

# **From Mirrors to Magnets: Seduction in the Age of Algorithms**

Algorithms are helping marketers become more efficient in reaching people, but using them merely to mirror predicted consumer tendencies puts brands at risk of losing the intangible magic they can bring. I believe that seduction will always trump prediction, and that the future of brands will rest on us using algorithms to make brands magnetize people instead of mimicking them.

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## **Introduction**

We now live in a world where coincidences are mere illusions. Somewhere in the world, something is mapping out what we're going to do, where we're going, who we're going to meet, how we're going to get there, and plotting to intercept us with a surprise. We may think it's serendipitous, but in reality it has been planned out in advance and activated in real time.

This all seeing-eye is not in the sky, nor in some ivory tower. It's in our pockets and our bags. It's in our homes and our workplaces: our phones and computers. And they can write our future because they're powered by clever learning engines called algorithms.

Algorithms have found widespread use, and marketing is no exception. They have changed how people behave and what they look for, and also how brands can approach and become meaningful. They bring much promise, but I believe that how we currently use them limits both their potential and the value brands can bring. This is the notion I will explore in this paper.

This essay is divided into three parts. First, I will explore the broad applications through which algorithms are being used by marketers today. Next, I will examine what implications the current uses of algorithms are on the value of brands. And finally, I will explore alternative strategies to the use of algorithms in marketing.

## **Our Future has been Calculated**

It has been said that the smartphone will become the defining relic of our modern-day era. While the far future has yet to arrive, this prediction will not come as a shock to anyone because this device has come to embody the defining condition of life today: one that is fueled by algorithms.

Algorithms have permeated every aspect of our lives. There's one for every modern-day dilemma. From the day-to-day decisions of what to eat, where to shop, what route to take through traffic, who to date, to longer term things like when to book plane tickets, how to teach our kids, even where to put our money in, there's an algorithm to help optimize our decisions. We've come to rely on them because they're very useful. They help us evaluate our choices more efficiently, making decisions easier to manage. We now live in a time where one can quite literally can never get lost, as long as there's a data connection. Simply by exchanging our personal behaviour data for the data we need, we're able to navigate every day with ease.

## **Algorithms allow brands to be even more ubiquitous in our lives**

All of this activity has resulted in the breadcrumb trail we now collectively call Big Data. By accessing the information we have given away about ourselves - our locations, our preferences, what we do when and where - marketers are now finding even more opportunities for brands to be present in people's lives and make themselves more relevant.

The booming MarTech industry is proof of the demand. From only around 150 companies in 2011, there are now about 5,000 known Marketing Technology companies, in a dizzying array of categories and functional capabilities.<sup>1</sup>



The “Tech” in MarTech more likely than not will rely on some sort of algorithm. These algorithms are used in order to find patterns in the swaths of behavioural data collected - whether publicly available or privately given away by people- draw conclusions, and give more precision to marketing activity. The reason they have become so popular is in their predictive capabilities. With markets’ inconsistent economic performance across the world and marketing budgets stretching to cover more ground, taking as much of the guesswork out of the equation is a way to make efficient use of a business’s resources. Specifically in marketing communication, these algorithms have found some common uses to marketers across the globe.

### The common tendency of marketers: use algorithms as mirror neurons

A mirror neuron is a neuron that activates when an animal observes another animal performing the same action. The animal doing the mimicking is said to be mirroring - subconsciously trying to make a connection with the other. In humans, this generally results in positive feelings towards one another. It sends subconscious signals that you are similar, in sync, and thus likely to act in the same interest. It is sometimes used as a negotiation technique because the positive feelings of connection disarm the other person.

This is not so different with what brands are attempting to do with people using predictive algorithms: send signals that they are in sync, and thus likely to act in the same interest. Marketers are getting brands to mirror people in three broad ways.

