion. They are seeking confirmation. Give it to them, and send everyone, including your boss, home happy. **MI**

Greg Billings will discuss the decision-making process at The NAMM Show in Anaheim, Calif. See him at the NAMM Idea Center at 1:30 p.m. on Jan. 16.