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The Psychology of Everyday Living

Have you ever noticed . . . that people never answer what you [ask]?

—G. K. Chesterton, “The Innocence of Father Brown”

One day in Vienna in 1930, the owners of a new laundry asked Paul Lazarsfeld, a psychology instructor at the city’s famed university, to help them increase their business. Many Austrian women were reluctant to send out their laundry, the instructor learned, as they thought that doing so reduced their role as proper hausfrau. In interviewing existing customers, the psychologist learned that women who did use the laundry often first sent out their wash when an “emergency” occurred, such as a child becoming sick or houseguests unexpectedly dropping in. Once experiencing the joy of having someone else do their wash, however, the women were usually hooked, and became regular customers. This particular insight led the psychologist to suggest that the owners of the laundry send a letter describing the services of the business to every household in which a family member had recently died, knowing that the bereaved would find it difficult to do their own wash. The owners of the store tried the idea, and business instantly picked up, lighting a spark under a new kind of research that over the next few decades would revolutionize global consumer culture.¹

The Accidental Researcher

Paul Lazarsfeld’s clever, if ethically ambiguous, use of what he called the “psychological approach” to studying consumer behavior revealed the in-

disputable value of what would soon be called motivation (or motivational) research. Although he is hardly a household name, Lazarsfeld was one of the most important figures in the history of advertising and marketing, and his approach to gleaning information from consumers is much like the way it is still done today. Pioneering “the analysis of the complex web of reasons and motives that determines the goal strivings of human actions,” Lazarsfeld was, according to Lewis A. Coser, “the father of sophisticated studies of mass communication.” A disciple of Alfred Adler (his mother was a prominent Adlerian psychotherapist), Lazarsfeld absorbed the ideas of this most sociological of Freud’s followers, creating a new, hybrid form of social science in the process. His most famous study, *The Unemployed Workers of Marienthal*, completed when he was a young man in Vienna, was an early attempt to quantify sociological fieldwork, a once radical pursuit that he would be obsessed with for the rest of his career.²

Although a devout socialist, a quite typical affiliation among Viennese intellectuals between the wars, Lazarsfeld ironically found himself in the market research business when he needed to fund his *Wirtschafts Psychologisches Institut* (Psycho-Economic Institute), a center studying economic problems in Austria. “We were concerned with why our propaganda was unsuccessful,” the former member of the Socialist Student Movement remembered years later, “and wanted to conduct psychological studies to explain it.”³ With its depth interviews and analysis drawing from sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis, the institute almost accidentally found itself doing what were probably the most progressive market studies in the world in the 1930s. These studies were the beginnings of motivation research, something that one of Lazarsfeld’s students—Ernest Dichter—would bring to the United States and, in the process, change the course of American business.

Lazarsfeld’s inauspicious work with the Viennese laundry in 1930 would soon lead to much bigger things. That same year, Lazarsfeld offered to help a group of Americans in the city “promote the use of applied psychology among business” and conducted a series of interviews with people regarding their preferences of soap and what was perhaps the first survey of radio listeners. Regarding the latter, Lazarsfeld was interested in, as Anthony Heilbut wrote, “what kind of people listened to what kind of programs for what kind of reasons,” this another seedling that would sprout into motivation research. “The commercial applications were evident,” Heilbut noted, and marketers of perfume and chocolate were eager to apply Lazarsfeld’s findings. Working-class radio listeners in Austria preferred both strong perfume and

chocolate, Lazarsfeld discovered, speculating that the reason for this was that their economic condition made them “starved for pleasure.” This kind of neo-Freudian interpretation would define motivation research over the next few decades as intellectual descendants of Lazarsfeld kept Viennese psychology alive and well.⁴

After arriving in the United States in 1933 on a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship, Lazarsfeld chose to make America his home as the Nazis rose to power in Europe. (The success of his Marienthal study, with its socialist agenda, had attracted the attention of the police, another factor contributing to his decision to leave Austria while he could.) As a self-proclaimed “Marxist on leave,” Lazarsfeld’s arrival in the States in the thirties was particularly fortuitous, his own politics matching up nicely with FDR’s New Deal progressive reforms. After a brief stint at the University of Newark (now Rutgers University), Lazarsfeld started working for an up-and-coming executive at CBS, Frank Stanton, who would eventually become president of the network. With Stanton, who also had a Ph.D. in psychology, Lazarsfeld found himself doing the same kind of radio research in New York that he had done in Vienna, spelling out his mission in a 1935 article cowritten with Arthur Kornhauser. Via “a systematic view of how people’s marketing behavior is motivated,” the psychologist turned market researcher wrote in “The Analysis of Consumer Actions,” companies could “forecast and control consumer behavior,” an idea nothing less than revolutionary in the mid-1930s. Lazarsfeld, admittedly more interested in exploring new methodologies in the social sciences than in selling products or candidates, nevertheless had become not just an agent of consumerism but one of its leading visionaries.⁵

Lazarsfeld’s introduction of psychology-based, in-depth market research made a giant splash in a field in which counting bodies was the height of sophistication. Within a year of his arrival in the States, Lazarsfeld recalled, “the small fraternity of commercial market research experts got interested in my work” and invited him to talk at meetings and serve on committees of the brand-new American Marketing Association. In addition, the AMA asked Lazarsfeld to write several chapters for a new textbook it planned to publish, *The Techniques of Marketing Research*. One of the chapters contained references to depth psychology and is thus credited as the official beginning of motivation research.⁶ The man who was, according to Heilbut, “a product of refined European learning who hustled himself a position in the marketplace,” soon landed a job with the Rockefeller-subsidized Office of Radio Research at Princeton (which moved to Columbia University in 1939 and five years

later was renamed the Bureau of Applied Social Research). There Lazarsfeld, along with a team of notable psychologists (including his second wife, Herta Herzog, another Adlerian, and Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt school), reigned for decades, surveying radio listeners for ad agencies and sponsors.⁷

Again, with his move to Princeton, Lazarsfeld was in the right place at the right time. Market research was in a decidedly crude state and interest in surveying radio listeners was just beginning, making advertisers very receptive to innovative methodologies directly lifted from the social sciences. The kind of systematic interviewing done in classic sociological studies like Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* and Lloyd Warner's *Yankee City*, for example, was exactly what was needed to advance market research beyond simple "nose-counting."⁸ "Our idea was to try to determine . . . the role of radio in the lives of different types of listeners, the value of radio to people psychologically, and the various reasons why they like it," Lazarsfeld explained. The whopping salary of \$7,000 that came with the Princeton job was an offer he couldn't refuse. At the university, he consulted with some of the leading psychoanalysts of the day (including Karen Horney and Erich Fromm) to satisfy his curiosity about the role of radio in their patients' lives. "Can Freudian theory elucidate the entertainment value of radio and account for some especially successful programs?" Lazarsfeld asked the noted analysts; this convergence of social research with psychoanalytical case studies was unheard of in 1937.⁹

Lazarsfeld wasn't the only one in the 1930s using psychological theory to solve marketing problems, however. In 1935, for example, Donald Laird identified what he considered "irrational" behavior among purchasing agents, claiming that their tough negotiating was not so much about saving money for their company as a way to boost their own egos.¹⁰ A couple of Lazarsfeld's colleagues, Hadley Cantril and Rensis Likert, were also "important links between academic culture and the applied research of business and government," according to Jean Converse, and the three constituted a powerful troika of "survey research entrepreneurs." Unlike most other academics in the social sciences, these men were eager to venture outside the ivory tower, finding the emerging world of polls and surveys quite valuable to their work. While Cantril focused on polling and Likert would go on to develop his famous rating scale, Lazarsfeld stayed true to his roots in the Viennese school of motivation research, applying Freudian and Adlerian theory to the real world of consumer behavior. At the core of the school's thinking was what was referred to as "psychologically correct" questioning to identify the role that unconscious motivations played in buying things—hence "motivation

research,” or what Converse described as the exploration of “underlying motives, observation of involuntary actions, and free association of ideas and concepts.”¹¹

