

## Consciousness as corporate image management

By Geoffrey Miller

Miller, G. F. (2003). Consciousness as a corporate pep rally. EDGE. Comments on Nick Humphrey's model of consciousness.

<http://www.edge.org/documents/archive/edge144.html#miller>

I've argued in *The Mating Mind* that many of our communicative abilities – language, art, music, humor – evolved as a sort of genetic marketing strategy. They show potential mates how great our genes are, how well our brains work, how ingenious and charming we are. Brains that sell themselves best in the mating market leave the most copies of their genes, and that's enough to drive mental evolution.

Our minds evolved largely as marketing for our genes.

Yet my mind-as-marketing argument missed something. True, every large corporation needs marketing experts to lure potential consumers, investor-relations experts to lure potential investors, and public relations experts to influence the media. But corporations also need a sense of subjective well-being, an internal sense of morale formalized in their mission and vision statements, embodied in the esprit de corps of employees, and reinforced by within-company newsletters, intranet web sites, team-building retreats, and corporate pep rallies.

Nick Humphrey's 'A self worth having' nicely makes the point that human consciousness may have evolved to serve this sort of motivational function in the multi-billion-neuron corporation that we call the human brain. Consciousness may be the brain's ongoing corporate pep rally, in which its diverse agents and adaptations are continually reminded that they work for the common good of the company (the human phenotype), its profitability (reproductive success), and its stakeholders (genes).

Rupert Sheldrake, Dan Dennett and Dylan Evans are doubtful that the human brain needs such an aggrandized sense of subjective richness to prosper, when all other species do so well without such puzzling phenomenology. Do we really need subjective qualia to keep our neural circuits from becoming lazy and phoning in sick, like disaffected employees? If selfish genes can build adaptively selfish brains in every other species, why would we need the extra corporate propaganda provided by a unified subjective consciousness thickened in time, ornamented by sparkling qualia, super-charged by a sense of self?

One possible answer concerns the selfishness-eroding power of advanced mind-reading abilities and human empathy. Insofar as humans evolved uniquely potent ways to understand the beliefs and desires of other people – especially friends, family, mates, and offspring – our self-interest tends to get spread pretty thinly through our perspective-taking. Social understanding brings compassion, and compassion may dilute adaptive self-interest.

Perhaps subjective consciousness evolved to keep our own interests salient, front and center, when our mind-reading abilities would otherwise undermine our genetic narcissism.

Consider the phenomenology of extra-marital lust, for example. Ideally, married humans develop deep empathy with each other and a sense of shared interests that promote efficient partnerships and parenting. Yet with such benefits come possible genetic costs: over-

developed spousal empathy may deter adaptive affairs that produce more or better offspring with other partners. The hominid who felt total psychic unity with her long-term mate may miss valuable opportunities to copulate with superior short-term mates.

What she needs to override her strategic social mind-reading is a consciousness that is salient, self-centered, and seducible – a private romantic getaway from her social, spousal, and parental duties. She needs a sensorium in which a new lover's sweet talk can make her forget her husband's potential jealousy. Likewise, her husband needs a sensorium in which his empathic fidelity to the wife can lose itself in the warm, wet immediacy of the mistress's mouth.

Equally, both sexes need a subjective consciousness in which immediate pain and distress can over-ride empathy with a lover's irritabilities, addiction, and rages. Who will survive better: the battered wife whose mind-reading leads her to over-identify with her abuser, or the battered wife whose subjective pain makes her forget the drunken bastard's point of view and empowers her to leave? In these ways, one could imagine an evolutionary arms race between altruistic mind-reading empathy and selfish sensory consciousness.

I'm not sure this consciousness-versus-empathy model really works, though. There must be simpler, cheaper ways to turn off mind-reading when it's maladaptive. There must be simpler, cheaper ways to remember that one's genetic interests are centered in the experiential opportunities that surround one's own body.

Maybe the corporate newsletter is a better metaphor for consciousness than the corporate pep rally. Maybe consciousness is about the consistency of one's marketing messages, rather than the intensity of one's motivation. Most companies now use the IMC (integrated marketing communications) approach to selling products, which emphasizes the need for a unified corporate and brand image across all of one's promotions, packaging, publicity, advertising, sponsorships, public relations, employee relations, investor relations, and government lobbying.

The company's right hand must know what the company's left hand is doing, and this is hard to achieve in multi-national companies with thousands of diverse employees. If BMW's South African advertising portrays the company as technically proficient, BMW's customer care call center in Delhi better have a phone system that works well. If Monsanto's British press releases portray genetically modified crop seeds as magnanimous, pro-social benefits to humanity, its security sub-contractors protecting its experimental crop fields in Kansas better not beat up any anti-GMO protestors there.

The more complex the company, the more communication channels there are, and the more diverse its stake-holders are, the harder it is for every part of a corporation to stay 'on message'.

The human mind has evolved the greatest complexity, the most diverse communication channels, and the most diverse set of social relationships of any animal. Therefore, we face the greatest challenge in maintaining an integrated marketing communication strategy – a credibly consistent way of presenting ourselves to family, friends, mates, and other stake-holders in our well-being.

Consciousness may help solve this IMC problem by working as the brain's corporate newsletter. Consciousness needs subjective time to be 'thick' because it needs a news cycle of optimal length – not too fast to integrate a decent amount of information and analysis, not too slow to respond to emergencies. Consciousness needs to feel like a unified 'Cartesian theater' so the mind's diverse adaptations all stay 'on message', responding to the same set of challenges and

opportunities with a unified action plan that stays consistent with the corporate image and mission statement -- the sense of self.