Psychographics Revisited: The Birth of a Technique

By Emanuel H. Demby

The term “psychographics” can be traced back to World War I, when it was used to describe people by their looks. Since then, it has evolved, albeit circuitously, into an important segmentation tool that still has underdeveloped applications, especially in the area of low-cost media studies. The author, one of the pioneers in psychographic research, relates the fascinating history behind the method in this article reprinted from the Jan. 2, 1989, issue of Marketing News.

Psychographics has many fathers (including me), and all of them seem to have a valid reason for claiming to first develop it or be better at it than anyone else. Although there may be some argument about who was first, the truth is that everyone in psychographics (even those who call it lifestyle research or values research) is probably correct in advocating a “right” way to do psychographic research.

Their methodologies are different, but all researchers are trying to go beyond the demographics to quantitatively improve on past research for decision making when demographics are found not to be enough.

As far as I know, I did the first publicly available study of psychographics in 1965, and made up the name at the spur of the moment. I was at a Detroit ad agency with Jack Connors, then publisher of Holiday magazine and later publisher of Travel & Leisure, explaining the research I was about to do. The vice president we were visiting asked, “What do you call what you’re attempting to do?” My spontaneous reply was, “Psychographics!”

(As far as I knew then, psychographics was a word I had suddenly made up. Many years later I found the word had a history. It was used in “Grey Matter,” a newsletter published by Grey Advertising in New York.)

I would define psychographics as: “The use of psychological, sociological, and anthropological factors, such as benefits desired (from the behavior being studied), self-concept, and lifestyle (or serving style) to determine how the market is segmented by the propensity of groups within the market—and their reasons—to make a particular decision about a product, person, ideology, or otherwise hold an attitude or use a medium. Demographics and socioeconomics also are used as a constant check to see if psychographic market segmentation improves on other forms of segmentation, including user/nonuser groupings.”

COINED DURING WW I

My research into the word “psychographics” indicates it was first used by an American writer around World War I to describe a method of classifying people by their physical appearance, but
not by demographics, socioeconomics, lifestyle, or psychological characteristics.

It was later used during the 1920s to describe a technique for classifying people by certain attitudes. Still, no attempt was made to research this hypothesis or suggest the existence of segments. Someone else used the same word during the 1930s to portray a mystical study of human nature. These seemingly contradictory definitions had one thing in common: They sensed there could be a psychological profile of a population. All seemed to lack what is known as a good dependent variable for measurement—how close or how far each psychographic group was to a particular behavior or attitude.

When I first accidentally used the word, I was just combining two common words, psychology and demographics. Psychographics is an attempt to move away from earlier views of people expressed mainly in behavioral, demographic, and socioeconomic measures. Psychographics allows us to view a population as individuals with feelings and tendencies, addressed in compatible groups (segments) to make more efficient use of both of mass media and those that are targeted to particular portions of the population.

Not until 1967 was there a standard quantitative way of getting qualitative data about people. A computer clustering program made it possible to predict the chances of selling a product or an idea to a segment, and which medium is more likely to provide an aid to what we were trying to accomplish.

Credit for helping us to develop suitable projective devices must be given to a former associate of mine, psychologist Ernest Dichter. He did a great deal of the early work of putting psychological, sociological, and anthropological concepts into easily administered projective tests.

**LARGE SAMPLES**

The importance of being able to use large samples, which is a feature of psychographics, is that the study of a total population could finally be done with samples projectible to millions. Once we used to consider a sample of 100 quite large in a depth interview or focus group. With psychographics, we could finally use probability samples of about 1,200 to build marketing segments of the total population—and get media habits by each segment’s tendency to hold attitudes or behave a certain way—and the reasons for this.

This achievement had great importance because we could now profile media, as well as products, by their psychographic segments. A new development allows us to determine how a medium may influence the psychographic profile of its audience; in effect, doing a psychographic study of a medium and competition without the sizable expenditures normally associated with a major psychographics study.

My experience with what finally came to be known as psychographics goes back to 1948. While working with Dichter, I first thought of the usefulness of a segmentation technique that would cluster people by their tendency to think or act in a certain way.

Though he didn’t use the word psychographics to describe his work, Dan Yankelovich developed useful segments of watch buyers in the middle 1960s and wrote about this in the *Harvard Business Review*. This has to be considered one of the precursors of psychographics, as were studies in the early ‘60s about consumers’ responses to product benefits by Russ Haley and Shirley Young for Grey Advertising.