<sup>1</sup> Infographic: The 2017 'Martech 5000' Marketing Technology Landscape. (2017, May 10). Retrieved July 10, 2017, from <https://martechtoday.com/infographic-marketing-technology-landscape-113956>

### *Mirroring Actions: What I offer fits what you're doing right now*

The first common use of algorithms in marketing is to mirror real time context. This gets used when the action we want people to take is closely related to what they're doing at the moment. They're shopping at a mall, send a location targeted ad to their mobile phone and make them visit a store. They're watching free porn, send them an offer for a paid subscription on the sidebar, with the ad even themed similar to the genre they're currently viewing. And with the rise of programmatic native advertising, marketers are able to more seamlessly blend in with the audience's real time context. Algorithms can now crawl through the many pages of cyberspace and identify which places will allow an ad to most likely mirror the content around it, using keywords and sentiment analysis. This supposedly allows for a less disruptive experience, and get higher quality leads with genuine interest. Native advertising is already picking up fast. It is projected to represent 64.5% of all digital display spend in the US for 2017.<sup>2</sup>

### *Mirroring Living Patterns: What I offer fits with your way of life*

This next use of algorithms is similar to the first, except done over a stretch of time. Instead of looking at what the person is doing at the moment, marketers look at what they've done and identify patterns that could help predict what they will likely do next. Tactics such as retargeting fall under this. If you've looked at a product online before and check it out again a few days later, chances are it will follow you around as you go through your feed over the next few days. Or if you take a regular path to work every day, you could get served offers by establishments you pass by on your route. You keep reading about surfboards, marketers predict you're probably in the market for one, and you get served advertising about it.

Algorithms have also allowed loyalty programs to deliver more personalized service, and tailor specific offers not by customer segments but to an individual level. From individual data on behavioural interactions - whether involving purchase or not - they can predict what will likely happen in your near future, and offer a relevant reward. As early as 2013, Facebook's algorithm was already attempting to predict how long people's relationships would last based on their behaviours in the platform.<sup>3</sup>

### *Mirroring Beliefs & Attitudes: What I offer is for someone just like you*

The last broad use of algorithms in marketing is to mirror people's beliefs and attitudes. These work similar to those BuzzFeed tests that try to guess how old a person is based on answering a few questions. Multiple behavioural data points are collected and segmented into clusters; if your behavioural data closely matches those from a certain segment, you are profiled to have similar interests, and now what you're likely to be interested in can be predicted. From what you searched on Google, what kind content you stayed on the longest, who you follow on Instagram or Twitter, algorithms will guess what kind of person you are and allow brands to mirror your interests. With the advancements in algorithms' ability to profile with accuracy, combined with the first two approaches, many marketers believe that the holy grail of predictive marketing is within reach: the right

<sup>2</sup> EMarketer Unveils Estimates for Native Ad Spending. (2017, March 21). Retrieved from <https://www.emarketer.com/Article/emarketer-Unveils-Estimates-Native-Ad-Spending/1015457>

<sup>3</sup> Ferenstein, G. (2014, February 14). Predicting Love And Breakups With Facebook Data. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2014/02/14/facebook-love-data/>

message, at the right place and time, to the right person; maximum context with minimal uncertainty.

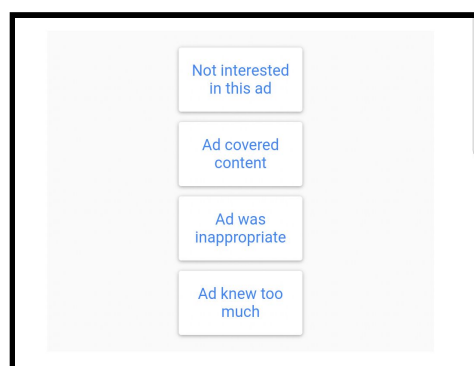
## The Pitfalls of Mirroring for Brands

Mirroring may work to help animals thrive, but the same can't be readily said for brands. This is because an underlying assumption in much of the technology used to capture behavioural data is active rational agency on the part of people, when we know that people don't always think about what they do before doing it. When algorithms merely read what's on the surface, and then let a brand reflect it, the pitfalls start to show. And while some marketers have found success using these methods, a bit of digging shows how these could be detrimental to brands in the long term.

### *Predictability makes it easier to lose trust*

Despite fears surrounding ad blocking and people actively shutting out advertising, people don't actually hate ads. In fact, 75% of AdBlock Plus users support websites that have ads, so long as they are deemed acceptable.<sup>4</sup> This just tells us that people are now more conscious of advertising. They know it is already part of daily life, even come to expect it. People know they will get sold to when they go on Facebook, much like they've come to expect advertising in magazines and on the streets. The fact that they will get hit by a banner ad somehow has already become predictable.

That is why it becomes extra annoying when an unwelcome ad shows up; people already expect marketers to be smarter than serving them an offer when they're not looking to buy, even if the context they're in makes them appear to be interested. An unwelcome advance becomes even more unwelcome when you can see it coming. An unwelcome advance that assumes you're interested borders on offensive. When a brand's assumption that it knows a person well enough turns out to be wrong, it suffers.



