

The Psychology of Pain – and What It Means for Brand Communication

Pain brings disorder into our lives. They show that something is out of balance. But even if we try to suppress the real causes, our subconscious mind tells us very clearly: "We pay too little attention to ourselves and our body. We would have to fix something." But what does this conflict mean for brand communication?

Pain always triggers a psychological conflict between our emotional SELF, which wants to prevent any form of suffering, and the rational I, which questions the rapid elimination of pain by a painkiller: "Does a painkiller really solve the problem? Is so much chemistry good for you? Shouldn't you deal with your real problems?" We are increasingly questioning our lifestyle and this also reinforces our critical view of painkillers. This raises the question of the extent to which communication for painkillers takes this change into account.

Brands must offer solutions

A successful brand will take up this conflict and offer a solution. This solution offer can exist on the superficial level of pure and as fast as possible pain elimination or it succeeds in mitigating the deeper conflict between SELF and I. This works best when the brand tells a story that on the one hand stages the brand as a conflict solver and on the other hand has a high identification potential with the story and the protagonist. Furthermore, in a market that is characterized by high interchangeability of products, storytelling is the only real option to distinguish oneself from the competitor.

Storytelling is not yet the great strength of brand communication in the field of OTC as well as painkillers. As a rule, a very simple mechanism is used. You show the problem: "I'm not well, I'm suffering from my pain." They offer a solution: "The painkiller." You can see the result: "I am released from my pain." A solution to the fundamental conflict, as described above, is offered at most on the website of the respective brand in the form of a consultation.

Advertising for pain gels

Voltaren's current TV spot "What, there's chicken?" (Fig. 1) can serve as an example of how proper storytelling works: A somewhat lazy dog is surprised by the new dynamics of his mistress thanks to Voltaren. His counter-strategy is to try to bury Voltaren in the garden. Psychologically, the two sides of our personality are shown. The dog symbolizes our comfort, which then also leads to our complaints. We can only maintain this convenience if we do without Voltaren, bury it in the garden. Mistress, on the other hand, has become an active person and, thanks to Voltaren, has not only overcome her pain but also her inner "pig dog". We find ourselves in both protagonists, but our SELF gives preference to the mistress and the activity of the woman also convinces our I of the effectiveness of Voltaren.



Fig. 1: Voltaren Pain Gel - What, there is chicken?

Kytta has long advertised with an Indian according to the motto: "An Indian knows no pain." (Fig. 2) The Indian represents a myth that is deeply rooted in our subconscious. He lives in unity with nature. He knows how to use nature for himself. It is a symbol of strength. This is an archetypal image that has a very large effect on our SELF. Through the story, the natural active ingredient receives a high credibility. This satisfies our I.

Unfortunately, this TV spot was replaced by a trivial pain experience while dancing (Fig. 3). The spot first activates our fear of pain and thus leads to a negative emotion for the "SELF". Who wants to be reminded of their pain? Then the spot follows the classic mechanism: "I'm feeling bad, I'm taking Kytta, I'm fine again." Whether the "I" will be convinced remains doubtful. It is called a natural active ingredient, but unlike the earlier spot, it sticks to the claim.



Fig. 2: Kytta - From the Indian...



Fig. 3: ... to the afternoon dance

Advertising for painkillers

While Pain Gel's approaches to successful storytelling are given, the advertising for painkillers remains in the communication of the pure promise of action. Thomapyrin reduces its message to "15 minutes faster" and "3 times power" (Fig. 4). We can assume that it shows a young mother who is trying to reconcile work and childcare. In aspirin (Fig. 5) we see a young woman at the train station saying, "The pain is gone."

In other words, I am fully operational again. The headache is thus relieved of its problems and becomes a self-evident part of everyday life. Why worry when there is aspirin. The persons depicted do not offer our SELF any real possibility of identification, they are arbitrary and interchangeable. A real justification for the effectiveness is not offered to the I. The real problem of the two spots, however, is to be seen in the intensification of our inner conflict. It's just a matter of functioning quickly again and fulfilling our tasks. This corresponds less and less to the prevailing attitude to life. Reactances by our subconscious must be expected.

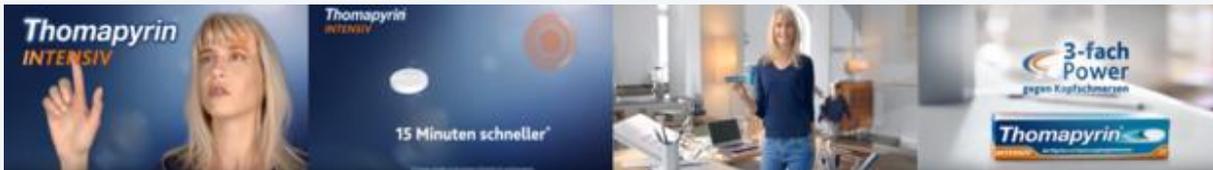


Fig. 4: Thomapyrin - To the point against headache



Fig. 5: Aspirin - The pain is gone

Result

While it has become a matter of course for many branded products to create identification possibilities through targeted storytelling and to make the benefits of the product emotionally tangible, this remains the exception in the advertising of painkillers. The persons depicted are only necessary accessories to communicate the product benefit. Fast effect is usually the only message and thus makes the individual products interchangeable. The emotional concerns about the use of painkillers are ignored and sometimes indirectly reinforced. The conflict over whether painkillers are really the best solution continues to smoulder. The search for insights that lead to more effective stories should begin.

About the author: As a psychologist, it is important to Melanie Sommer to uncover the psychological and often unconscious mechanisms of consumer behavior and to translate them into actionable recommendations for her customers. RSG Marketing Research sees itself as a problem solver for the client, with the aim of really understanding the customer and making his actions comprehensible and deriving adequate action strategies based on this. Our work is based on the proven psychological model of the SELF & I, which enables a differentiated explanation of consumer behavior.

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