As his principal heir in the Viennese school, Ernest Dichter, would do on a much grander scale, Lazarsfeld brought an intellectual component to market research that was missing from the field in the 1930s and 1940s. Consumers’ purchase decisions were as complex as any, he felt, entirely worth studying in detail. Lazarsfeld’s 1935 article “The Art of Asking Why in Marketing Research” became a classic, a convincing argument that standard questionnaires were simply not revealing why consumers did the things they did. In the article, Lazarsfeld identified what he called “buyer behavior determinants of the first degree,” which included not just a product’s attributes but also consumers’ emotional likes and dislikes. There were also “buyer behavior determinants of the second degree,” consisting of the reasons for consumers’ likes and dislikes, which were unknown.¹² Lazarsfeld, however, was determined to discover them. “A careful collection of opinions is far superior to pseudo-scholarly tabulations of the type of statistics which have only a remote relationship to the special problem under investigation,” he wrote in another article a couple of years later, rebranding himself as a sociologist rather than a psychologist, because the former was more like a market researcher. At Columbia, students felt “they were in on the ground floor of an enterprise that believed it was about to remake social science, if not the world,” remembered one of them, Seymour Martin Lipset, who, like many on Lazarsfeld’s team, would go on to become a giant in the field.¹³

Although Lazarsfeld’s trailblazing work in market research was remarkable enough, an even bigger contribution may have been his role in bringing together the previously separate worlds of academia and business. In a 1941 talk to the National Association of Broadcasters, Lazarsfeld made it clear that “communication research [was now a] joint enterprise between industries and universities,” a way for academics to fund their work and an opportunity for American companies (like his clients CBS and the ad agency McCann-Erickson) to achieve their ambitious objectives. “The great innovation was the decision that contract work would be permitted,” he wrote decades later, speaking of his bosses at Princeton and Columbia, “a real turning point in the history of American universities.”¹⁴ Lazarsfeld’s own work focusing on identifying commonalities among people who shared opinions—to find out not just what individuals thought but if they formed a social group of some kind—was the stuff of marketers’ dreams. Out of this kind of leading-edge

research came, for example, Lazarsfeld's notion of "opinion leaders," that certain people shaped the views of the "masses"—this more than a half-century before Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*.¹⁵ "Thanks largely to his work, mechanical systems of observation could chart everything from voting preferences to tastes in mouthwash and deodorant," concluded Heilbut, the accidental researcher forging an entirely new way to understand the American consumer.¹⁶

The Public Pulse

An entirely new way to understand the American consumer would turn out to be exactly what American business needed after World War II. Much less than knowing consumers' unconscious reasons for buying or not buying things, business executives had precious little understanding of the most basic marketing issues, the first being whether there was a market at all. Immediately after the war, some corporations became determined to discover how big the postwar market for consumer goods would be, "a question that keeps many a manufacturer awake at night," as *Business Week* described it in 1946. While companies retooled to "turn guns into butter," as the saying went, shelves remained mostly empty, giving marketers no information about how much product companies should make or how much they might sell. Economic and social conditions were quite different after the war, making prewar numbers unreliable, managers believed.¹⁷

One company, for example, Silex, went the extra mile to try to figure out how many coffeemakers it should make, doing some innovative market research in Peoria, Illinois, which was then considered the most average of American communities. (Peoria replaced another Midwestern town, Muncie, Indiana—the subject of Robert and Helen Lynd's two Middletown studies—as what Charles McGovern called "a divining rod of dominant public sentiment.")¹⁸ Silex flooded Peoria with all the coffeemakers it could produce and then waited to see how long consumers would keep buying them, the key question being whether sales would be good not just during the expected initial "boom" period but for months after. Most companies believed Americans would buy anything and everything they could for some time after the war, having been deprived of most consumer products for half a decade. The company happily learned that sales of their coffeemakers kept percolating for the duration of their market test, news that "should cheer other manufacturers who are wondering how substantial their present order backlog really is."¹⁹

Silex wasn't the only company pursuing some interesting market research soon after the war to figure out what to do next. In 1947, for example, Ford gave consumers the chance to design a new car on paper (something more typical of today's "relationship marketing"), even asking them what they would pay for their dream automobile. Learning that consumers now wanted a lot more choices when it came to styling, colors, comfort, and safety than they did before the war, Ford realized it had a major gap between its research and sales departments and decided to do something about it. H. D. Everett, Jr., was quickly snatched up from Time, Inc., recruited to head up a seventeen-person research department at Ford created to "keep a finger on the public pulse." Besides farming out work to a number of suppliers, the market research department within the sales department also partnered with academics who were doing intriguing studies related to the driving experience. Anthropologists and anatomists at the University of Michigan were studying dashboard design, for example, and researchers at Northwestern University were looking into how and when drivers became fatigued. Ford was especially interested in how research findings differed by gender, fully aware that automobiles were designed for men and that, as *Business Week* reported the company's thinking, "maybe they should be changed to suit women too." Women from the Detroit area were brought to Dearborn to weigh in on issues of style and comfort, quite a radical step at the time given the accepted belief up to that point that automobiles were strictly a masculine domain. One research finding in particular—that husbands may have been the primary breadwinner but wives held the power to veto new car-buying decisions—no doubt shaped Ford's rather sudden interest in appealing to the interests of the woman of the house.²⁰

Silex and Ford were more the exceptions than the rule, however, with most managers picking up where they left off before the war and using their familiar tools of research. In the thirties, market researchers had gleaned loads of information from consumers about everything from automobiles to zippers, which gave them a good handle on product sales, market share, and media ratings. By far the biggest fish in the market research sea in 1950 was A. C. Nielsen, and its \$45 million in annual revenue was nearly six times that of its nearest competitor and constituted almost a quarter of the entire industry. Arthur C. Nielsen had begun issuing his indices of consumer sales in the early 1930s and hadn't looked back, his company zooming to become the top dog in the field with its purchase data and radio ratings that many companies depended on. Much of Nielsen's success had to do with its being among the

earliest users of business machines, the company's three thousand electronic tabulators and calculators whirring away. Nielsen had already ordered from Remington Rand one of the first Univacs, a vending-machine-sized contraption able to tumble numbers at what was considered lightning speed.²¹

Marketers also had at their disposal Gallup's and Roper's opinion polls, which had shown that Americans were willing to share their feelings on a variety of issues, even the touchy subjects of politics and religion. The first Kinsey Report, published in 1948, proved that Americans would speak at length about the most intimate details of their lives, something that boosted market researchers' confidence that they would get answers to their many much less intrusive questions. "Doorbells are being rung every day to find out which products people are buying," *Newsweek* reported in 1948, as the ramping up of the field caught the attention of the mainstream press and the American public. "The odds are getting better all the time that when the doorbell rings, a well-trained young lady will be standing there to say, 'We are making a survey,'" the magazine added, and the number and range of questions being asked grew as more organizations decided to invest in market research. In addition, more new products were being tested in homes before they were rolled out to the masses, with different elements of the marketing mix, such as packaging and advertising, carefully scrutinized through research. Market research was gradually getting more sophisticated after the war, slowly moving beyond the simple "counting of noses."²²

What perhaps was most interesting about the growth of the field was that it was taking place with little or no practical or ethical standards. How information was gathered and interpreted was left totally up to the organization and the individual, allowing plenty of room for highly questionable conclusions. Even market researchers, whose very jobs depended on being industry experts, had no real idea what was going on in their own field, as conducting the research was scattered among hundreds, perhaps thousands of companies, ad agencies, and consultants. The strongest, most obvious evidence that the field had some major bugs to work out was when opinion pollsters universally picked Dewey to beat Truman in the 1948 presidential election. As a result, many businesspeople wondered if the market researchers they had hired were applying the same sort of principles when making forecasts for them. Gallup had been off by 4.5 percent and Roper a lot more than that, the latter explaining that his firm's last poll was in September of that year and, with a Dewey landslide seemingly imminent, he had seen little reason to do another. (Roper had had much better luck with the previous three elections,

coming within 1 percent of the popular vote for FDR in 1936, 0.5 percent in 1940, and 0.2 percent in 1944, this trifecta making him nationally famous.)²³ Alfred Politz, who was then rapidly becoming the most trusted market researcher, thought the “Dewey Defeats Truman” fiasco would ultimately be good for the field, saying, “It will help get rid of the charlatans.”²⁴ Politz wasn’t the only one convinced that market research needed an overhaul, however. “All agree that it is high time the market-research business got together with itself and decided on a set of standards of practice to ensure honesty and high scientific fidelity in their work,” *Newsweek* wrote a few months after the worst blunder in opinion polling, one of the few things that people in the field did agree on.²⁵

The 1948 opinion poll fiasco, not to mention the rather sluggish evolution of the field, were reasons enough for market researchers to realize they had a serious problem on their hands. By mid-century, researchers were acutely aware that there was something missing from their field—specifically, that only one side of their big brains was working. “As marketing people, some of us have been so damnably busy quantifying that we have forgotten about qualitative research,” admitted Steuart Britt of McCann-Erickson, the main problem being that “we have plenty of marketing facts—but unfortunately we have little psychological information.” Plenty of material was available on how much of a given product was sold to whom and when but precious little on why, something postwar marketers found increasingly disquieting. Very soon, Britt’s wish for more “psychological information” would come true, as marketers looked to Vienna to find the answers to their many questions.²⁶

A Third Ear

It would not be Lazarsfeld, however, but one of his students who would realize the full potential of motivation research and, in doing so, rewrite the rules of how American business did business. Also trained as a psychologist in Vienna, Ernest Dichter arrived in the United States in 1938, ultimately churning out a flood of books, articles, and studies for clients, all grounded in his particular brand of Freudian thought. His positive view of consumer culture, that the material world allowed individuals to more fully express themselves, differed from that of many if not most social critics who were unhappy about, as one put it, the nation’s millions of status seekers. (Dichter’s pro-capitalist values also differed from those of Lazarsfeld, who was willing to work with clients in order to fund his work but would always remain a Marxist at heart.)

