

Chris Gray on the Intersection of Marketing and Psychology | Transcript

[00:00:00] **Andy Murray:** Hi, I'm Andy Murray. Welcome to It's a Customer's World podcast. Now more than ever, retailers and brands are accelerating their quest to be more customer-centric. But to be truly customer centric. It requires both a shift in mindset and ways of working, not just in marketing, but in all parts of the organization.

[00:00:27] In this podcast series, I'll be talking with practitioners, thought leaders and scholars to hear their thought. And what it takes to be a leader in today's customer centric world.

[00:00:50] Hello everyone. Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Chris gray early in his career, while Chris was earning his doctorate in clinical psychology, he discovered his passion. He sent out to apply his knowledge and psychology to the challenge of understanding the psychology of shopping and consumer behavior.

[00:01:06] When our paths first crossed over 20 years ago, Chris was one of the first consumer psychologists applying his trade in the field of shopper marketing. He has spent the last two decades helping

agencies and CPG companies turn human insights into powerful ideas. And I was excited to get to talk to him about some of his learnings from this journey, including his views on the art and science of marketing, what's going on with our dwindling attention spans, and how we can better use our intuition in developing deeper insights that are at the backbone of the art in marketing.

[00:01:38] I hope you enjoy our conversation. As much as I do.

[00:01:50] Big data, AI, and data science have added quite a bit of understanding to the science of marketing. But recent academic research, which I'll publish in a link in the show notes suggest that some serious limitations to how far the science can really go in predicting human behavior. And with that more attention is starting to focus on the art of marketing.

[00:02:10] I ask Chris for his view on the question of art versus science.

[00:02:14] Chris Gray: The question of art and science, I think what we've seen the focus on data, the focus on being data driven, big data. I think the unfortunate side of this is that the art has atrophied to some degree. I don't think it's got the, has the same respect and value to people right now.

[00:02:34] And I think that will change. It's inevitable that it will change because the more we lean into data, the more we need the human side of things to connect with our customers to, create compelling stories. All of that. And I think that, for me, the art side is the more interesting side, frankly.

[00:02:52] I that's part of what I do with my company, the biologists, just focusing on deep, psychological insights that help companies get a competitive edge in the marketplace. And I think it is, when we talk about data is extremely useful. I don't wanna come down and oh, data's not helpful, but it has its limitations like anything else.

[00:03:10] And what you miss are all the nuances, the stories the interesting parts of life that really give it texture and help you make connections with people. And I, I. Think right now, we're at a point where it's been atrophied the problem too, is that when it's not being utilized, it's not being practiced.

[00:03:29] And then by practice, literally practicing it and developing at a skill. And so what ends up happening a lot of times is companies will give a half-hearted effort into the art side and then it doesn't pan out. And it's not because the art side isn't valuable it's because it hasn't been practiced that muscle hasn't been built up.

[00:03:47] And so I think that the more we can continue to. Lean on both sides and it like bring them together in a really integrated way. The more we're going to improve the art side and in turn, improve marketing as a whole, in my experience, I feel like we've regressed from where we were as far as the art side.

[00:04:07] And it's really unfortunate because I think what 10 starts to happen. Everything starts to look the same. We all have the same data. In fact, I've heard from clients you and I have been in the, the selling rooms of large retailers many times. And what I've heard from sales folks is, we go in with these, this data, but, boy, the retailer had the exact same data, so it wasn't anything interesting. Whereas if they would've taken that data, combined it with some human insight and created a unique perspective, that would've been a very different story, but instead everyone's playing off the same sheet and, everything starts to look and sound the same.

[00:04:43] Andy Murray: I did some digging for what I could find on the art of marketing. Sadly, there isn't much there as compared to the science. And what is there lacks common understanding and definition. It's as if that side of the equation was left in the dust bend is irrelevant for me. The art of marketing is a journey built first on mastery, as informed by the study and humanities, that reveal insights on the human condition.

[00:05:06] It's a quest for the universal stories of our shared humanity. Every practice of the arts first has to be built on a foundation of mastery regarding the elements used in that art can then be produced through an informed intuition. I asked Chris, the role intuition plays in the art of marketing. .

[00:05:24] Chris Gray: Yeah, absolutely. And I think intuition is extremely valuable, but it, like you said, it comes the intuition is natural to us. Because there's so much that happens internally in our minds that we just don't have access to. And so oftentimes we'll get a gut feeling or something that you can't quite explain, but you just have this sense about something.