*It is now an option to tell brands off for knowing too much*

This has undoubtedly contributed to the increased importance of information security and privacy. People are willing to exchange their information for some sort of value.

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<sup>4</sup> Mysore, V. (2016, September 05). Why the advertising industry needs to embrace AdBlock. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2016/09/05/why-the-advertising-industry-needs-to-embrace-adblock/>

<sup>5</sup> So if brands won't use it in a smart, value-adding way, why would they give it up? They'd much rather share false information, and ignore all the targeted ads that come their way as a result of.

### *Moving down the Decision Chain*

Brands came about as a heuristic to help narrow down choice. Their value lies in their ability to short circuit the decision process in people's minds. But mirroring only becomes efficient when that decision has already been made - when the algorithm finds the people who have already decided on what they want and matches them with it. Else, the illusion of being able to predict consumer choice breaks. A brand then only becomes the right choice at the right time when it was already chosen beforehand; It operates on availability as a heuristic. And so if we continue to operate this way, we will naturally see a brand's value - both to businesses and to people - move down the chain: from helping people make that decision, to being present when the decision has been made. And if a product or service gets chosen in spite of, not because of, a brand, it lessens its chances of being able to charge a premium over competition in the long run. This mitigates the long term value a brand can bring to a business.

This gets exacerbated when we consider that there are services that function like predictive algorithms themselves. When we think of brands that Amazon or Compare the Market suggest, the power to influence choice moves almost completely to the intermediary, depending on how much it is trusted - and away from the end brand of choice. They become the pseudo-brand operating systems, matching people with what they want, based on whatever data is available on behaviour and other factors.<sup>6</sup> All a brand can do is find ways to predict when people will become interested in it, and show itself once it happens.

### **The best brands aren't mirrors - they're magnets**

The most iconic brands of our time have never been those that merely held up a mirror to people to show them their reality. They are the ones that allow people to experience and consume a myth through them<sup>7</sup>. They are the ones that are able to draw people in with their otherworldly appeal; they magnetize people both in spite and because of deliberately setting themselves apart from the pack.

If we keep using algorithms to limit brands to being mirrors, we risk losing their intangible magic. But I believe the solution isn't to eschew algorithms altogether; that would make marketers appear backward, and vulnerable to competition. I believe the solution is to change our mindset in how to use them.

### **From Mirrors to Magnets: Using Algorithms to Seduce instead**

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<sup>5</sup> Younger Internet Users Willing to Hand Over Personal Information. (n.d.). Retrieved July 24, 2017, from <https://retail.emarketer.com/article/younger-internet-users-willing-hand-over-personal-information/58f7d8a0ebd4000a54864b24>

<sup>6</sup> Follows, T. (n.d.). *The Future of Brands in a Post-Human World* (Publication No. 1). Any Day Now.

<sup>7</sup> Holt, D. (2003, March). What Becomes an Icon the Most? *Harvard Business Review*.

The prevailing approach to using algorithms has been to use their predictive powers in order to help brands mirror people: in their actions, patterns of living, and even their beliefs. This might make a brand an easy, natural choice. But it doesn't make the brand irresistible. And sexy trumps easy.

In order to unleash the seductive powers of algorithms, we must unshackle them from the baggage of how they're currently being used. Seducers succeed because they touch on something beneath the surface level. Algorithms can give marketers that same power if used correctly. In this section, I offer three alternative algorithmic strategies, as well as examples of tactics that show how they might be applied to brands and communication.

## **From: Mirroring Actions → To: Fuelling Feelings**

A mirror brand uses algorithms to make people feel that it fits within their current course of action. A seductive brand gets them to reconsider their plans. This requires a shift away from the thinking that the best moment for a brand to make contact is in the context wherein it will most likely be used. Rather, the best moment for a brand to seduce is in the context where it can exert the most emotional influence. We know this has commercial because when people feel emotionally connected to a brand, they become more valuable to a business.<sup>8</sup>

The last few years have already seen developments in emotion-based targeting with varying levels of controversy. Spotify is already studying people's moods based on their playlists. Facebook's algorithm can already tell when feelings of insecurity rise.<sup>9</sup> While these options aren't being publicly used by marketers, we can take inspiration from technologies like facial coding that have pinpointed corresponding emotions behind facial expressions in the meantime. If we teach algorithms to interpret behaviours as proxies for emotional states, we stand to find more success in influencing people. From more obvious signals like changing a relationship status on social media, to more nuanced ones like unusually frequent searches of Adele songs on YouTube, a little creative triangulation can give marketers the necessary clues into a person's emotional state.