Dichter's upbeat take on the dynamics of consumer culture was unquestionably a reaction to or backlash against his own childhood experience, which was decidedly non-upbeat. Born in Vienna in 1907, the oldest of three sons, Dichter (who later changed his first name from Ernst to Ernest) had to leave school at the age of fourteen to support his family. The turmoil of World War I and the rise of Nazism instilled in him a longing for individual and social stability and prosperity. (Like thousands of underfed Viennese children, Dichter had been sent to Holland during the war, one of many experiences that led to his lifelong insecurity.) Working in his uncle's department store as a window decorator as a teenager, he was exposed to and enchanted by the universe of consumer goods, observing the psychic and even sexual power they seemed to hold over the well-to-do. His father's failure as a salesman made his interest in the good things of life even more intense, this outsider-looking-in view no doubt shaping his life's work.²⁷

Dichter ("poet" in German, rather fittingly) considered his red hair—something rather unusual in Austria—another major source of insecurity. "I was an outcast, and on top of that I was not a particularly good athlete," he remembered in his 1979 autobiography, *Getting Motivated*. Combined with the poverty he experienced as a child, Dichter's carrottop gave him what any Freudian shrink would diagnose as an inferiority complex and a set of neuroses from which he would never fully recover. This deep-rooted, lifelong insecurity afforded him a special ability to see it in others, however; his almost preternatural powers of perception were one of the main keys to his success. "Because of these doubts I became critical of myself, and I watched continuously to see whether people around me would discover this insecurity," he explained, thinking that "self-observation leads inevitably to an increased skill in observing other people." Dichter's Jewish background too certainly played an important role in his development; he would weave stories and parables into his ten- to forty-page typewritten reports in the spirit, so to speak, of rabbinical tradition. While he would turn out to be an atheist, Dichter was in fact sometimes called the "Messiah" of market research, an anointed savior ushering in a new age of prosperity for American business and the nation itself.²⁸

Once able to resume his education, which had been interrupted by the war, Dichter studied with Karl and Charlotte Buhler at the University of Vienna, soaking up their views of humanistic psychology and its emphasis on the self-motivated individual (Lazarsfeld too had studied with the legendary couple). Dichter was also strongly influenced by the general cognition theories and philosophical thinking of Moritz Schlick and the Viennese Circle of

the 1930s, these ideas adding to his rich intellectual stew. Lazarsfeld's methods of empirical social research too had a deep impact, the professor's interest in why somebody did or didn't choose to buy something contributing to Dichter's fascination with the role of motivation in people's lives. Dichter was one of Lazarsfeld's two star pupils, the other being his future second wife, Herta Herzog, who would also go on to great success in motivation research in America.²⁹

As Gerd Precht observed, the social, political, and cultural climate of Vienna in the early decades of the twentieth century was ideal for a mind like Dichter's to blossom, the collapse of the Austrian monarchy and the rise of modernism allowing more liberal thinking than was previously possible. Jewish intellectuals in particular were able to find their voice, forging a holistic approach to the social sciences that offered a refreshing and exciting alternative to the earlier era's rigid academic boundaries.³⁰ Peter Scheer has argued that psychoanalysis in particular was a distinctly Jewish phenomenon, that with the acceptance of Jews by universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries their knowledge could "finally [be] phrased in academic language." With its focus on desires and motives, psychoanalysis served as the natural framework for motivation research, allowing Viennese Jews like Lazarsfeld, Herzog, and Dichter to see its implications and applications for consumer research.³¹

By the early 1930s, however, in part because of its Jewish connections, psychoanalysis was a field that, despite its Viennese roots, was "despised" at the university (in fact, at all universities). Although psychoanalysis was technically banned, Dichter was able to gain a thorough understanding of the field through lectures by Alfred Adler, the founder of individual psychology (the second Viennese School of modern depth psychology), as well as those by Wilhelm Stekel, one of the premier psychoanalysts in Vienna. Dichter was also mentored by August Aichhorn, the founder of psychoanalytic pedagogy, who deepened his knowledge of the officially taboo subject. "Both were psychoanalysts, but of a very practical nature, interested in a more immediate application of analytic principles," Dichter recalled in his autobiography, so "opening up a psychoanalytic practice of a similar nature was therefore a very logical idea for me." Finally, Dichter himself went through Freudian psychoanalysis in Vienna as a learning experience (for free, by teaching his American analyst German), and this no doubt gave him personal familiarity with what the method could reveal about a person's inner feelings and desires.³²

With a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Vienna in hand (after

a brief stint at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he studied literature), Dichter began his own psychoanalytic practice in 1934 (in rooms across the street from those of the now elderly Sigmund Freud, whom Dichter never met).³³ Dichter's forte was as a career counselor, helping young men (many of them referred by Stekel) figure out what to do with their lives. Dichter's work funneled back into Lazarsfeld's Psycho-Economic Institute, which used Dichter's "data" in its sociological and market studies. Times were hard for Dichter, but fortunately his wife, Hedy, was a concert pianist, and she was able to support the household through her recitals. A few years later, Dichter got a job at the city's Psychoanalytic Institute, which gave him more training in Freudian and Adlerian theory. It was during these years, through his exploration of people's motives, that he recognized a link between his academic training in psychoanalysis and his fascination with consumer behavior. While in Vienna, "Ernest had already discovered his talent for the application of psychotherapy to the commercial arena, to marketing and advertising—in short, what he later established as motivational research," Hedy remembered more than half a century later.³⁴

After the Nazi takeover of Austria (and especially his month-long detainment for his association with the decidedly leftist Psychoanalytic Institute), the thirty-year-old Jewish man recognized that his life was in danger. Unlike many of his classmates (and two younger brothers), Dichter was actually not a Marxist, but he heeded the advice of one of his professors (a Nazi, in fact) to leave Austria.³⁵ The first stop was Paris, where Dichter worked as a salesman for a year, which gave him firsthand understanding of the power of a brand's "image." Dichter sold fake labels from expensive clothes, to be sewn into cheaper garments to make them appear to be the real thing. Although it was a shady business, Dichter could not have received a better education in how the perceived value of a product was more important than its quality—an idea he, perhaps more than anyone else, would bring to American business.³⁶

With the Nazis on his tail, Dichter, like other Austrian and German Jews (including Otto Preminger, Billy Wilder, Peter Drucker, and Bruno Bettelheim), decided to flee to the United States. When asked at the American consulate in Paris how he planned to make a living, Dichter replied he intended to "change the methods of marketing"; this made such an impact on the French official that he personally interceded to ensure that Dichter and his wife received their visa without paying the usual \$5,000 per person fee.³⁷ He and Hedy were fortunate indeed to have been granted a visa (some of Dichter's extended family in Austria were killed in the Holocaust). They ar-

rived in New York in September 1938 with a total of \$100 in their pockets. One of the first things Dichter did was to ask his secretary's brother-in-law, Henry Lee Smith, a Columbia University professor of phonetics (who had a radio program called "Where Do You Come From?"), help him develop "an all-American accent," so that people "would not be suspicious of my foreign background." Unlike many other immigrants (including Lazarsfeld, who would never lose his heavy Austrian accent), Dichter's English soon became nearly perfect, which helped him navigate the world of WASPish corporations and Madison Avenue.³⁸

