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Marketing Metaphoria: Undressing the Mind of the Consumer

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Abstract

The book by Gerald Zaltman and Lindsay Zaltman (2008), *Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal about the Minds of Consumers*, builds on the premise that most thoughts are unconscious and what people think are actually in frames of pictures, not necessarily words. The authors focus on seven deep metaphors in which they believe is the key to understanding consumer's minds and thus that marketing firms and managers can truly understand what consumer's desire and need. These seven deep metaphors are explained in detail and are the meat of this book. Mr. Zaltman has conducted several thousand qualitative inquiries using his patented marketing research tool called ZMET, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. This book does not go in depth into the procedures and process of ZMET, which is a downfall to its overall usefulness to the qualitative research industry.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), Metaphors, Deep Metaphors, Qualitative method

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Marketing Metaphoria: Undressing the Mind of the Consumer

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*The book by Gerald Zaltman and Lindsay Zaltman (2008), *Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal about the Minds of Consumers*, builds on the premise that most thoughts are unconscious and what people think are actually in frames of pictures, not necessarily words. The authors focus on seven deep metaphors in which they believe is the key to understanding consumer's minds and thus that marketing firms and managers can truly understand what consumer's desire and need. These seven deep metaphors are explained in detail and are the meat of this book. Mr. Zaltman has conducted several thousand qualitative inquiries using his patented marketing research tool called ZMET, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. This book does not go in depth into the procedures and process of ZMET, which is a downfall to its overall usefulness to the qualitative research industry. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), Metaphors, Deep Metaphors, Qualitative method.*

In their 2008 book, *Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal about the Minds of Consumers*, Gerald Zaltman and Lindsay Zaltman mine their experiences in the marketing industry to produce an interesting account for qualitative researchers concerning an understanding what people think and how they can verbalize this thru metaphors. A central focal point to this approach is the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET)

Gerald Zaltman is a professor at Harvard Business School and thru his research developed ZMET which is a patented market research tool. ZMET is a technique that elicits both conscious and especially unconscious thoughts by exploring people's non-literal or metaphoric expressions. As Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) described it, "it is to demonstrate that deep metaphors play powerfully yet silent in the unconscious minds of consumers, are relatively few, and are universal" (p. xxiii). The technique has been used by academic researchers and for marketing purposes to study a variety of topics related to both marketing and the social sciences. For example, von Scalkwyk (2010) used an adapted form of ZMET, the Collage Life Story Elicitation Technique (CLET), to study autobiographical memories.

In *Marketing Metaphoria*, Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) assert that 95% of what consumers are thinking including emotions as well as memories occurs in the unconscious mind. Thus since this occurs in the unconscious one can't necessary articulate it, so he believes that ZMET can tap into the unconscious while other research methods try to access the conscious mind thus leaving deep understanding of concepts untouched. Zaltman and Zaltman believe that understanding the "deep metaphors" is a way for consumers to voice what they really want and feel.

Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) state that most managers, companies and corporations suffer from what they have termed the "depth deficit, a lack of careful

reflection and bold thinking about rich consumer information” (p. xii). They have termed the process of thinking deeply as “workable wondering” (p. 10). Which “involves the use of empirical, rigorous and relevant information, also called workable knowledge, to challenge our assumptions and to engage in disciplined imagination” (p. 10). Zaltman and Zaltman believe that having deep insights from consumers can allow one to understand why and how they think and do what they do. Thus the authors use the ZMET to probe and analyze the nonliteral expressions of one’s deep metaphors.

According to Zaltman and Zaltman (2008), there are seven deep metaphors: balance, journey, transformation/change, container, connection, resource and control. Thru the use of ZMET in some twelve thousand interviews in over thirty countries surfaced these metaphors. The ZMET and its process are not covered in depth in this book but for understanding the purposes of how this can be of a contribution to the field of qualitative research, it will be explained here. The ZMET process is as such. A sample is selected of usually 10-25 people, about a week before the interview the participants are asked to collect eight to 10 pictures that represent their thoughts and feelings about a research topic, thus trying to eliminate researcher-bias by having participants select constructs instead of those opposed by the researcher. Each ZMET interview is a one-on-one discussion lasting approximately two hours. As a result of this pre-interview work, participants arrive for their in-depth interview at an advanced stage of thinking. The interview is carefully designed to probe various facets of the mind’s operation, enabling the consumer or participant to be more explicit about their implicit thoughts and feelings. This often also reveals drivers of human behavior. The interview format also presents an opportunity for a properly trained interviewer to learn not only about one’s initial thoughts much as might be obtained by use of a structured questionnaire or a focus group, but allows for deeper meanings of a topic to surface. This deeper meaning and constructs are often not accomplished by other qualitative research methods (Coulter & Zaltman, 1994).