### *Make your absence felt in precise moments*

The first tactic brands can use to fuel feelings is to make the pain of their absence felt. Instead of identifying moments where the category is more commonly used, marketers can use algorithms to figure out which moments its absence would suck the most. The beauty of doing this with algorithms is the amount of precision it allows. Without algorithms, this would be called a tension point in the creative brief. With algorithms, they become actionable instances that can be carried out at scale. This tactic is especially useful for service brands that can immediately alleviate the pain at the click of a button. For example, a brand like Lyft could identify peak moments of the day when trains are most likely to be jam-packed full (or not working) based on location data cross referenced with the known capacity of the stations. Or reach out to customers in the vicinity of the station right after the last train has left, again using location data cross referenced with closing times as a proxy for feelings of distress.

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<sup>8</sup> Magids, S., Zorfas, A., & Leemon, D. (2015, November). The New Science of Customer Emotions. *Harvard Business Review*.

<sup>9</sup> Kulp, P. (2017, May 02). Facebook's just added another quiet and creepy way to target you with ads. Retrieved July 24, 2017, from <http://mashable.com/2017/05/02/facebook-ad-targeting-by-mood/#EQJlbgA0siqw>



### *Feed a Fantasy*

A second tactic would be to feed a fantasy. We can teach algorithms to identify what people are doing in the moments they're feeling the exact opposite of the emotion we want to trigger. The effect is a "You're doing this right now, but wouldn't you rather be..." moment. This can be useful for tactical promotions meant to drive excitement. An airline brand could sell the fantasy of a getaway during points in the day where boredom strikes. It might even customize the locations in the creative depending on how exciting a location is likely to be to the audience. A beer brand could entice people with a nice, cold pint when rising stress levels are being detected during work hours. Or when a status about a bad meeting has been posted on social media. There are already algorithms that can tell bosses how employees are feeling.<sup>10</sup> By tapping into this data and feeding the fantasy of pure relaxation, both of these brands would have increased their chances of being availed.

### **From: Mirroring Living Patterns → To: Defamiliarize the Routine**

People are creatures of habit. It is a way for us to manage life's complexities, and algorithms have had a massive impact on routinizing life. There is comfort in the easy and the familiar; this is what makes the unfamiliar alluring. To be seductive, we should be thinking about how we can lead people into unfamiliar territory, not how to go with their flow. Instead of asking how algorithms can show our brands fitting seamlessly in a person's life, we should be looking for opportunities to make the routine feel unfamiliar and new again.

There is an aspect to this that may lean towards disrupting habits and bias brands that need to switch from competitors in order to grow. But if we think about how algorithms can learn when something has become too familiar, then identify an alternative to take when necessary, we start to see the wider possibilities this strategy can offer. We can apply this principle by teaching algorithms not to look at patterns of existing behaviour, but patterns in absence instead. What are the things that are consistently absent in people's lives? More importantly, why? The filter to help narrow the outcomes of this exploration would be things that are related or adjacent to the brand's category. So, in haircare for example, a brand could look into patterns of absence in usage of hair products, visits to the salon, even searches for anything hair related, as compared to the greater population. What this does is paint a picture of the category world that isn't familiar with them yet, and therefore inform how we can make their hair care routine feel more alluring, and when it will be best to do it.

The beauty of doing this using an algorithm is it allows to personalize at scale. All the points in a population's patterns of absence can be accounted for with the right response from a brand. Programmatic technology already allows for creative materials to be optimized based on relevance. What we're merely tweaking would be the basis for what relevant means at a specific point in time, for a specific person. Here I offer two tactics to frame how it might be done.

### *Use Nudges to Heighten Suspense*

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<sup>10</sup> Waddell, K. (2016, September 29). The Algorithms That Tell Bosses How Employees Are Feeling. Retrieved July 24, 2017, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/the-algorithms-that-tell-bosses-how-employees-feel/502064/>



Nudge theory tells us that a decision to eventually avail of a product or a change in behaviour isn't finalized in an instance, but rather influenced by multiple suggestive moments over a stretch of time.<sup>11</sup> This can be used by marketers to seduce its audience using nudges to keep them on the lookout for the next one. Here, we would identify moments of absence that can trigger intrigue and wonder around the category. Algorithms can help figure this out by looking into moments when search interest around the category naturally heightens, and feeding the suspense trigger into it. This becomes more and more applicable as we let algorithms run more aspects of our lives; if we can nudge algorithms to seek what's missing, the more chances we have of making an impact.