In New York, Dichter soon found work doing conventional market research studies for various firms and ad agencies, hating every minute of it. Finding what he was doing simply unbearable, Dichter one day bought some letterhead paper and wrote letters to about a dozen companies, making them a hard-to-resist offer: to tell them why consumers did or didn't buy their products. "I am a young psychologist from Vienna and I have some interesting new ideas which can help you be more successful, effective, sell more and communicate better with your potential clients," the letter read, convincing enough to generate four replies. From this modest direct-mail campaign, he landed his first real consulting job, advising *Esquire* to focus its advertising on the nude pictures included in the magazine at the time, something that had not occurred to the publisher. Although today the idea of applying the principles of European-based psychology to marketing and advertising seems perfectly obvious, clients were—not surprisingly—initially taken aback by Dichter's literally foreign ideas ("His way of thinking was not American," as Sheer explained it).³⁹ Knowing that Lazarsfeld had already established himself as a rising star in the field, Dichter also called his ex-professor, who had fled to the United States five years earlier, hoping he could help him break into the small but growing area of "depth research." Interestingly, Lazarsfeld suggested that Dichter think twice about his career plans, telling him that American businessmen were obsessed with numbers and statistics and had precious little interest in using psychology to decode consumers' wants and needs.⁴⁰

Dichter was, of course, undeterred. Lazarsfeld recommended Dichter to Compton Advertising, the agency for Ivory soap, and Dichter was soon telling executives at the agency that bathing was both an erotic experience ("one of the few occasions when the puritanical American was allowed to caress himself or herself," he said) and a purification ritual, observations that were not the kind of thing that businessmen in 1939 were used to hearing. Dichter

also talked about Ivory's "image," the first time that the term was used in marketing or advertising. ("I stole it," Dichter later admitted, explaining that the source of the term was the Latin *imago*, which in Gestalt psychology means the overall impression of a person.)⁴¹ For the Ivory project (and a fee of \$2 per interview), Dichter spoke to a hundred people about bathing and soap, one of his key findings being that the Saturday night bath was considered very special among women going out on a date, in case romance happened to come their way. "So he saw that soap was more than soap, and a bath was more than a bath," his wife Hedy remembered almost sixty years later. Dichter even came up with an advertising slogan for the brand: "Be smart, get a fresh start with Ivory soap"—"because," he explained decades later, "bathing, in its old, ritualistic, anthropological sense, is getting rid of all your bad feelings, your sins, your immorality, and cleansing yourself, baptism, etc." Finally, Dichter explained that the personality of a brand should match that of the consumer, a notion almost as shocking as his sexual interpretation of bathing, in what was the first motivation research study in the United States.⁴²

If his projects for *Esquire* and Ivory were groundbreaking, his work for his next client, Chrysler, was positively radical. Dichter had been asked to help Chrysler and its ad agency figure out how to market Plymouth models, and he came up with the idea that an automobile was perceived by American men as either a kind of wife or a kind of mistress. Dichter also told Chrysler to put sexual double entendre in its advertising ("It fits me like a glove" and "You just slip it in" were two lines he suggested), certainly not something the car company had heard before. Based on his research, Chrysler decided to run ads in women's magazines, the first time in automobile history such a thing was done. As coup de grâce, Dichter advised Chrysler that it could sell more Plymouth sedans by advertising more convertibles, this kind of logic only adding to the man's reputation for unconventional thinking.⁴³

Dichter's work for Chrysler made him nationally famous, his nontraditional views reported first in the trades and then in *Time* magazine.⁴⁴ During the war years, with few consumer products for people to sell or buy, Dichter worked alongside Lazarsfeld at CBS under Frank Stanton, then the director of research. As a program psychologist for CBS, Dichter analyzed radio programs, especially soap operas, trying to match shows with particular personality types. "Not being particularly fond of Germany," as he later put it, he also volunteered to analyze Hitler's speeches and develop counter-propaganda, doing his bit for the war effort. As soon as America was back in business, Dichter founded the Institute for Research for Mass Motivation, a

company he would run for more than four decades (renamed a number of times).⁴⁵

Unlike his mentor, Paul Lazarsfeld, Dichter was convinced that psychology was exactly what American business needed after the war, making his case to an increasingly receptive audience intent on jump-starting the post-war economy. Consumption was falling “behind” production, and the pre-war ways of selling were now outmoded and inefficient, he explained in a 1947 *Harvard Business Review* article. In order to evolve from a “medicine man” approach, marketers had to address consumers’ emotions, irrational behavior, and unconscious drives, which were much more basic and powerful than logic. Dichter extended his thinking in his first book, *The Psychology of Everyday Living*, arguing that the things around us mean much more than appearances would suggest.⁴⁶

Although Lazarsfeld and Dichter didn’t agree on the long-term viability of psychology in the business world, Lazarsfeld’s 1935 article “The Art of Asking Why” had a profound influence on Dichter (and many others), helping him make the connections between psychoanalytic theory and qualitative market research. Through his depth interviews, Dichter listened with what Theodor Reik had called “a third ear,” encouraging subjects to tell stories, recall memories, and free associate to get beyond rational thought. Role-playing through “psychodramas,” in which subjects pretended they were objects, companies, or other people was one of Dichter’s favorite techniques. Many other techniques that Dichter clearly borrowed from psychoanalysis—the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), transactional analysis, phrase completion, association tests, caricatures, animal comparisons, and the Rorschach test—soon became the standard tools of motivation research. Dichter’s written reports were as nonlinear as his interviews, filled with verbatim quotes from subjects, stories, and off-the-cuff impressions, a long way from other researchers’ statistical tables and charts.⁴⁷ Dichter “sifted out the essentials [of Freudian psychology],” noted Patrick Schierholz, who considered Dichter more than any other psychotherapist in history “especially concerned with the practical application.”⁴⁸

Perhaps more important than anything else, the psychoanalytic foundation of motivation research shifted the dynamic between marketer and consumer from an “us versus them” relationship to much more of a partnership. Dichter frequently recommended that the client “reorient” consumers by encouraging them to try new things and by advertising products in emotional terms rather than through facts (Esso’s “tiger in your tank” versus

“high octane rating” is probably the most famous example). Dichter was also fond of telling clients to give consumers what they wanted, something which of course makes a lot of sense but was (and is) frequently not done. Many Americans in the early 1950s wanted to borrow money but didn’t want to take out loans, for example, so Dichter told the bank he was working for to provide what would become known as overdraft protection, the first time this was done.⁴⁹ Dichter also came up with the idea of the car clock, telling automobile manufacturers that drivers wanted to know how fast they were going in real time rather than just according to the speedometer’s miles per hour. Thinking moms did not like to be considered bad mothers, so Dichter told his supermarket client to place candy at the cash registers to make it more of an impulse item rather than regular food, just one of many ideas he had regarding how grocery store layout should be changed.⁵⁰ Throughout his career, Dichter consistently maintained that the role of women in the family’s purchase decisions was greater than popularly believed, which alone was a major contribution to marketing thought.⁵¹

While he drew from the Platonic (and Aristotelian) tradition of problem solving through discussion, Dichter challenged Plato by arguing it was emotion, not reason, that ruled human behavior. Dichter took an “existentialist approach to human self-realization through action,” wrote Cudlik and Steiner, maintaining that self-understanding could be achieved only through internal means rather than by external religious or philosophical systems and beliefs. God was inside, he insisted, and the institutions of faith actually hindered true self-fulfillment and happiness. In Dichter’s perfect world, the human being was his or her own God, disinclined to delegate his or her freedom to a “higher” power. The Edenic paradise of the popular imagination was one of ignorance and static tranquility, an illusion compared to the very real (and more demanding) paradise consisting of intellectual growth and creative challenges. Dichter thus fully embraced Kant’s idea of “liberation from self-inflicted dependency,” that one was free only if one had faith in oneself. Rather than spend time and energy dreaming of a perfect paradise perhaps waiting in the future, it was the journey of this life, not its destination, that really mattered (contentedness, he believed, was equivalent with death). Dichter defined his own primary motivation as “creative discontent,” even subtitled his autobiography in the original German version “The Autobiography of a Creatively Discontented Person.” “Getting there is all the fun” was Dichter’s motto, the process not just half of the joy to be had in life but every bit of it.⁵²

The Research Bug Is Spreading

Mostly due to Dichter's work for a growing number of curious clients, motivation research was by the early fifties beginning to be taken very seriously in formal advertising and marketing circles. It was regarded as having stolen the show at the American Marketing Association's 1952 annual convention in Chicago, for one thing, and the social sciences were featured in the *Chicago Tribune's* prestigious Distribution and Advertising Forum that year. In addition, the lead article in the fall issue of the *Journal of Marketing* was devoted to the role that psychology could play in the business world, as clear a sign of official recognition as any.⁵³