ZMET actually uses the metaphors that surface as guides to understanding consumer behavior and decisions. Metaphors are the key window/mechanisms for viewing consumer thought and feelings and for understanding behavior. “The essence of the Metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5, as cited in Coulter & Zaltman, 1994, p. 501). For the most part, it is only through their metaphors that we can understand participant thinking and behavior. Even behavior and thoughts are themselves metaphors for one another. In fact, there is an emerging consensus that metaphors are the essential units of thought and communication. Metaphors are not only ways of hiding and expressing thoughts, they actively create and shape thought. We cannot know anything unless it is perceived as an instance of one thing and not another. Thought is more inherently figurative than it is literal. Consequently, by paying more attention to the visual and other sensory metaphors people use to express their images, researchers can learn more about their thoughts and feelings.

Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) believe that the seven deep metaphors are surface expressions to hidden thoughts and patterns. They believe that these metaphors shape our lives and are universal in nature. They also profess that few research ever fails to uncover at least one giant metaphor. The Zaltmans believe that deep metaphors and emotions are siblings, that they are hardwired in our brains and shape our social contexts and

experiences. Moreover, deep metaphors and emotions are unconscious operations that are vital perceptual and cognitive functions. What Zaltman and Zaltman focus on during the research process is the difference. Differences arise in how people experience a given deep metaphor. These differences are shaped by unique individual experiences and by social contexts, including the impact of a firm's marketing activities on consumers, such as the media. Understanding the anatomy of emotion we can engage the emotions using metaphoric cues.

This book examines the seven deep metaphors in depth for the reader to have a better understanding of how these can be applied to a deeper understanding of consumer behavior. The first deep metaphor is balance, (Chapter three) which includes ideas such as harmony, equilibrium, adjustment and maintenance and offsetting of forces. Such as physical balance, moral and social balance as well as psychological balance. For example, Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) suggest that psychological imbalance may be expressed when talking about being, out of sorts, down, feeling off.

The second deep metaphor is transformation, (Chapter four), which involves changes statuses or states. For example, emotionally speaking if we undergo a major life change someone may say we need an "attitude adjustment." There can be both positive and negative transformations, surprised or anticipated. The authors propose that virtually all products and services are tied to transformation. "The presence or absence of transformation and the qualities of past, present and future transformations create a viewing lens that services as a powerful, automatic, and unconscious way of evaluating experience" (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008, p. 80).

The next metaphor is journey (Chapter five), which they conclude is rooted in our awareness of time, evolution, progress, and maturation. People may experience themselves on a journey, for example, "life is a journey", or may experience others on a journey. One's journeys may involve many obstacles, setbacks. The authors believe that understanding the theme behind ones journey can make interactions with someone more successful.

The forth deep metaphor they examine is container (Chapter six), keeping things in or out. These may be positive or negative and involve physical, psychological and social states. These are boundaries or borders if you will. For example, "the old phrase you are what you eat is a caution that what enters your body defines both its status and event that of another powerful container, one's self-identity" (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008, p. 99).

The fifth metaphor is connection (Chapter seven), how the need to relate to oneself and others the authors state affects consumers thinking. At the core of all humans is the basic need of affiliation, and thus often drives our behaviors. Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) propose that products and services can be a device in which either provides engagement or disengagement or both. They feel that this can be a major viewing lens for understanding behavior. They ascertain that connection drives interest in internet chat rooms, brand-oriented clubs and dating services.

The sixth deep metaphor is resources (Chapter nine), which are capacities or abilities that people use to restore or to achieve certain states; they are associated with feelings of satisfaction and survival. A resource may be physical or intangible, and act as agents enabling humans to obtain their goals. Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) believe that there are more resources in a person's mind frame other than food, water, money and

fuel. For example, calling a person who helped you out a “lifesaver” there is a deeper meaning that just helping someone out involved.

The seventh deep metaphor examined in this book is control, which Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) say arises from a basic human motivation to control ourselves, situations as well as others. This does not simply include power and authority, but could have deeper frames involved. Such as when someone says they feel *powerless*, could cause use to act a certain way to add to sense of control. The authors propose this is why we often are responsive to Nike’s campaign of *Just Do It*.

In summary, this book was mainly written for the marketing industry, but does hold useful information in understanding how the use of metaphors can shape ones behaviors, but could also allow a qualitative researcher valuable insight into the deeper meanings, thoughts and feelings of participants. If you are in the arena of marketing this is a must read, if you are involved in research for the social sciences, you can probably skip, while it does not give step by step information on how to use the ZMET in qualitative research inquiries. The concepts and theories behind ZMET however do open the door for future research inquiry methods and for improving qualitative research methodology and techniques. You can read sections of the book as well as see the deep metaphors defined online at <http://marketingmetaphoria.com/index.html>

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