[00:05:46] And that happens for everyone, but intuition is also more prone to error. Daniel Kahneman the psychologist and behavioral economists. He talks about obviously type one and type two thinking and type one is fast, is thinking fast and that is more intuitive based. And type two, obviously is more slow, rational, analytical. And, I think sometimes we think those are mutually exclusive when they're not, they actually work in concert all the time, but developing the intuitive side, it means that it becomes more and more accurate with experience because what happens is when you have a lot of experience in a field or a subject, you start to recognize patterns very quickly and you compare those patterns to

[00:06:33] previous experiences. And then you can project forward how this might play out. That only happens with accuracy when you've got actual experience with it. And the more you have experience with observing people of engaging in marketing strategy and tactics of working in retail, et cetera, the more you're gonna have intuition that's more accurate, more helpful. I think the problem we run into is when we have intuition, that's not really based on a lot of experience and we treat it as though it is, and that's really where some things can go awry as far as, like you mentioned, cognitive biases, blind spots, even, discrimination and those types of things that are unintentional.

[00:07:16] So much of this happens beyond our awareness. That we have to stop and ask ourselves what's going on here? Is this true? Or is this something that's biased? Is this something I should be careful about? Do I need to think more about this, but intuition when it's used correctly is extremely valuable.

[00:07:36] Andy Murray: So one of the pitfalls in tapping into your intuition to make new connections is that our intuition is shaped by our own experiences. As Chris states, it takes some work to make sure our intuition isn't hampered by blind spots and biases to the point that it really isn't that helpful. I ask Chris how he approaches shoring up blind spots and biases embedded in his own intuition.

[00:07:59] Chris Gray: Yeah, absolutely. And I think when you are a grad student in psychology, usually it's either required or highly recommended that you be in therapy yourself because there's a tremendous amount of self exploration that you need to do to be aware of your own biases, to be aware of any prejudices or anything like that, that might affect your relationship

[00:08:18] with your patients. And, I spent years doing that and I, I still, I go to therapy today and I'm not know that's, it's something I find always very helpful, but I think the challenge here is. There's a term called naive realism. And it's the idea that my opinions, my experience is are objective reality.

[00:08:40] And if someone else doesn't share those opinions or that experience, then I have to somehow. Think through what that means. And usually what the, what comes out is they're either biased or they're just uneducated. They don't know. So either they're stupid or there's something wrong with them. and there's when you think about that from experience, that's a huge barrier to empathy and.

[00:09:05] Examining those things and being able to stop yourself, we all, it's something that we all experience. It's just the way we're wired that we think our own experience is the right experience. So whether it's your taste of music or what car you like, or what kind of ice cream

you like at some level, you think that's the right answer, and if someone else disagrees, it's like, what, why what's wrong with you?

[00:09:25] You don't. Chocolate ice cream come on. And that's, that's a silly example, but it plays out in ways that can be very damaging or at least misleading and costs a lot of time, effort and money from the marketing side. Being aware of our own thoughts, our own biases, our own prejudices is really critical to having intuition that is effective.

[00:09:46] Andy Murray: So if it's such hard work to make sure we are getting to a point where we can trust our own intuition, just to know ourselves. How can we trust it to really understand and know our customers and what influences their behaviors

[00:09:59] Chris Gray: keep in mind that you will never understand your customer. And I always tie this back to if you've ever seen me speak at a conference or anything, you've probably heard this story because I tell it all the time, cuz it was so important to me.

[00:10:11] And in how I developed my thinking. It was my first day of grad school. When the professor walked into this room full of eager psychology students, waiting to help people. And he pounded his fist on the table and said, you will never understand people. And I just remember, like everyone looking around the room at each other, like what?

[00:10:31] I just paid my tuition, what, that's what I'm here for. And he said he continued on and he said, you. And the more you're able to accept that the more effective you'll be as a clinician, the more people you'll help and it will make all the difference in how you approach your practice. And it took me a long time to really fully get what he was talking about there.