### *Add Measured Doses of Friction*

Seamless experiences are great for utility, but can become robotic and cold. A little friction adds a highlight, and increases a person's involvement in a moment. Brands can use this thinking and orchestrate tiny snags in the routine to highlight what's missing, eventually leading them to want to discover the solution to it.

## **From: Mirroring Beliefs & Attitudes → To: Posing a Challenge**

It is easier to agree with someone who shares our own point of view, but it is hard to ignore someone who doesn't. Algorithms have been used by marketers to make brands appear more agreeable to people. I believe it's time we took a different approach.

This is easier to do in traditional forms of communication. How can algorithms help marketers do this? We could do this by teaching algorithms to identify not what makes us similar, but rather points of incongruence. In what areas of life can the brand's point of view seem to be at odds with its target audience's? We could then teach the algorithm to look around those areas and mine for the moments ripe for provocation.

Can this be done without antagonizing the audience and turning them off? Brands have proven that challenging a prevailing notion can reap rewards, and in fact can emerge from culture to by countering it.<sup>12</sup> What algorithms allow marketers to do is to reinforce this in moments that can make it more powerful. The trick here is to still be clear and authentic about what value the brand can bring. If the reason behind its stance makes intuitive sense to its audience, the mind will make the necessary connections and respond accordingly.

### *Master Insinuation*

One way to apply this thinking is by using the power of suggestive insinuation. A classic seduction technique, insinuation works when the seducer discovers and plays to an underlying desire that is different from what is projected outward. Algorithms can help marketers harness insinuation by looking for clues that point to inconsistencies between the consumer's expressed beliefs and his actions, related to the brand's space. For example, if a person is a self-proclaimed feminist but then accidentally (or not) shares content that is misogynistic, a brand that stands for female empowerment could step in and challenge their beliefs. If we teach algorithms to pick up on similar moments, brands can take a stand whenever the opportunity arises.

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<sup>11</sup> Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *Nudge: improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>12</sup> Grant, J. (2007). *The brand innovation manifesto: how to build brands, redefine markets and defy conventions*. Chichester: John Wiley.

### *Use the Desire of Others*

A less direct but equally potent way brands can apply this thinking is by using the desire of others. Brands are already doing this by combining crowd data and making suggestions based on people's interests that are similar to the target's profile. With this thinking of posing a challenge to their own beliefs, however, brands can aim to push this application of algorithms by identifying which people can be the most influential on their choices, and make those recommendations more suggestive. A proxy for this could be the people whom your social tribes most follow and interact with. This can trigger a stronger level of consideration for a brand; as if to say - they're choosing this, why are you choosing that? A brand that does this well is Shazam, the music detection app. They make recommendations based on what the artists one follows Shazams as well. By doing this, they are both able to extend your time on the app and make their service more credible to music fans.

### **Conclusions & An Idea for the future: A Seductive MarTech Agency**

The underlying principle of the three strategies I have presented is to make smarter use of the behavioural cues algorithms are able to pick up and react to today. To go beyond the obvious applications of automation and consider what we can do instead to make brands more appealing and seductive. This is because these are the most reliable cues we can measure with the technology we have right now. This is admittedly a stopgap of sorts.

The gamechanger will come when seduction can be automated. When AI can read keywords on a page and find alternative paths depending on how a person feels while reading an article. When it can interpret the thought process around browsing behaviour on e-commerce sites and adjust for maximum influence. When we have the technology that doesn't just let brands affirm people's behaviours, decisions, and beliefs, but automatically find the opportunities to take a stand; add some friction; trigger a feeling. When the technology doesn't just make us more efficient, but also allows brands to perform their role in people's lives effectively: get people to buy into an idea to live by. Bits and pieces of the technologies already exist. The winner will be those who can fuse them together.

We will need this once people start realizing the value of their personal data to companies, and finding ways to milk this transaction. Right now, the most the public can do is withhold their information; but if in the future it becomes legitimate trading currency, marketers will need to start using customer data more purposively. We will need to start paying to fuel these algorithms soon.

Much talk about the future of our industry has centered on the debate between data and creativity. I believe that these are not binaries; the real battle will be how we want to approach both. The choice is ours to make - and I believe we should choose seduction over prediction, today and in the future.