As it became a genuine, recognizable entity, motivation research was considered a key turning point not just in market research but also in American business, offering managers something they had never possessed before—the “why” driving consumer behavior. “When it comes to explaining the things that spur people to buy or act, the researchers usually have to bow out,” wrote *Business Week* in 1953, this not knowing what prompts people being “a fact that has long galled advertising men.” But now, finally, there was something that could penetrate consumers' thick skulls, a technique grounded in that mysterious, somewhat dangerous realm, psychology. “Madison Avenue is preparing a concerted onslaught on the consumer to find out what makes him tick,” the magazine reported, “this effort to pry off the top of the consumer's head . . . a long time in the making.” Motivation research wasn't just a new technique, however, it was quite possibly the key to the new way of business in the postwar years. The century-old age of “economic man,” in which consumers acted predictably according to their income level and how much products cost, was over; a new age of “psychological man” had begun. Understanding this new man—unpredictable, complex, independent—required a new, more sophisticated set of tools, and motivation research was, by all appearances, the handiest one in the kit.⁵⁴

Given the range of things motivation research could supposedly do, it's not surprising how excited marketers were when it became water cooler talk. Motivation research could serve as a predictive tool, many thought, tipping off marketers to consumers' behavior before they acted. Knowing how consumers decided to spend their discretionary money was a gold mine, and motivation research was said to be able to expose the factors leading someone to choose to buy new furniture, for example, versus a new car. Insight into the dynamics of brand selection was another huge deliverable of motivation

research, went the thinking at the time, as the technique was able to pinpoint why a consumer purchased Brand X versus Brand Y. Marketers operating in categories in which there was little real differentiation—beer or cigarettes, for example—were especially thrilled at this possibility, viewing motivation research as the magic bullet to make their brands the desired Brand X.⁵⁵

The definitive indication that motivation research had reached the big time in 1953 was the publication of *An Introductory Bibliography of Motivation Research*, which listed almost five hundred books and articles related to the subject. What made the book significant was that it was published by the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF), the joint research organization of the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA) and the Association of National Advertisers (ANA). With this book, the ARF was essentially canonizing motivation research, giving its blessing to the technique as a legitimate research tool that marketers and agencies could and should use. ARF's appointing a Committee on Motivation Research the previous year would in fact mark the beginning of a deep commitment to motivation research over the next decade or so. The following year, ARF published a glossary of more than five hundred motivation-research-related terms that advertisers should be familiar with, educating advertisers about this still relatively new technique. Just a couple of definitions included in the *E* section of the glossary suggested that motivation research really was like a foreign language requiring its own dictionary, with psychology-challenged marketers learning such terms as:

EGOISM (Psychiatry): the classification and evaluation of things only in terms of one's personal standards and values.

EIDETIC IMAGERY (Psychology): remembering by being able to call up and "see" in the *mind* a vivid, almost real, picture of a previously seen *object* or situation.⁵⁶

As one might imagine, the ARF's arming its members with a psychology-oriented bibliography and glossary was hardly an easy task. Besides the sheer volume of material contained in Psychology 101, there were of course different schools of thought in the field whose members often saw the sky in very different colors. Negotiating the distance between the Freudians and the Adlerians, say, or between the behaviorists and the Gestalt people, was a tricky business, leading the ARF to try to stay somewhere in the middle of the enormous field. Interestingly, one word used (a lot) in motivation research that the ARF opted not to even attempt to define in its glossary was "moti-

vation,” the consultants it hired to do the job advising that it just meant too many different things to different psychologists. Many of the terms the ARF was tossing out to its members were certainly esoteric, but advertisers were often quite familiar with their meanings as used in their trade. “Voyeurism” and “narcissism” may have been new words to some, for example, but businesspeople immediately recognized their meaning upon reading their definitions, well versed in appealing to such tried-and-true consumer behavior. After the glossary and bibliography were published, the ARF’s next step was to put together a complete listing of organizations that performed motivation research, the psychologists and psychiatrists consulting in the field, and ad agencies with motivation research departments. “Where Madison Avenue will take Freud remains to be seen,” *Business Week* wrapped up, but one thing the magazine felt was certain: “The research bug is spreading.”⁵⁷

A quick survey of how motivation research was being used and by whom made it clear that the research bug was indeed spreading. A wide range of firms was pursuing a rather startling variety of projects in the early 1950s, with motivation research rapidly becoming the market research technique du jour across the country. Lazarsfeld’s Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia, with its structured depth interviewing (in which questions were “fixed” or “closed” so the findings could then be quantified), was exploring food mixes, for example, telling its client that it should avoid using the terms “easy” and “last-minute” in advertising copy because many women felt guilt and shame in using convenience foods. Applied Psychology Associates, asked to find out why people who owned television sets continued to see movies in theaters, found through motivation research that people often projected themselves into one or more roles portrayed in films. Role-playing was more real in movie theaters than on tiny, black-and-white sets in one’s living room surrounded by relatives, the firm pointed out to its film industry client, information that was no doubt used to make the cinematic experience even more lifelike.⁵⁸

There seemed to be no limit to the kind of insights motivation research could reveal—and the technique was assumed to be able to help resolve any marketing situation or problem. Richard Manville Research, a firm specializing in sensory issues, told its baby oil client that, based on motivation research findings, its product should smell the way a baby is supposed to smell, whatever that is. Nejeliski and Company learned that many women bought and kept spices in their kitchens but were afraid to use them, thinking they were only for expert chefs. Weiss and Geller, a Chicago ad agency special-

izing in motivation research, discovered that many women wore lingerie not for their lovers but for themselves, the sexy underwear functioning as a form of narcissism or self-adoration. In his motivation research work, William A. Yoell ascertained that cat owners felt that their pets got tired of being served the same food everyday, projecting human values onto the animals. Burleigh Gardner at Social Research International (SRI) also was working in pet foods, learning that dog owners didn't like seeing fancy breeds in commercials, thinking they made their own mutts look like, well, mutts. SRI was also using motivation research in the health-care category, coming to the conclusion that users of pain relievers were mostly hypochondriacs and that heavy users of cough drops liked them primarily because they tasted like candy.⁵⁹

Motivation research was shifting the plates of not only market research but also its first cousin, advertising. To some admen of a certain age, motivation research reminded them of when radio invaded their business with a vengeance in the late 1920s and early 1930s and, more recently, when television did the same. And like these two revolutionary media, motivation research was, as one middle-aged gray flannel suiter said in 1953, for the "upward-mobility boys." Much as in the case of another revolutionary idea—the Internet—that would change the rules of business a half-century later, younger agency people were often most receptive to motivation research, seeing an opportunity to jump over their more senior colleagues. Older advertising and marketing executives saw motivation research as a distinct threat, a new-fangled way of thinking that was capable of putting them out to pasture.⁶⁰ Indeed, ad agencies like Needham, Louis and Brosby in Chicago were now looking for people with graduate degrees in psychology, economics, statistics, or marketing; the qualifications of advertising past—the right pedigree and a pronounced ability to hold one's liquor—were no longer enough to get or keep a job. Motivation research was also demanding more collaboration among agency employees than before, with a team of a couple of psychologists, an economist, and a statistician typically working together on a project. What happened to the good old days when a winning personality and a big expense account were how to succeed in advertising without really trying?⁶¹

In addition, some advertising copywriters were struggling with Dichter-esque findings, wondering for example what creative tack to take with the idea that teenage girls used soap not to get rid of acne but rather to "wash off the feeling of guilt that comes from newly awakened sexual desire." Smoking, similarly, was really about fulfilling "oral erotic needs," motivation research theory went—hardly ideal fodder for copywriters to pitch cigarettes. Men

who didn't like to fly definitely feared their plane crashing, but they suffered from an even greater fear of "sexual relationships with strange women," another motivation research study for American Airlines suggested, which was certainly difficult to work into a magazine ad. This new breed of researchers might be brilliant, some copywriters were thinking, but they sure weren't making their jobs any easier.⁶²

Besides upsetting the ad agency apple cart, the rise of motivation research was leading more and more Ph.D.s to become allies of American business, a distressing trend to some. "Seduced by the advertising industry, an increasing number of social scientists are turning into super-hucksters," thought "Ralph Goodman" (a pseudonym), who alleged that these psychologists and sociologists were selling out their expertise in exchange for a fat check. Whether involved in Weiss and Geller's attempt to get coal miners in eastern Pennsylvania to chew more gum (to relieve their frustrations), McCann-Erickson's pursuit to get heavy drinkers to be even heavier drinkers, or SRI's concerted efforts to find a way to tell cigarette smokers that the product was pleasurable and wouldn't kill them, social scientists were now a primary weapon in marketers' arsenal. For better or worse, many if not most of the psychologists and sociologists who were cashing the fat checks were not hacks but bona fide authorities in their field, a world-class collection of current or ex-academics from universities like Columbia, Chicago, Michigan, and Yale. Most disturbing to Goodman was that most of these same types were known for supporting economic reforms to encourage greater social equality, yet here they were eagerly stoking the capitalist machine. "If the social scientist becomes the hireling of advertising and business," he asked, how can he study objectively their social implications?" A reasonable question indeed.⁶³

Is the Prune a Witch?