[00:10:52] But now, I feel like it has been so influential in my life, which is, you'll never understand people like we're, it's impossible. The more you learn, the more you'll find that you don't know. And it is when we assume that we know the truth. When we think we know everything about a customer, segmentation and okay, segmentation's done don't need to do another one for five years. You've just created some blind spots. You've just opened the door for biases and some those lead to big misfires, and I think that something that I would,

[00:11:25] I always suggest to people, just keep in mind that you'll never know your customer. I think part of being in the human sciences is a commitment to continuous learning. Just knowing that there's always more to learn. There's always more and more. And when you take that approach, when you really can accept 'Hey, I need to go learn more. I need to go learn more about my customer.' Then that will lead you to great things, because you will notice more. You'll be on the lookout for more. You will be open to things that don't necessarily fit

with how you think about this person. And you'll be able to incorporate that and develop your foundation of knowledge even more. And that will lead you to the ability to come up with unique ideas, deep insights, things that other people hadn't thought of because you were continuously learning and challenging yourself.

[00:12:12] And so while I think that segmentation, customer segmentation is a great thing. It can be a help, very helpful guide but if it becomes dogmatic or if we feel like. As you so often see, as I said, "we don't have to do another one for another five years." That's a problem. They can be, customer segmentation is great, but it can lead to a lot of complacency in learning about your customer and the curiosity of your customer.

[00:12:37] Andy Murray: One of the things that has been a consistent experience for me is how often I'm surprised by what customers reveal as you do observational research and you spend time with them. As a clinical psychologist focused on shopper behavior. Chris has done hundreds of interviews shop alongs and focus groups. I asked him if he still gets surprised by what he discovers, surprises that challenged his beliefs in what he thought was true, but wasn't.

[00:13:02] Chris Gray: Actually one that really had an impact on me and it actually challenged some of my own preconceptions was

probably the project that most moved me in my career. So far, we were doing work with studying dollar store, the dollar store channel, and we did in-home and shop alongs with moms.

[00:13:25] And what I realized midway through is that I was approaching this with a bias, with a, prejudgment that people shop at the dollar stores because they have to, because they don't have the means to shop elsewhere and that it's not enjoyable or it's not out of preference. It's out of necessecity.

[00:13:42] And I will never forget this moment. We had a mom and we met outside of the dollar channel or in the parking lot. And just talking to her a little bit about, why she shops there and what's about, and she said, I have to be, we don't have a big budget and we don't have a lot of money.

[00:13:56] So I always have to be the mom that says no, and it's really hard for me. To always have to say no to my children and be that person. But when I go here, when I come here with my kids, I can give each from a couple dollars and they can go crazy and they have the most wonderful experience. They're excited.

[00:14:14] They have fun. And I get to be the fun mom. And it just really, I think, goosebumps just talking about it, cuz it really affected me. It really challenged my own thoughts about what was going on

there. So it. I think that's a great example. And then that was used. So those insights were then used to create experiences that were really helpful and created that joy versus just being this arduous task.

[00:14:39] And that's the thing I love about shopper marketing is you have such a platform to improve people's lives and we think of shopping sometimes as something trivial, but it takes up a tremendous amount of our time and effort in life of getting the things that we need and finding new things and all of that.

[00:14:55] And so I think, there's a, there's an opportunity to continue that kind of work and it, data is important. But having that capacity for empathy to set aside your own perspectives. And look at the world through someone else's lens, and understand from their perspective what's different and difficult.

[00:15:15] One of the things that really has a big impact that is a misconception, is that shoppers can tell us directly, how they make their choices. And what's going on as they shop. I think there's a, I've done a million shop alongs in my lifetime and I think they're incredibly valuable. But I think when we take that information too literally that's where problems can really arise because like I said before, there's so much that happens in our minds that we don't have access. We simply don't have access to. And the problem is that we can rationalize it afterwards. So it feels like we know exactly why we did what we did,

but that those are just rationalizations. There's a saying, You're not rational. You're just rationalizing.

[00:15:58] Andy Murray: One of the misconceptions that many marketers believe is that shopper's minds are always actively in discover mode when shopping, especially in physical retail, the truth is the more common activity going on in the brain is deselecting, which is basically the function of dismissing everything that isn't relevant as Chris describes it, our brains are very good ignoring machines.

[00:16:21] Chris Gray: So think about all that sensory information that's coming in that just, we're not even aware of because our brains automatically just scan it out because it's not relevant to us. And, I sing it from the rooftops. Relevance is the golden ticket.

[00:16:34] Because relevance is what engages people. It's what gets past selective attention, our brains ignoring things. And it's what engages people. If I feel like something is relevant to me, then I will pay attention to it. I may engage with it. I at least have a moment to consider it. If you're not relevant, And you are, filtered out with those other millions of sensory inputs.

