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# VIEWS

WINTER 2010  
VOLUME 9 • NUMBER 2

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**RIGHT PLACE,  
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*USING VOICE MESSAGING  
TO BE “IN THE MOMENT”*

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# Marketing & Happiness:

## Through the Looking Glass of Positive Psychology

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**M**arketers and market researchers frequently turn to the field of psychology for both inspiration and conceptual models. For example, psychoanalytic insights led to the widespread use of projective testing in our profession. Similarly, Carl Rogers' "active listening" and "unconditional positive regard" have certainly had an impact on the way we conduct focus groups and in-depth interviews. Some of us have also drawn upon Jungian thought to incorporate "archetypes" into our work. Also, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been fairly influential over the years, especially in terms of the realization that consumers have higher needs that can be addressed through products, advertising and market communications.

As a qualitative researcher and psychologist, I am particularly interested in a trend that has been revolutionizing psychology in recent years. I am referring here to the birth of Positive Psychology, which has spawned a large body of both research and practice devoted to understanding and enhancing human happiness.

Positive Psychology was officially “born” at the annual American Psychological Association conference in 1998 during Dr. Martin Seligman’s inaugural address as association president. Dr. Seligman, already well known for his pioneering work on the subject of learned helplessness and, later, on optimism, declared that psychology had too long focused on pathology and that the time had come for an empirical study of human strengths and human happiness.

There was a similar rallying cry at least 40 years earlier by humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Viktor Frankl and others to refocus psychology on healthy human functioning. Their ideas, rooted in existential philosophy, led to what became known as “the human potential movement,” and in many ways, these ideas have been absorbed into the larger culture.

Interestingly, Seligman made no mention of these important fore-runners. Presumably, he wanted to distance Positive Psychology from the human-potential movement, which had been criticized for its excesses and tarred with the brush of narcissism. More importantly, Seligman wanted to establish Positive Psychology on a firm scientific foundation. In this regard, he has certainly succeeded.

In just 12 years, the Positive Psychology movement has generated 64,000 research studies, 2 academic journals and an international professional association. For additional resonance on this movement, which seems to be the current zeitgeist, we

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have seen an explosion of popular interest in activities such as yoga and meditation, as well as a proliferation of books about happiness.

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### What Is Happiness?

First, it is important to note that there is no single, simple definition of happiness. Happiness is not only an emotion or a feeling defined by short-term, hedonistic pleasure, nor is it a simple Pollyanna approach to life.

Rather, what may be more important to the field of marketing research are the longer-lasting, deeper forms of happiness. A large body of psychological research reveals that happiness does not generally result from either amassing more money or collecting more “stuff.” Instead, the results of this research highlight the importance of virtues such as close ties with one’s family, friends and community. Research results also support the long-term value of exercising the virtues of generosity, forgiveness, gratitude, mindfulness and commitment to goals beyond one’s self, among others, to increase one’s happiness.

Historically, issues of happiness among various populations have been addressed by both spiritual and philosophical traditions. Past views of happiness have been articulated by the Greek philosophy, Judeo-Christian thought, depth psychology, utilitarianism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, among

others. Aristotle, for example, extols *eudaimonia*, which means to flourish through the exercise of one’s core virtues. Freud emphasizes the importance of satisfaction in both love and work. And, for Carl Jung, happiness lies in coming to terms with and expressing our deepest, authentic selves. In the United States, the Declaration of Independence boldly reflects the thoughts of Utilitarian philosophers John Stewart Mill and Jeremy Bentham in its emphasis on the inalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Dr. Seligman, in his groundbreaking book titled, *Authentic Happiness*, suggests that there are three kinds of happiness: (1) The Pleasant Life, (2) The Engaged Life and (3) The Meaningful Life. Furthermore, he notes that pleasure is only associated with the first one: The Pleasant Life.

Seligman and other positive psychologists talk about the “hedonic treadmill,” referring to the observation that hedonistic pursuits are never ultimately satisfied. Such people quickly adapt to pleasurable circumstances or activities, and like a drug addict, they crave even more. This tendency keeps us chasing after more money, more status and more possessions. The delusion that more money or more stuff will make us happy seems particularly hard to shake, despite a raft of studies reporting that, beyond a subsistence level, *income is not correlated with happiness*. Harvard professor Dan Gilbert similarly reports that we are not very good at predicting what will make us happy. After we get that long-awaited big job promotion, we



discover that we are no happier than we were before.

In part, this phenomenon is related to what professor Sonja Lyubomirsky has called our happiness “set point.” It is as if we each have an internal thermostat to maintain homeostatic balance in relation to an overall level of happiness. Thus, she reports that lottery winners tend to return to their original levels of happiness after a bit of time has passed. Perhaps more strikingly, so do those who have become quadriplegics or dialysis patients.

According to Lyubomirsky, our happiness is 50% genetic and maybe 10% due to circumstances in which we find ourselves. That leaves us with 40% wiggle room to cultivate long-term happiness through the exercise of what Seligman and others refer to as our “strengths and virtues.”

Dr. Seligman describes a study in which the entry essays from 180 novice nuns entering monastic life in 1932 were subsequently coded for positive feelings. At 88 years old, 90% of the “mostly cheerful” quarter was alive vs. 34% of the “least cheerful” quarter. By age 94, it was 54% vs. 11%.

Moreover, Positive Psychology challenges the notion that human nature is basically selfish. According to U.C. Berkeley professor Dr. Dacher Keltner, a re-reading of Darwin suggests “survival of the altruistic” rather than “survival of the fittest.”

Keltner quotes Darwin, “...Those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring.” In other words, a social instinct toward goodness and altruism has intrinsic survival value.

