“We are feeling machines that think – not thinking machines that sometimes feel!”

ALEX BATCHELOR IS THE CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER OF THE DELICIOUSLY NAMED BRAINJUICER, A LONDON-BASED AGENCY THAT APPLIES BREAKTHROUGHS IN BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOOLS TO EXPLAIN AND PREDICT HUMAN BEHAVIOR. HE SHEDS LIGHT FOR US HERE ON SOME OF THE COMPANY’S NEW THINKING IN MARKET RESEARCH FOR THE HOTEL INDUSTRY.

A life lived through the prism of hotel stays is an interesting one. I am told I was conceived in a hotel – but of course I can’t know this. I stayed in hotel rooms in London, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Manila and Bagui, as well as 6 weeks in a ship’s cabin, before I was one year old (I don’t claim to remember any of them either!)

I have supported Chelsea football club since the age of 5 because of a stay in a hotel (a kindly Italian hall porter at the Grosvenor House Hotel and the replay of the 1970 FA Cup final between Chelsea and Leeds were to blame).

I have spent over 150 nights in the same hotel within a 15-month period (the Mövenpick in Amsterdam) – to the extent that they used to introduce me to new members of staff (“This is Mr Batchelor; he comes every week”).

I spent my wedding night in a hotel room and went back with my wife for various anniversaries to the same room at The Savoy, until they refurbished the whole hotel and the room we stayed in changed. We have still been back – just to a different room – and will have been married 20 years next year.

I write all of these details because I have some deep personal experience of hotels. As you are reading The Hotel Yearbook, I suspect that you do, too! Over 47 years, I have spent almost two thousand nights in hotels, in over a hundred countries. What distinguishes them is that even though I cannot possibly remember that much about any one – exactly where each hotel was, how much I paid, any features of the room, even the name of the hotel – I can remember, for an amazingly high proportion of them, exactly how I felt. Happy or sad or angry or perhaps worse: neutral, indifferent.

Indeed, emotion is what matters in most decisions – and it drives a lot of our memory, too. A well respected neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, wrote a great book called Descartes’ Error. In it, he outlines how emotion is the main driver of our behavior – and he shows, at a neurological level, that most of our decision making is driven by our amygdala, our ancient, reptilian brain. (Damasio is also the source of the title of this article.)

Much of his neurological work has found widespread support from the growing field of behavioral economics. Daniel Kahneman, author of another excellent book called Thinking, Fast and Slow, has devoted his life to demonstrating that human decision making is a long way from the rational, considered model of “Homo economicus”. He delights in designing experiments that show us how we are irrational and how our decision making is flawed – and is honest enough to admit that, despite a Nobel Prize and a lifetime spent studying the subject, he is just as likely to take these mental short-cuts as anyone else.

Kahneman doesn’t waste time trying to explain the different regions of the brain that are involved, but simply distinguishes between two brain systems, which he calls System 1 and System 2. System 2 is the rational, slow, analytical, learned, conscious system – the one that does quadratic equations. System 1 is the infinitely more powerful, emotional, intuitive, implicit, instinctive, unconscious one. If we draw a computing analogy, then System 1 operates at 11 million bits/second – while System 2 can only manage 50! Little surprise, then, that most of our decision making is emotional and instinctive.

If we accept the premise that emotion drives our behavior – then we are left with the question of how you might measure emotion. This leads us to the work of Paul Ekman. A respected social anthropologist, he spent 40 years travelling the world looking at how emotion is expressed in human faces. When he started his work, the theory was that facial expressions were culturally influenced. But Ekman showed faces of white students from San Francisco to tribesmen in Borneo...
who had not seen white people before (and vice versa) and demonstrated that there are seven basic human emotions that we all recognize the same way. Subsequent work has validated his research and shown that babies code for, and recognize, emotion in human faces before they are one year old. The American TV series Lie To Me is based on the work of Paul Ekman – indeed he even writes an interesting blog that explains that the show is genuinely based on his academic work, and explains when the needs of TV drama cause it to drift into the realms of fantasy!

By this stage I can almost feel you asking, well what does all of this mean to someone in the hotel industry? Well, to make it less painful, let’s look at how you might try and understand the customer experience in an industry with close links to hotels – airlines. I found a video on YouTube that we use to highlight the issues, but despite the advances in modern technology I can’t yet play you this video in The Hotel Yearbook. The basic story is shown in the pictures below.

How would the airline industry normally try and evaluate this customer experience? The honest truth is that they would do so with a questionnaire that looks something like this:

![Questionnaire Image]

You may notice the capacity for confusion with a series of closed questions. The things we ask are mostly not relevant: yes, the staff were polite, well dressed, the area was clean and tidy – but you don’t really know what happened. I speak from experience when I say that often, the metrics used might cover the time taken per customer when checking in, the time taken from the first customer to the last, but that none of those would pick up on what actually happened here – which is that the check-in team just failed to communicate with the waiting queue of customers and basically kept them waiting, until they were ready to open check-in, by ignoring them. No matter how wonderful they were when they did check-in the customer, the part that people remember strongly is the bit where they were ignored!

At BrainJuicer, we use the human emotions identified by Ekman to understand consumer and employee responses in a wide variety of ways.

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Based on FaceTrace® and MindReader®
Clear and instant read on System 1 with reasons why

“Which of these faces best expresses how you feel right now?”

![Emotions Image]
“We are feeling machines that think – not thinking machines that sometimes feel!” cont.

The survey is then very short – and the responses are very clear. In this example, you would discover that the customer was angry and that the reason for that anger was that they felt ignored and kept waiting.

Over the course of a 25-year career in marketing, I have worked indirectly for hotel chains large and small – from IHG, to the Four Seasons, to lebua. Many of these organizations have large customer satisfaction surveys, and many of them use the Net Promoter Score as a key metric. Recently, we have started to hear two main complaints. The first is that their customer satisfaction scores are increasing but they aren’t getting any more customers – in fact, quite the opposite. The second is that even though they know what their Net Promoter Score is, they don’t know what they need to do in order to make it better.

Over the last year we have been using this approach in a particular hotel chain – and have generated some interesting learnings:

First, focus on how people feel – it will be the surest guide to any future behavior.

Second, it is important to know how both your guest and your staff feel. Everyone knows that you want to have happy guests and happy staff, and that you don’t want to have unhappy guests and unhappy staff – but both the other options are unsustainable too. Happy staff and unhappy guests eventually means an empty hotel – and happy guests and unhappy staff also eventually means an empty hotel, as things will never run smoothly, since you will always have too many new people trying to work together as a team. (As an example I remember meeting the team working in the in-house laundry of the Four Seasons in Philadelphia a few years ago. Think there were five members of the team, and four of them had been there since the hotel opened in 1983. The “newcomer” had joined the team in 1985! I am sure their dedication and teamwork helped support a great guest experience).

Third, let guests write freely about what interests them – I can promise that their concerns won’t match your list of chosen options.

Fourth, try and gather the data as close as you can to the moment of the experience. We have experimented with mobile surveys, iPads in reception, hostesses with iPads in the restaurant – and would say that any survey completed weeks after the event is less useful as a source of feedback.

I will continue to stay in lots of hotels – and am still amazed how the best hospitality can make us feel happy when we are excited, tired and away from home. The little surprises that make the best experiences are what keep bringing us back for more.