[00:16:56] You lose any opportunity to engage that shopper and convince them to buy your product. So relevance really is the key. And I think that, there are two ways to get attention. Relevance obviously is

one, but the other is disruption. And, but we hear about disruption all the time. And, disruption is a great tool to capture someone's attention for the moment for literally a second or less.

[00:17:17] If something stands out against its environment. So that's why, ambulances have sirens. That's why school buses are bright yellow. We instantly see them. But if, even if you have a great disruptive campaign or message or sign or package or whatever it is. If the next instant our brain says, oh, I see that it's not relevant to me.

[00:17:40] You've lost your chance. Yeah. And so relevance and disruption really have to work together to grab someone's attention and to engage them so that you have an opportunity to convince.

[00:17:52] Andy Murray: A common belief is that it is harder than ever to get people's attention because something has fundamentally changed in human behavior. That we just aren't as good at paying attention as we used to be. I wanted to know if that was really true.

[00:18:06] Chris Gray: Yeah. It's an important question because, as I said, attention is critically important. If you don't have the attention, then you don't have any chance of communicating and convincing.

[00:18:15] Yeah. And this is part of my myth busting series and consumer psychology. It's a fun one. There's this alleged study that

I've heard a million times about that says, allegedly says that, consumers attention spans are less than those of goldfish today. It's fascinating click bait.

[00:18:34] It certainly, "wow that's interesting. I need to learn more about that." So I decided to really dig in and see where that was coming from. And what we found out was there is no study that suggests that there's references to a Microsoft study in Canada, but that doesn't exist.

[00:18:50] That in fact, the study that is often referenced does not compare anything to goldfish. As far as I've been able to tell, no one has ever studied the attention spans of goldfish. I'm not exactly sure how you would do that and just. Avenge the poor goldfish. They actually have memories. There have been studies about memories for goldfish using food.

[00:19:09] They actually have memories that last for months oh, okay. So sorry, Ted lasso. I know there's a whole episode about, be the goldfish, but that poor malign goldfish actually has a pretty decent memory. I think what's happening. It's not that our capacity for attention has diminished. It's that there's just more and more shouting at us in our environments.

[00:19:29] We have more screens, more ads, everything minute coming at us all the time. And it just seems to continually increase. And so what happens is we end up filtering again, filtering out so much of that, that it seems like we don't have attention spans as long as we used to, if anyone's ever sat down and binged an entire series on Netflix, you know that if it's compelling and interesting enough you can pay attention for a very long time.

[00:19:52] And so I think it's not that attention is less it's that the stimulation is more.

[00:19:59] Andy Murray: I asked Chris to go a bit deeper into how we can develop better insights into customer behavior. Here's what he said.

[00:20:06] Chris Gray: Absolutely. And I think that there's a misnomer that getting to insights, getting to those real deep psychological insights is there's not a lot of return on investment.

[00:20:17] Like it takes a lot of time to spend time with people. It takes a lot of money and effort it that may or may not be true. I think there's various ways you can do these things. The difference between data and insight. One of the key differences is that a true deep, psychological human insight can last for decades and can be fresh for

decades and can fuel really interesting, cool, creative concepts for decades. Where

[00:20:44] I often hear, oh, we need new insights. We need new insights. And what they really mean is we need new data and yes, behavioral data expires very quickly because behavior changes all the time. But the underlying motivations, the underlying aspirations or needs that people have, they're much more stable over time.

[00:21:03] And you think there are research studies that have come up with these amazing insights that have lasted decades.

[00:21:09] Andy Murray: One of the things Chris did early in his journey to understand shopper behavior was to create a mock shopping trip that simulated the real world reality of not just a list of items to go shop for, but also had elements of surprise that brought real world experience into the equation.

[00:21:26] For example, just before the client enters the store to go execute their predetermined shopping list, they open an envelope. An inside would be a note that might say something like, "the principal just called and little Johnny's in the nurse's station. You need to come pick him up." So now you have only 10 minutes to execute your trip, or you just open your heating bill and it's \$20 higher than you anticipated.

[00:21:48] You'll need to cut your plan budget for this trip maybe by \$10. He called the exercise shopper passport. Here's Chris.