Some outside the industry saw motivation research as a more serious threat than forcing some members of the old boys' club into early retirement, making copywriters work harder, and leading Ph.D.s to become marketers' mercenaries. In his 1953 article "Is the Prune a Witch?" Robert Graham painted a not very pretty picture of how motivation research worked, the first real trickle of criticism that would soon become a torrent: "Advertisements are like tacks placed in the road, and the mind of the American consumer is somewhat like an automobile tire. The outer layers of the tire, made of black, smoke-cured apathy, are resilient and hard to pierce. But a good sharp tack

can do it, and a superior tack can go on and puncture the inner tube. When that happens, the consumer comes to a shuddering halt and the man who put the tack in the road, or hired somebody else to do it for him, steps out of the bushes and sells the consumer an icebox.”⁶⁴ Although there were signs soon after the war that advertisers were placing tacks in the road, Graham thought, it wasn’t until the spread of motivation research in the early 1950s that some major blowouts started taking place. Graham called motivation research “the new liturgy” on Madison Avenue (“the Appian Way of the advertising world”) and was mightily concerned about the power of this new religion. “If motivational research can in fact supply the right answer, and if the copy writer can translate it into understandable and appealing terms, the adman will have a tack that will penetrate tire, tube, fender, and windshield and stab the consumer right in the gizzard,” he fretted.⁶⁵

Graham’s problem with motivation research was actually twofold. First, like Goodman, he thought that psychologists were prostituting themselves, applying their knowledge to an area in which they had no business being. And this was no ordinary knowledge, Graham argued, the social scientist being “the inheritor of three thousand years of western man’s effort to understand himself.” Great minds—Aquinas, Da Vinci, Descartes, Jefferson, and many others—had created the arts and sciences, and now headshrinkers were using this phenomenal body of knowledge to help market detergents and deodorants. Second, Graham claimed, psychologists had what amounted to “insider information” regarding the human mind, he or she whispering sweet nothings of consumers’ neuroses into marketers’ ears. Equipped with this information, marketers could then not just play upon people’s prejudices and anxieties but actually create them, if doing so would help sell their product. “It is possible that an irresponsible social scientist will feed dangerous material to an irresponsible adman,” Graham worried, this worst-case scenario capable of causing real harm to individuals.⁶⁶

One social scientist who would be labeled both irresponsible and dangerous was James Vicary. By 1953, Vicary, whom Vance Packard would call a few years later “perhaps the most genial and ingratiating of all the major figures operating independent depth-probing firms,” had an impressive roster of clients, including Benton & Bowles, J. Walter Thompson, and BBDO, all blue-chip agencies.⁶⁷ Vicary’s favorite tool was free word association, in which a word was recited to a respondent, who replied with the first word or phrase that came to mind. This Freudian game of “Password” supposedly revealed people’s inner, unfiltered thoughts, but Vicary liked it just as much because

it required less time than the hours (and sometimes days) of the depth interview and, as important, there was less opportunity for respondents to “cheat.” Having to reply every three seconds gave interviewees little time to invent something, in other words, making it much easier to simply tell the truth. Vicary had put himself on the motivation research map with a study for a major brewery, telling executives not to put the word “lagered” into its ads, as they were thinking of doing. Word association had revealed that more than a third of respondents replied with terms not particularly desirable when thinking of beer, specifically “tired,” “drunk,” “lazy,” “linger,” and “dizzy.”⁶⁸

Vicary’s motivation research study for the Chicago-based Commonwealth Edison Company also helped make him the go-to guy for anything word-related in the early 1950s. Again using his pet methodology, Vicary found that of the hundreds of associations given for “Chicago,” six were strongest, and he advised his client to not only include them in its ads but also put them in a single sentence in descending order of importance: “Chicago is a *city* in *Illinois*, sometimes referred to as *windy*, is known for its *stockyards*, *gangsters*, and in the past for the great *fire* which destroyed the town,” went the first sentence in the ad, on target from a research perspective, perhaps, but not the stuff of creative genius. (Thankfully, Vicary did not go so far as to recommend that the power company try to construct a sentence with other words that respondents frequently associated with “Chicago,” including “Sister Carrie,” “jazz bands,” “the City of Hogs,” and “meat cleavers.”) Vicary was so smitten with word association that he not only employed it as his top motivation research tool but actually tried to use it to name his children. Expecting a boy, he and his wife decided to name him Simon. “Simon Vicary seemed to us to have a fine sound,” he thought, but the name didn’t pass muster in a word association test. “When we tried it on our friends,” Vicary explained, “we got associations like ‘Simon Legree’ and ‘Simple Simon,’” causing the couple to rethink their decision. As it turned out, the Vicarys’ conundrum was all for naught. “The child was a girl anyway,” he said, and “we named her Anne.”⁶⁹

Fortunately for readers of print ads, other motivation researchers were fonder of projective techniques using pictures rather than words, thinking that visual imagery more deeply penetrated the unconscious than did linguistics. One such test was “thematic apperception,” in which respondents were shown a picture and then asked to construct a story about it. Another test flipped this around, where respondents told a story and were then asked to draw a picture visually representing it. One of the most unusual motivation research tools had to be the Szondi test, in which respondents were shown

photographs of human faces and asked, “With which one of these people would you like to go on a long train trip?” or a similar question. The catch was that all the people in the photographs were insane, with respondents presumably likely to pick out the person whose madness most closely resembled his or her own (common psychological thought in the 1950s was that the man or woman on the street was about 5 percent mad). An interesting test, to say the least, but one can only wonder about its value regarding marketers’ biggest concern, to move product.⁷⁰

The case of prunes neatly illustrated how motivation research findings could vary a great deal based on the consultant used and his methodology of choice. Vicary and Dichter each deconstructed consumer attitudes toward the dried fruit at about the same time, and the results of the former’s word association tests emerged as much different from those produced by the latter’s depth interviews. Vicary’s research with two hundred men and women indicated that prune marketers should flaunt rather than cloak the prune’s *laxative* connotations, as well as remind consumers that the purple things were *plums* and *fruit* (these three italicized words topping his association test.) For prune marketers, this was good news, allaying their fears about their product being best known as a laxative.⁷¹

Dichter, in contrast, came back to the prune people with less cheerful and far more complicated news. Also interviewing two hundred people, the doctor discovered an array of negative associations with the unpopular fruit, chiefly that it was a symbol of old age, no longer really natural, an unpleasant reminder of parental authority, socially embarrassing to serve to guests, associated with hospitals, the army, and boardinghouses, and, last but not least, primarily eaten by peculiar people. Dichter, however, was just getting going on what he called a “scape-goat food,” “Puritan,” and something “meager, rough and joyless.” “The prune is resented as a freak and an intruder,” the psychologist believed, and those who eat them were viewed as equally odd and unwelcome. Dichter also thought the prune was a “witch,” the edible equivalent to “a wrinkled, ugly, sterile old spinster,” this last observation no doubt making the fruit’s marketers downright despondent. The fact that the prune grew year round while most fruits were seasonal was for Dichter a “rebellion against nature,” its blackness making it that much more “sinister and dangerous.”⁷²

Although Dichter’s report was far more disturbing than Vicary’s, he did see an upside. Among his forty suggestions on how the prune marketers could make the best of their fruit’s characteristics, was that they should compare the ugly ducklings with more beautiful products of nature. Prunes

could be, Dichter envisioned, “the black diamonds of the fruit family,” and such an ad copy would persuade housewives to proudly serve them to company, unashamed of their cathartic qualities. Its dignity restored, the prune could be transformed into “the California wonder fruit,” Dichter concluded, something the agency of record on the account, Botsford, Constantine and Gardner of San Francisco, took to heart.⁷³ From this one case study, it’s obvious how difficult it was for clients to fully believe Vicary’s brand of short and sweet findings and make sense out of Dichter’s Homeric ones. The output of motivation research was, as this case study suggested, typically highly unpredictable and often not very user friendly. “In a single lunch hour Dichter will give an adman enough new thoughts to mobilize him upward like a jet plane,” observed Robert Graham, but it was then “up to the adman to sort these ideas as an umpire sorts ball and strikes.”⁷⁴

