

PROBLEM SOLVING

Do human instincts explain what we buy, and why we want it?*Monday, July 4, 2011***SUSAN PINKER**

Everyone's heard the bromide "think globally, act locally." It exhorts people to get involved in local causes, banking on the idea that small, individual acts will add up to big, international gains.

But what about the reverse – act globally, think locally? When global ideas are tweaked for regional appeal, the activist slogan becomes more than a plea to recycle your newspapers and buy local lettuce. Ironically, it turns into a cipher for bang-on marketing campaigns. Universal desires are what motivate us, to be sure, but add some savvy about local tastes, and you'll have a pretty good idea of what people want.

Applying that mantra is how McDonald's Corp. earned \$6.1-billion the first quarter of 2011. Chicken McNuggets became Chicken Maharaja-Macs in India, and Mega-Teriyakis in Japan. Marketers knew that enjoying fried food is a human universal. But how should it be spiced and sauced? Well, these are just local glosses on a much larger theme.

In his new book, *The Consuming Instinct: What Juicy Burgers, Ferraris, Pornography and Gift Giving Reveal about Human Nature*, author Gad Saad shows how these consumer choices are driven by four ancient and universal human desires: for survival in lean times (the appeal of fast food), for sexual reproduction (why sex sells), for favouring family members over others (the toy industry, for example), and for reciprocity among allies (gift-buying and giving). These four principles are what drive evolutionary change, according to Saad, a professor of marketing at the John Molson School of Business, at Concordia University, and they're also the forces behind marketing that works.

One of the big debates going on is whether you should you develop one message and export it everywhere, or be sensitive to different expectations in different settings," said Prof. Saad, when I asked about advertising. "I argue that the key to solving this debate is to infuse some evolutionary psychology into the discussion. You have to look at what are human universals, and what are local, biological adaptations." For example, fried foods are popular all over the world due to our human ancestors who preferred high calorie meals when food sources were scarce. And because they survived, they were able to pass on their high-fat preferring genes to modern consumers like us.

But the seasoning in local dishes? Those are cultural variations determined partly by geography, and partly by happenstance, said Prof. Saad. "A neuroscientist at Cornell has found that cross-cultural differences in salt and spices, and vegetables versus meat in the diet are all correlated with the number of food pathogens in the environment," explained Prof. Saad, adding that there is still other types of preferences that have nothing to do with evolution. "Why are wedding dresses red in one culture and white in another? That's a cultural accident."

Some of the universals described here make for entertaining reading. A low voice in men is such a powerful magnet, according to Prof. Saad, that he bets Barack Obama wouldn't have been elected had he had squeaky pipes like Ross Perot's. "That's what I call the Barry White effect," he told me. "If you look at voice endorsers used to peddle products, expertise and knowledge, companies use men with low voices because there's an innate response we have [to that register] that transfers to the product. And in various cultures, men who have deeper voices, on average, have greater reproductive fitness."

Translation? That means they'll have more success with the ladies, and will leave more of their genes behind. And not just with any women, mind you, but beautiful, healthy women, which brings us to another human universal: what men find attractive, and what most women want to buy. "If I'm advertising beauty products, then whether I'm advertising in Namibia, Romania, or Canada, using facial symmetry as a global cue to beauty is the common metric." Where local practices like scarring, or piercing are culture specific, there's evidence showing that facial symmetry, including high even cheekbones for women and prominent jawbones for men, are innate cues that appeal to all people – including infants – everywhere in the world, says Prof. Saad. "What makes the Montrealer, the Peruvian and the Bedouin nomad have universal consumption patterns is their common biological heritage, their shared consuming instinct," he added.

In other words, what counts as the right sauce for your McChicken is one way of acting locally. But in the 117 countries it's on offer, "what defines that global village is our shared human nature," according to Prof. Saad. And that's the main reason why we buy the product in the first place.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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