[00:21:56] Chris Gray: And honestly, I have to say the creation and multiple executions of shopper passport that we, we did, or some of the highlights of my career. And it really came from you, Andy, cuz you said something that stuck with me and it led to the creation of this, which was experience is undeniable . And the idea that, we can talk numbers, we can talk about shoppers being frustrated. We can talk about tough choices. We can talk about limited budgets. But until you step into those shoes and you experience it firsthand, it's not really real to you, but what what we did is, and I think now this there's a lot of this happening now.

[00:22:31] I think it, and I hope so anyway, but we literally created these personas shopper personas that we gave them, lives. We, we brought them to life with not just their demographics, but. Their home life, their challenges, where they had medical issues, where they had likes and dislikes, what their children liked or disliked.

[00:22:52] And we provided them with that profile. And then we gave them a shopping list that usually had about 10 items or so, and usually three or four of them were from categories that they, that were from the brand we were working with. And then we gave them a budget to actually spend, we actually shipped them off to the store and they

shopped just like anybody else, except that they had to shop from that shopper's perspective.

[00:23:18] And we let them know that when they came back, they were going to have to present to us what choices they made, what they came back with and justify their decisions and talk about their experience. And we had them do it in groups so that they had to talk out loud versus just having this internal conversation.

[00:23:35] Andy Murray: I asked Chris for some practical ways, we can improve our powers of observation and intuition.

[00:23:42] Chris Gray: Yeah, there's a few things around empathy. I think the first thing is take some time to be, to think through your own biases, prejudices, presuppositions, we all have them. So there's no shame in that.

[00:23:53] It is more about just. Being honest with yourself about these things so that you can set those aside. And there's a activity that you learn when you're trained to be a therapist called bracketing and it's, creating this awareness of your own prejudices and those types of things.

[00:24:07] And then literally before a session. Do this mental image of putting a bracket around that and setting it aside. And it just is a little

bit, it gives you a little bit more opportunity to see things with fresh eyes, rather than through the lens of your past experiences or biases and those types of things.

[00:24:25] So that's one to, and it does take some work, but it will help build that sense of empathy. I think too. One thing that I really encourage is when we're thinking about insights, start with the human, not the channel. And I specifically reference that to e-com the number of times that I'm asked. Oh, gimme some e-com insights.

[00:24:50] Okay. Those are human insights. If you start with the human first, there aren't really e-com specific insights, there are there's e-com specific data. There's e-com specific behavioral knowledge, but when you really get into the deep, psychological insight of what people need, what they aspire to, what drives their behavior, that's channel agnostic.

[00:25:15] Now how you would execute that against e-com would be very different than how you might again in brick and mortar or some other venue, but the insight doesn't care about your channel. It's the human insight that matters first. So you always challenge yourself to think human first and then go from there.

[00:25:33] And it's not to say that, data, behavioral knowledge, isn't important. It is very important because that is the expression of those

deeper insights needs and aspirations and those types of things. And how can e-comm fulfill that uniquely. That's interesting. That's gonna be compelling, but just saying, give me some e-comm insights, like that's I don't have anything for you there.

[00:25:54] So that's another one. And then last thing is I encourage just practice, critical thinking, ask a lot of questions. One of my favorite power questions is how do you know that, when someone, says something, or gives me a piece of knowledge or a data point or something like, okay, how do you know.

[00:26:10] And okay. And then you start from there and it's like thinking about, where's the data coming from? What was the study? How, what was the methodology of the study? How did they go about getting, accumulating or collecting this information, analyzing it, and then how do they report it?

[00:26:25] Because often what I see is a number or a data point or an insight will get thrown around a lot. The goldfish example, right? If you start to ask questions, then you can get to the bottom of, is this valid? Is it not valid? Is it appropriate for certain situations, but not others? It helps give you more context for what those numbers mean and the insight that you can draw from them.

[00:26:58] Andy Murray: I had a fantastic time catching up with Chris. I particularly enjoyed his insight on the complex relationship between the art and the science that drive marketing today and how that dynamic will shape the future of the industry. Thank you, Chris, for your time and your continued ever to push the limits of customer centricity.

[00:27:19] That's it for this episode of It's a Customer's World. If you found this helpful and entertaining, I would be so grateful if you could share our show with your. And it'd be super happy if you subscribe so you can be updated as we publish new episodes. And if you really want to help leave us a five star rating and a positive review on apple podcast or wherever you listen.

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