They’re Selling Your Unconscious

Unable to ignore this new kind of market research taking American business by storm, editors at *Business Week* posed a number of questions they thought “any alert and reasonably skeptical businessman” should be asking himself in 1954. Was this trend sweeping across the landscape of American business a fad, “a novelty that will blow over in a few years?” Was it “a full-fledged technique of human engineering,” as reliable as, say, chemistry or electronics? Last, was it so important it could produce “a new way of looking at human nature,” that is, be used not just in business but in all kinds of relationships with other people? The magazine was referring to motivation research, and the sort of questions the editors raised clearly showed how central it was becoming to the American businessperson at mid-century. With Americans having more choices than ever in the prosperous postwar years, marketers needed to take motivation research seriously, according to *Business Week*. The magazine suggested that the best way to solve business problems very possibly resided within the enigmatic behavioral sciences of psychology, sociology, and anthropology.⁷⁵

The *Wall Street Journal* too took note of the sea change taking place in American business as motivation research took hold. “The businessman’s hunt for sales boosters is leading him into a strange wilderness,” Thomas E. McCarthy wrote in the paper in 1954, that wilderness being “the subconscious mind.” Fears of “posthumous guilt” and deeply buried memories of childhood spanking had not been particularly foremost in the minds of busi-

nessmen, but executives at a host of companies, including Goodyear, GM, General Foods, CBS, and Lever Brothers, were fast becoming conversant in such classic psychological fodder. Corning Glass's discovery that purchasing agents weren't buying the company's pipes owing to the trauma of having broken a glass as a child was particularly profound, and agency people worked hard to figure out a way around the buyers' emotional block. Although some were calling such insights "hocus pocus," eighty firms were now selling motivation research services, with the top firms such as those run by Vicary and Politz having quadrupled their business over the previous few years.⁷⁶

Controversial as motivation research was, those with a sense of history recognized that it was possibly much more than just a new, potentially dangerous tool of marketing. From the long view, motivation research could be said to be the third and most sophisticated level of exchange between a seller and a buyer, quite a claim if true. The first level, which had ruled for thousands of years, was the simple trading of something another person wanted for money (or something else), followed by the creation of markets and demand for things by advertising and other kinds of promotion. By appealing to the subconscious and consumers' hidden motivations, however, motivation research represented something very different, a form of exchange operating on a much deeper and potentially more sinister level.⁷⁷

Whether it was either one of the best things that had ever happened for someone trying to sell something to someone else or a development we would come to regret, there was no doubt that motivation research was here to stay. "The excitement and interest in MR reached a crescendo in 1953 and 1954," Packard wrote a few years later, noting it was during this time that the technique, in current parlance, "tipped."⁷⁸ It's not hard to see why and how the business community got so swept up with the behavioral sciences as they became the darling of Madison Avenue. Psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists were able, or at least appeared to be able, to find out what people wanted, just the kind of information your average businessman was naturally interested in. The growing belief that people weren't always reasonable and often didn't themselves know why they did certain things made the work of behavioral scientists, with their odd but apparently effective arsenal of methods, that much more intriguing. If you could truly understand people, the possibilities were limitless, and this unbounded potential was exactly what was needed to keep the nation's economy moving. Understanding people meant, in short, the ability to manipulate them, a dream so powerful that it was even worth becoming familiar with the

ideas of a man who spent most of his career studying middle-class Viennese women decades ago.⁷⁹

The “arrival” of motivation research in the early fifties was all the more remarkable given that it had been around in some shape or form for a couple of decades. American business, caught up in its own travails during the lean Depression years and scarce wartime years, was simply unaware of the strides that had been made in the social sciences over this same period of time, making the emergence of motivation research that much more dramatic. Suddenly, an amazing body of knowledge was there for the taking. Adding to the effect was the mystique that motivation researchers commanded, a breed of egghead unlike any other that had populated the business world. Compared to traditional market researchers, social scientists could somehow tell when consumers were holding back information or not telling the complete truth, it was believed, meaning the surveyors wouldn’t fall for any booby traps. And because they were scientifically trained, motivation researchers were considered impartial, analytical, even detached—all things the affable, sales-oriented businessperson was not. At the same time, individuals coming from the social sciences were considered more nimble and flexible than the corporate statistician, able to squeeze themselves into the corners of consumers’ minds to find the richest material.⁸⁰

The spectacular rise of motivation research was that much more impressive given that marketers had at their disposal what had been viewed as the definitive reading of “the public pulse.” Since 1946, the Federal Reserve Board had been working with the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan to measure consumers’ attitudes, a massive effort to determine Americans’ relative “buying mood.” Year after year, the center, led by George Katona (another European immigrant) and his colleagues Rensis Likert and Angus Campbell, issued its much-anticipated findings, with consumers’ interest in spending money going up and down like a roller coaster. Measuring the “psychological state” of consumers in a quantitative way seemed to be an ideal approach, the perfect blend of large-scale surveys and social science.⁸¹

With this as the gold standard in market research, Freud’s appearance on Madison Avenue was not unlike the arrival of modernism in the art world (or later, perhaps, when Dylan went electric at Newport), a classic example of the shock of the new. Besides learning about what was really going on in consumers’ dirty little minds, motivation researchers had the audacity to break pretty much every rule in the book. For one thing, motivation researchers made no real effort to study a representative sample, this in itself a clear

violation of basic marketing research practices. The techniques they used to gather information differed dramatically from those of traditional researchers, the former's long and winding questions (and respondents' even longer and more winding answers) considered very bad form by the latter with their cut-and-dried ways. Finally, and most important, the open-ended, even literary ways in which motivation researchers interpreted and presented their findings were the opposite of those favored by mainstream researchers. In a nutshell, motivation researchers believed that less could very well be more, and their rejection of the postwar consensus mantra that bigger was better was as radical an idea as Mies van der Rohe's in architecture.⁸²

As it became clearer what motivation researchers were bringing to the marketing and advertising party, the voices of concern among critics like Robert Graham soon became much louder. "Your dreams, your desires, and the rumblings of your subconscious, formerly sacred to you and your analyst, have been charted by advertising psychologists," warned Lydia Strong in 1954; they are "eager to learn how you buy and why you buy, and therefore how they can sell you many, many more products." Even the title of Strong's article for the *Saturday Review*—"They're Selling Your Unconscious"—indicated that something surreptitious and possibly dangerous was afoot, with marketers now apparently able to unlock the secrets of one's mind and thus release the contents of one's wallet. "Motivation research is the hottest trend on Madison Avenue," she correctly observed, and "the fatter the advertising budget, the greater the probability that Freud helped write the copy." Attempts to get inside consumers' heads were hardly new, of course, going at least as far back as Walter Dill Scott's landmark 1903 *The Psychology of Advertising*, and in the 1920s advertisers went positively wild for John B. Watson's psychology-based theory of behaviorism. Marketers' postwar drift toward the Freudian concept that the subconscious was responsible for humans' actions was something new, however; the mingling of business and psychology was considered by critics to be a dangerous collaboration between state and church.⁸³

Worse, for skeptics, motivation research was in the process of becoming canonized as it began to be accepted by academics and be taught at business schools. "Motivation research is at present a sort of 'social movement' in advertising," George Horseley Smith, a professor at Rutgers, observed in his 1954 *Motivation Research in Advertising and Marketing*, the first textbook on the subject. Motivation research was still evolving, Smith thought, with techniques and concepts, sample sizes and reporting methods, and relationships between scientists and marketers all in a state of flux, but he felt that it was a

long overdue joint venture between business and the social sciences. Smith embraced the idea that consumers were unwilling or unable to tell researchers what they really wanted to know, aligning himself with what Dichter and others were telling their clients. “Under ideal conditions, respondents would tell us briefly and to the point just what they think and feel at a given time,” Smith wrote, “but the fact is that most people are severely handicapped in trying to communicate their private experiences.”⁸⁴