**MEANINGFUL NUMBERS**

My original concept was that learning whether the finding that a person earned a particular salary, say $25,000 per year, could be made more meaningful if we knew if that person had been earning $50,000 and was reduced to $25,000; if the individual had just been given a raise to $25,000; or if the person had been making $25,000 per year for a long time.

Depending on which situation applied, an individual’s reaction to products, communications, and even choice of media ought to be different, and this variable could be used for building segments. Everybody I spoke to agreed with the possible value of this concept, but nobody would invest money in it.

As we entered the computer age, it became possible to handle much larger amounts of information about people, and I got “fancier.” Not only did income status concern me, but also the individual’s level of expectation: aspirations about such things as product desires, political and personal goals, etc.

This also aroused a great deal of interest, but resulted in no money. In fact, for many years, the publisher of *Time* had me make presentations of the idea to him, one year even having me compile make-believe data to show what such a study might reveal and its possible importance to media. This also didn’t sell.

Meanwhile, I did studies throughout Europe for Caltex gasoline (a marketing combination of Socal
The long voyage from an idea to a research project took me from 1948 to 1965.

These studies gave me an opportunity to experiment with attitudinal questions that would later be incorporated into psychographics.

Suggestions from two of my then-employees, Louis Cohen and Larry Wolf, turned me in directions that worked ultimately by using variables (questions) with which advertisers, agencies, and media were familiar: what people actually bought, where (and if) they traveled, vacation habits, party and dinner customs, beverage consumption, product benefits sought, lifestyle and serving style and self-concept, media habits, and projective tests that revealed whether respondents were “appreciative” or “thankful” toward others.

MISSING LINK

I built segments with three classes of variables—responses about lifestyle (or serving style), self-concept, and benefits sought. These seemed most to reflect what groups of people had in common. These predicted, quite accurately, who were and were not early new-product buyers. This was one of the dependent variables that earlier attempts to profile people did not have.

The first study was sponsored by Time, using depth interviews. This research led to presentations at the annual World Association of Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) conference in Williamstown, Mass., and the Dublin (Ireland) conference of WAPOR in 1965 and 1966, respectively, and to a presentation to the AMA’s New York Chapter later in 1966. My papers were titled “Beyond the Demographics.”

The second most important advance is the use of what can best be called “special profile information” to form psychographic groups. One set was developed by Douglas Tigert of the University of Toronto in the 1970s. It involved what he called AIO: attitude (and activities), interests, and opinions.

HISTORICAL PARENTS

For me, the historical parents of psychographics, before it was even called that, were Paul Lazarsfeld and his associates during the 1950s at Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Statistics. He suggested that any research aimed at understanding consumer behavior must “involve an interplay among three sets of variables: predisposition, influences, and product attributes.”

By 1967, I felt strongly that a good psychographics study had to be tailored to illuminate a particular problem the researcher was trying to solve. The Time and Holiday studies were designed to separate the population into two segments: one that would be first in new-product purchasing and another segment of later adopters.

With my European affiliates, I acted as a Johnny Appleseed, planting the seeds of psychographics research in the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Germany.
has jumped on the bandwagon through its VALS method, using values as the segment discriminator. Many years earlier, a noted sociologist, Milton Rodeach, also promoted the use of value segmentation and presented a paper on values at the Dublin conference of WAPOR in the middle 1960s.

The area where there is still a great deal of work to be done is media segmentation: going beyond behavioral measures to learn which competing media are favored by psychographically qualified respondents in a particular segment.

A new psychographics technique for media involves content analyses of competing media, using pragmatic, psychological, sociological, and anthropological criteria. Q analysis is used, and the result is a segmentation of media from which one can predict potential audience size and their qualities and indicate which media are likely to be most effective. One advantage is that it costs only a fraction of other psychographic studies.

In a study by Vending Times magazine, I used as the criteria that determined the psychographics of competing magazines how each catered pragmatically to vending machine operators. The magazine with the lowest ranking vending psychographics also had the fewest vending articles—and the fewest readers.

The magazine with the highest number of vending articles had the best vending psychographics. To account for the influence of these psychographics on readership, I developed the “ratio of differences,” through percentages of differences, between competing magazines. Of course, this is an early and quite crude magazine psychographics technique. Later work will allow me to refine the method.

We are still at the dawn of the new day when media will be analyzed not just for demographics and socioeconomics, but also for audience attitudes. Using pragmatic, psychological, sociological, and anthropological measures in content analyses, we should provide psychographics media profiles to help media buyers.

This is not to say that the current state-of-the-art of psychographics has not been a powerful aid to the most efficient selection of media. It has. It’s just that we have a great deal more distance to travel to accomplish low-cost psychographics for media.

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