

Satisfaction, Insight & Motivation: The Biology of Satisfaction



Recent advances in medical technology are allowing a whole host of researchers the ability to study the biologic underpinnings of human emotion and behavior. As a result, a significant volume of research is currently being conducted to understand the biology behind satisfaction, and what the implications of this insight means for business managers who are responsible for customer and employee satisfaction. Bottom line, there is a chemical release in the brain linked to, not only satisfaction, but perhaps more importantly to motivation as well.

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Chemically, satisfaction is all about dopamine. Until recently dopamine has been considered "the pleasure chemical." As it turns out, the role in the brain is far more complex, playing a critical role in movement, information flow within the brain, regulation of certain hormones produced in the pituitary gland, as well as pleasure and motivation. Without dopamine, we would be unable to obtain any of the things we consider rewarding.

To illustrate some of this recent research, Gregory Berns, in his excellent book *Satisfaction, The Science of Finding Fulfillment*, describes an experiment of his in which participants were placed in an fMRI machine, which measures blood flow and oxygenation levels in the brain. Using this technology they measured the dopamine system's response to a pleasant stimulus (in this case Kool-Aid). While in the fMRI machine, participants were given Kool-Aid; water was given periodically as a control. In either case, the liquid was placed on the back of the tongue requiring the participant to swallow it in order to taste the liquid. Surprisingly, they discovered that the brain's dopamine system responded to both water and Kool-Aid, as long as they were unpredictable, leading them to conclude, the dopamine system was most responsive to novel and unpredictable rewards.

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Now, why is novelty important to our brains? Why would our dopamine centers react to novel events? Paradoxically, it is our need to live in a predictable world which drives our brain's need for novelty. To live in a predictable world, one needs to have a database of information from which to compare experiences and predict the probability of certain outcomes. Novel events, as it turns out, are an excellent means of gathering

information about our environment that we didn't already know. As a result, they expand our database of information about our world, giving us more information from which to predict events around us. Being "turned on" by novel events better positions us to gain insight into our environment. The brain's desire for novelty may be linked to that satisfying feeling we all get from insight.

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Novelty is not the only dopamine story going on in our brain. In other research conducted by Brian Knutsen, a Stanford research scientist, participants while in an fMRI machine played video games that involved winning money as a reward. Blood flow and oxygenation levels were measured both in anticipation of winning the money and actually taking possession of it. As it turns out, the dopamine centers of the brain were activated more in anticipation of the reward rather than the reward itself, leading to the conclusion that customers get more satisfaction from anticipation of the purchase than actually taking possession of the product. This is probably the dominant cause of buyer's remorse.

Berns' Kool-Aid experiment produced a similar conclusion. Since the participants were forced to commit to the act of swallowing in order to receive their reward, Berns proposes it is the need to commit to action which rendered the liquid important to the brain, regardless of whether it tasted sweet or not. Therefore, according to his conclusion, dopamine released in advance of the reward is a motivator for action. Dopamine motivates us to action, before we get the reward. Satisfaction is the result of committing to an action to obtain a product, rather than from the product itself.

Now, what does all this mean to the customer experience manager? First, this story is just beginning. As researchers continue to probe the brain's reaction to certain stimuli, we will continue to better understand the biological foundations of why we feel the way we do. However, in the short run, there are some obvious lessons we can employ to manage the customer experience in a positive and profitable way.

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Engage the customer's curiosity. The chef who comes out of the kitchen to explain how they prepared a dish creates a novel experience, makes the customer feel valued, and uses our natural desire for insight to create a rewarding experience. The employee who asks meaningful and thought provoking questions about a customer's needs and how they will use a given product, not only rewards the customer's need for insight, but leverages the customer's reward center in anticipation of the purchase, setting the perfect conditions for the purchase. The manager who puts insight-producing

protocols into the sales/service lifecycle (such as standardized profiling procedures, or correspondence which adds value by generating insight) manages the customer relationship with the intent of keeping the customer's curiosity fully engaged. The sales person who follows up after a purchase has a huge opportunity to answer any questions the customer may have, tell them something about the product they may have not known or remembered, and at the same time reinforce the sale dispelling any buyer's remorse (not to mention the cross-sell or referral solicitation opportunities of such a call).

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Leverage the desire for novelty. Beyond engaging curiosity, we can leverage the brain's response to novelty to reinforce the customer experience by giving customers occasional small unpredictable service "miracles". The car dealer who, unbeknownst to the customer, places a cold bottle of water in the cup holder after they have had their car serviced - the gardener who, knowing his client is going fishing in the morning, leaves a bucket of night crawlers on the back step. Both of these service professionals create a small unpredictable novel event which their clients will forever associate with a dopamine release.

The lessons of this recent research into the biology of satisfaction are many, and it will certainly take creativity to fully leverage the importance of novelty, insight and anticipation. However, managers who successfully build these experiences into their customer experience will have an advantage, on those who do not, in creating the chemical release in their customers' brains that is at the center of both satisfaction and motivation to purchase.

For more information contact Eric Larse, co-founder of Seattle-based Kinesis, which helps companies plan and execute their customer experience strategies. Mr. Larse can be reached at elarse@kinesis-cem.com.