With his landmark book, Smith helped to spread the gospel of motivation research by arming business school students with the basic theories behind the technique. The professor discussed the motivation research notion that there were three levels of awareness, the first entailing material that could easily be discussed, such as the features or benefits of a product. Even if consumers could articulate why they liked a particular brand and not another—not something that should be assumed—this kind of superficial information just wasn’t valuable anymore, Smith explained. The second level of awareness involved material that was rarely discussed, he continued, most of this having to do with identity or social status, that is, how consumers wanted to feel about themselves or be perceived by others. Why people bought a bigger television set or moved into a nicer neighborhood, for example, fitted this category, as did the reasons men drove fast cars or smoked cigars. The last level of awareness involved material that was both unanalyzed and not discussed, Smith instructed marketers-to-be, for this information was not even apparent to individuals themselves because it resided in the deep unconscious. Researchers had to go to this level of awareness to discover the real reasons things people did the things they did (much of it irrational), such as why gamblers gambled (to lose money as a form of self-punishment) or why shoppers hunted for bargains (to outsmart others). Only through psychiatry and what was called at the time “abnormal psychology” could marketers tap such repressed feelings and hidden motivations, Smith concluded, and motivation research was equipped to do just that.⁸⁵

In his textbook published a few years later, Joseph Newman also made the case that motivation research was exactly what the field of market research needed to fulfill its full potential. Newman, a Harvard Business School professor, explained how motivation research was rescuing marketing from its ignorant ways. Before motivation research, marketers’ knowledge of consumers’ wants had been “woefully inadequate,” Newman observed, adding that this “perplexing state of affairs” was one of the major flaws of American business. “We have been wearing conceptual blinders,” the professor lamented,

and individuals and their wants have been “sadly neglected” due to marketers’ obsession with things that could be counted and measured like sales, prices, and market share. Such quantitative information, however, was typically not enough and came after the fact, too little information arriving too late for managers to do any real market planning. The fundamental problem was that marketers had historically viewed the consumer as a mini-company, as he or she methodically used resources to purchase things offering maximum satisfaction. The truth was, however, that consumers did not act with the cold, steely logic of a business enterprise, making this model a poor one when trying to sell them products. The University of Michigan Survey Research Center had learned, for example, that consumers often acted carelessly when shopping by buying things impulsively and not comparing prices, something that would wreck havoc with the best-laid marketing plans. “People often do not consciously know important reasons for their actions or preferences [and] even if they do know, they may rationalize or otherwise cover up the less socially acceptable influences,” Newman wrote; consumers’ emotions were completely left out of the marketing equation.⁸⁶

It did not help matters, Newman continued, that business schools like his were not preparing students to deal with the real world in which consumers’ emotions often ruled. Harvard’s case study approach in particular was inadequate, he stated, for the method by which all others were measured ignored consumer motives in its close readings of business situations. “While the marketer often has known that emotional factors are important, he has had no systematic way of thinking about psychological and social meanings,” the professor observed. Much more problematic, however, was the fact that Americans were simply not trained to deal with emotions. “Most of us,” Newman correctly pointed out, “were brought up in a culture which places high value on logic, reason, economy, and control over feelings,” our instincts to deny or overlook the nonrational. Business executives were particularly unequipped to get in touch with people’s warmer and fuzzier sides, being much more interested in their products than in whatever might be going on in the mysterious minds of consumers. With motivation research, however, marketers now had a tool to access this huge body of untapped knowledge, its psychological underpinnings opening the window onto “human personality and the social forces that act upon it.” With this kind of promise, it was difficult to overestimate how much motivation research could contribute to American business, Newman concluded. “Motivation research promises important conceptual growth and, therefore, appears destined to be a major

landmark in marketing's history," he exclaimed, excited to be part of this new movement.⁸⁷

Although their methods differed, motivation researchers generally agreed there were three levels of the mind, each offering marketers useful information. Conscious material was available but not particularly valuable, preconscious material was somewhat difficult to access and relatively valuable, and unconscious material was the most challenging to obtain but loaded with juicy information, as most motivation research practitioners would put it. Dichter's work on M&Ms had already become by the mid-1950s a classic case study of how plumbing the deeper levels of the mind was worth the effort, illustrating how the theory was put in play. Consumers didn't eat the chocolate candies because they tasted good, Dichter's research had shown, but rather as an incentive or reward for doing work they would rather not do. After the company changed the product's slogan from "Everybody likes 'em" to "Make that tough job easier," sales of M&Ms reportedly doubled, the success story prompting other marketers to board the motivation research train.⁸⁸

It was no coincidence that motivation research took off just as the nation's postwar economy kicked into high gear. Dealing just with the conscious may be fine in a subsistence economy, its proponents argued, but not in that of the United States at mid-century with so many discretionary dollars floating around. Likewise, rational thinking was sufficient during the days of Ford's "any color as long as it's black" Tin Lizzie but not in the 1950s when one's car was as much about social status as about transportation. The mere conscious thus no longer revealed consumers' automotive wants and needs, motivation research believers pointed out, leading to such emotion-laden advertising headlines as Buick's "It makes you feel like the man you are." Also driving motivation research was consumers' growing skepticism toward advertising, which related to the sometimes ridiculous claims being made on the new medium of television. Americans were simply more media savvy than they were before the war, motivation researchers explained, making it necessary to break through or go around the defenses they had constructed.⁸⁹

How exactly to penetrate those shields varied a great deal, however, with each motivation researcher going at it somewhat differently. Dichter was partial to his "psycho-panel," which consisted of a group of a few hundred (local Westchester) families sorted by character trait, such as secure versus insecure, escapist versus realist, and so on, with which he would conduct his depth interviews. Psychoanalytic-based depth interviews were in fact the most commonly used tool among motivation researchers, as these hours-long,

rambling conversations were believed to ultimately lead to the underlying reasons consumers did what they did and thought what they thought. Word association, another Freudian technique that Vicary specialized in, was also often used to tell researchers what consumers thought of brand names or ad copy on an unfiltered basis. (Such testing occasionally had more practical benefits; after learning that 40 percent of housewives thought the term “concentrated” meant “blessed by the pope,” Procter and Gamble dropped the word from its soap advertising.) Sentence completion and picture tests too were employed, but it was lie detector tests that really got people’s attention. One Chicago firm, the Ad Detector Research Corporation, specialized in lie detection, flashing advertising copy only after strapping a device onto consumers to see if what they said was truthful. Pulse, breathing rate, and blood pressure were also measured to learn what the subjects felt about the copy regardless of what came out of their mouths.⁹⁰

Such varied motivation research techniques obviously produced a wide range of findings, but certain drives were almost always determined to be the root cause of human and thus consumer behavior. Sexuality, not surprisingly, topped the list, followed closely by issues of security. (“You either offer security or fail,” Dichter had said in 1951, no doubt projecting his own sources of insecurity as a youth—his red hair as much as his poverty—onto Americans.)⁹¹ Frustration and hostility too popped up quite often, arguably a function of postwar Americans’ pressure to conform to prescribed norms. Like M&Ms, chewing gum wasn’t bought for its taste but, in the latter’s case, to relieve tension and anxiety, said Weiss and Geller’s study, this finding supposedly a bonanza for Wrigley. Edward L. Bernays, the already legendary public relations man who was now dabbling in motivation research, claimed that the most enjoyable thing about breakfast cereals was their crunch, “satisfying an aggressive desire to overcome obstacles.” Longing for acceptance and friendship was another common motivation research theme, leading beer marketers to present their product as something that lubricated social situations rather than conveyed sophistication, previously a tried-and-true strategy. Elitism in any situation was deemed off-putting to most consumers, all motivation researchers agreed, dovetailing nicely with postwar America’s impetus to fit in. Marketers could learn a lot from the success of Arthur Godfrey, motivation research people mused, the not very good-looking, not especially smart but very popular talk show host making his many viewers feel comfortable and at ease.⁹²

As the second half of the fifties beckoned, American businessmen could

look forward to much more than figuring out how to infuse some Arthur Godfrey into their products and services. Over the previous quarter century, a new research technique had emerged from a laundry in Vienna to take Madison Avenue by storm, redirecting the trajectory of marketing and advertising. Largely conceived by a Marxist simply looking for a way to fund his leftist agenda, motivation research had become one of the nation's most valuable imports, bringing an intellectual component to American business that was sorely missing. The Nazis' rejection of some of the greatest minds of the day would turn out to be a bonanza for the United States and the American Way of Life, these academics offering U.S. businesses an entirely new way to understand and approach consumers. On the surface strange bedfellows, European philosophy and American pragmatism proved to be a happy coupling, the bridging of social science and business making for a synergistic collaboration. Ernest Dichter's brand of Freudian and Adlerian thought was particularly potent, as the principles of psychoanalysis became permanently ingrained in Americans' cultural consciousness. The early days of motivation research were exciting, but another, much more turbulent era lay ahead.