



The world is becoming more and more complex – at the same time populists gain in importance with simple truths. Does enlightenment help?

In the last BrainCandy, we already talked about the fact that we know much less than we think we know. A small mental preparation: You understand about vitamins, don't you? They are added in many foods nowadays. Because they are supposed to be good for us. But what exactly are vitamins? What do they do to the body? Why do we need vitamins in the first place? Why should vitamin C be good for colds? And vitamin A for the eyes? How do you know the right dose? What are the top 10 natural products with the highest vitamin C value? And which have the most B12? Can water-soluble vitamins be overdosed rather than fat-soluble ones? Many of our customers have tried to make their brand more attractive by adding vitamins. To help, we discussed the knowledge about vitamins with their target groups. For our customers, this was almost always very sobering. Even the simplest things were not understood. Even basic questions could not be surely answered. Nevertheless, all participants had an opinion about vitamins. And they felt good about their opinion – until we managed to create uncertainty with detailed questions. In real life, however, we do not realize that we have only superficial knowledge – and that we do not change our opinion.

So we have opinion, even if it is not based on deep knowledge. When, as with vitamins, which are not necessarily harmful, it is also no problem. The industry will stick to the rules and will not overdose, so everything will be fine. But what if this objectively false opinion causes risks? You estimate wrongly the importance of medical check-ups and run far too late to the doctor? Or worse, if you do not vaccinate your children, because you are skeptical or even think that there is a conspiracy. Because it is assumed that only the pharma-

ceutical companies and doctors benefit from it, but the children become autistic thanks to the side effects. The safer we feel in our opinion, the more sure we are that we are on the right track. Like-minded people confirm us – and we do not realize that we got the science wrong.

The vaccination opponents believe in simple cause-effect causalities. Vaccination makes you sick because of the presence of mercury (there is a small truth: in some cases, thimerosal is present at an extremely low dose). And we can strengthen the defenses with good nutrition (also true). But the immune system is considerably more complex than the well-sounding concept appears and has certain defenses against certain pathogens only when it once defeated the causative agent. This is where the vaccination starts. Do enlightenment campaigns help? Apparently not, that's why we have this problem. Many studies show that these are largely ignored^{1,2}, after all, we feel safe. Even pediatricians do not succeed with it. It may even be the opposite, as the public attention enhances the conviction of being right. Salience by refreshing the memory. In Italy it has been recognized that enlightenment campaigns do not help. Italy has decided for a legal vaccination obligation.

Michael Ranney, a psychologist at the University of California, has been trying for years to find ways to convince people of climate change and then to trust the scientific consensus. One of his first observations was that very few people know something about the cause of climate change. Just 12% had the rough idea that 'atmospheric gases' block the heat. No one could make a complete statement. Only after the participants had revealed their ignorance, they were receptive to very brief, exact explanations, e.g. in the form of



very short videos. Their understanding has increased drastically, and now many accept mankind as the cause of climate change. Donald Trump was unfortunately not among the participants.

Ranney's results are promising, but it would be naive to assume that we could change society into knowledge-driven communities with a simple tool, and conspiracy theories get cut the ground from under feet. Because new information, which runs contrary to our simple causal models, is difficult to be understood and very easy to be rejected or simply ignored. Especially when our point of view is supported by people whom we trust. Especially in extreme social media groups. In the American election campaign, many such groups have been built from Russia, and have been ignored by Facebook for too long.

Presumably you have to go through Ranney's path and open the target group's eyes, that they and their peers have the science wrong. No one likes to be wrong. Where has the AfD (Ultra right wing party in Germany) achieved its best results? In the municipalities with the lowest immigration rate – and lower education. Lack of experience, lack of knowledge is a good breeding ground for simple causalities.

The authors of the book “The knowledge illusion”³ therefore question the principle of the plebiscite in the case of complex topics. This basic democracy can at best lead to a good result by chance, as most voters have an opinion, but no profound understanding. The authors hope for wise politicians, who employ the best experts to the respective topics. However, they are not optimistic, which is perhaps due to the fact that they are American professors.

Literature:

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Feedback, comments, criticisms about this article to:
braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com

The author

Ralph Ohnemus, CEO. Ralph Ohnemus, CEO. Director and principle shareholder of K&A BrandResearch since 2001. Was previously a customer of K&A BrandResearch for 15 years. National and international marketing and sales experience in senior management positions including FMCG, fashion, media and telecommunications – most recently as SVP consumer sales responsible for marketing, sales and subsidiary chains at Viag Interkom O2.

Contact: r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com

Ralph Ohnemus book

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