The latest brain research suggests that, in many ways, we are wired to “do good.” Mirror neurons, for example, set us up for an empathic understanding of other people. Recent research on the brain reveals much greater *plasticity* than previously realized; over time, our thoughts actually affect brain structure. The left frontal cortex has been found to be associated with positive emotions. Negative thoughts release the stress hormone cortisol and activate the limbic system. Positive thoughts, on the other hand, release different sets of chemicals, such as DHEA, which cleans up cortisol, slows the heart and relaxes the muscles. The hormone oxytocin sends signals of warmth, trust and devotion throughout the brain and body, and ultimately to other people.

### Happiness and Its Effect on the Brain and Body

Dr. Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin and Dr. Sarah Lazar carried out separate studies on the effects of meditation on the brain. Both researchers have independently confirmed that



meditation changes the brain. The longer a person has been meditating, the greater the measurable changes to the meditating person's brain.

A large body of research shows that happiness confers many benefits. For example, happy people tend to enjoy their jobs, live longer, have better health, earn more and have longer-lasting, more-satisfying marriages.

Perhaps a few quick examples from the burgeoning research literature on happiness will be illustrative for us to understand the psychological aspects of this principle. Dr. Seligman describes a study in which the entry essays from 180 novitiate nuns entering monastic life in 1932 were subsequently coded for positive feelings. At 88 years old, 90% of the "mostly cheerful" quarter was alive vs. 34% of the "least cheerful" quarter. By age 94, it was 54% vs. 11%.

Similarly, professor Dacher Keltner studied yearbook photos of 140 women who graduated from Mills College in 1960. His team focused on women whose photo revealed a "Duchenne" smile. (Named after a 19th century French neurologist, Guillaume Duchenne, this is a genuine smile that cannot be faked because it uses muscles that are not under their voluntary control.)

The women in Keltner's study were contacted at three different points of time over the course of 30 years. Women who had a Duchenne smile were more likely to be married, to stay married and to experience more personal well being.

There is also the famous longitudinal study by Harvard professor George Valiant. He studied around 500 men (including students from Harvard and men from Boston) when they were in their teens in the 1930s to today, when they are in their 80s and 90s. The result indicated that personality traits such as altruism, the ability to postpone gratification, future-mindedness



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In our focus groups, ethnographic studies and so on, we need to drill down to see what sustains consumers, what gives them hope, and even joy, in these challenging times. On behalf of our clients, we need to evoke the specific language that reflects the sorts of human capacities that Positive Psychology points us toward.

and humor were the best predictors of joy in social status, high income and vigorous old age. Of those inner-city men who displayed these traits when they were younger, 95% of them could still move heavy furniture, walk two miles and climb two flights of stairs in old age, whereas of those who did not display those traits, only 53% could perform these same tasks.

### Implications for Qual

What are the implications of these findings for those of us in qualitative market research? I maintain that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. This shift is reflected both in the explosion of happiness-related research and also in the flood of books, magazine articles and television specials that this research has spawned. Furthermore, this paradigm shift seems to be driven by threats to the environment and global economies. Increasingly, consumers are hunkering down and are looking for deeper sources of fulfillment that can sustain them during trying times.

A number of major brands already appear to have sensed this paradigm shift, and their advertising seems to reflect the findings of Positive Psychology. Consider the following ad campaigns:

- Coke: “Live Positively... Open Happiness”
- BMW: “We Don’t Just Make Cars... We Make Joy”
- Sears: “Life Well Spent”
- Dove: “Inner Beauty... True Colors”

- MasterCard: “Things Money Can’t Buy”
- Starbucks: “What If We’re Not Separate?”
- Allstate: “Protect The Basics”
- Kaiser Permanente: “Thrive!”

You can find video spots on YouTube for each of the campaigns above. If you take time to view these television commercials, you will have an opportunity to see why account planners and others in advertising/marketing communications have been studying the literature on Positive Psychology and are interested in the benefits it can provide.

These campaigns reflect an awareness that consumers have become tired of — and jaded toward — advertising based on a “deficit model,” beating the drum of everything they lack in order to find true happiness.

Unbridled capitalism is undoubtedly destructive in the long run, from the destruction of the environment to the near-collapse of the world economy to a widespread sense of alienation. Yet, people will continue to need goods and services, and other people will continue to provide them. What might Positive Psychology have to tell us about making the basics of the supply-and-demand chain fit better with our higher-level needs and our long-term survival?

The results of this research and practice clearly have important implications for us as qualitative market researchers, as we, too, can define ourselves to be in “the happiness business.” That is to say,

marketers want to provide their customers with products and services that will satisfy their needs and wants — i.e., make them happy. Our job as qualitative researchers is to help them do just that, by listening deeply to consumers and organizing what we learn in useful and compelling ways.

In our focus groups, ethnographic studies and so on, we need to drill down to see what sustains consumers, what gives them hope, and even joy, in these challenging times. On behalf of our clients, we need to evoke the specific language that reflects the sorts of human capacities that Positive Psychology points us toward.

If nothing else, the framework provided by Positive Psychology will likely help us to better listen to, understand and address — including such audiences as the “cultural creatives” — those committed to a green revolution and those seeking to create sustainability.

Positive Psychology can expand the scope of our models to include the higher dimensions of human experience and aspirations, such as the quest for happiness, the search for satisfaction and inner fulfillment, and the desire to do good.

To quote Rory Sutherland, vice-chair of Ogilvy in the U.K., “If you target people’s interests and beliefs rather than use demographics, I think you can create more resonant work, which people won’t want to skip but will in fact seek out or even propagate.” Indeed, our job is to assist in that process. 