
Motivation Research and the Marketing Science of Measuring Consumer Desire in Postwar America

Bradley Queen, Boston University, USA

In coining the term motivation research, Ernest Dichter, Austrian émigré and associate of well-known media researcher Paul Lazarsfeld, named a trend that occupied a central place in market research for nearly twenty years after 1951 when the phrase gained currency.

*Discussion about motivation research reached across a broad swath of business print culture moving from academic journals such as the *Journal of Marketing and Sociometry* through trade journals such as *Printers' Ink* and *Advertising Age* to mainstream business publications such as *Fortune* and *Business Week*.*

*In 1953, the Advertising Research Foundation published *A Bibliography of Theory and Research Techniques in the Field of Human Motivation* that was accompanied by the *Handbook of Motivation Research in Advertising and Marketing* to document the deep penetration of social science techniques and motivation research into marketing. *Fortune* magazine reported in the mid-fifties that almost one billion out of the nine spent on advertising came from the use of motivation research by two-thirds of the largest advertisers and their advertising agencies. The handbook went out of print when motivation research lost its effectiveness for provoking debate in the years surrounding the turn of the seventies as creativity triumphed science in marketing thought and subversive cool became the advertising style.*

This analysis explores how motivation research came to dominate thinking about measuring and interpreting consumer preferences by deciphering its place in the history of American market research and the history of American social science. Within the marketing culture of the immediate postwar years and into the early sixties, intuition and creativity, two sensibilities long used by advertising executives in communicating with consumers, merged and conflicted with an interdisciplinary brand of nonacademic social science in the everyday effort to assess the American consumer. Motivation research conceptually embodied this broad conflict in marketing thought.

Postwar marketing research, like marketing itself, constituted a middling arena of economic culture and drew new ideas about methodology and scientific purpose from an array of American social scientific disciplines—among

them economics, anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology and social psychology—that had been recently liberated from the purposive methods, historicist dogma, and activist intentions of an earlier generation of social scientists. The new service intellectuals or brokers of knowledge who had come to professional maturity within the established institutional matrix between business elites and scientific professionals carried elements of such scientific sciences into marketing research. By the mid 1930s social scientific ideas and methods began merging into marketing research alongside the statistical orientation of opinion and media researchers creating in turn a broad sociology of knowledge that subsisted on amoral scientism and narrow empirical objectivism while attending to the art and artifice of acquisition.

Questions about science in marketing inevitably focussed on motivation research and the claims of its practitioners about its ability to differentiate the emotive preferences of consumers for branded goods of similar quality and utility. Motivation research, as the internal logic of advertising and a major element of the ideology of consumption, proved capable of creating advertising that both avoided regulation and drove consumption during the long period of economic growth and expansion from the end of World War II through the early seventies. Detailed analysis of debates over motivation research's philosophical and scientific validity by social scientists, marketers and social critics illuminates the larger intellectual contours of American business culture's efforts to appropriate the language of social science during a long period of economic abundance.
