

# Understanding the digital native's brain: How marketers can respond

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This article explains how immersion in a digital world changes how the brain processes content and how brands can understand this science when marketing to 'digital native' millennials and centennials.

- Extensive exposure to digital media changes the way the brain processes content, its receptiveness to different types of messages, and the general impact of marketing activities.
- Consumers with extensive exposure to digital media enhance their fluid intelligence, i.e., their ability to find solutions to practical problems, and improve their reaction times.
- Digital natives are more receptive to games and challenges that can be addressed by using fluid intelligence - they like variety and typically want more of it, but because they are used to multi-screening it's more difficult to maintain their involvement.
- Due to so much online communication, marketers can't assume digital natives will pick up important nuances in ads or videos – key messages must be clearly stated.
- Digital natives are less likely to be interested in complexity - marketers should keep things simple or gamify the experience to ensure dopamine releases will motivate an audience to stay engaged.

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**Neurothinking**

Marketers are constantly bombarded with information on the latest digital opportunities, encouraged to allocate more of their budgets to digital media, and exposed to digital success stories. However, there is an important aspect that has been largely ignored: the digital environment has not only changed marketing practice, it has also changed the consumer at a neural level.

Extensive exposure to digital media changes the way the brain processes content, its receptiveness to different types of messages, and the general impact of marketing activities.

For brands targeting millennials, centennials or even much younger consumers, these fundamental differences are important to understand.

## The science of brain plasticity

Digital marketing expenditures have grown significantly over the years, but in all the frenzy about digital media, we seem to have ignored a very important question: how has digital media changed the consumer? This is not referring to how consumers *use* digital media, but rather how the way they process and relate to advertising and other marketing exposures is changing.

Among internet users, 'digital natives' deserve special attention as they have grown up fully immersed in the digital world - and they now hold enormous consumer power.

At first sight, it may be a big leap to suggest that the brain adjusts the way it works because of its exposure to digital media. After all, did it not take millions of years for the brain to develop to where it is today? However, there is ample evidence that the brain will adjust even in the short-term to the demands we make of it.

The brain's ability to change in response to the demands made on it is typically referred to as *brain plasticity*. Our brain moulds itself to accommodate the demands we make on it.

For example, fMRI scans have shown that the brains of London taxi drivers have a larger than average area allocated to processing spatial tasks. The brain area responsible for motor control of the right index finger has been found to be significantly larger in blind subjects who are Braille readers than in sighted individuals. A Chinese study of expert divers found brain areas

associated with skilled motor control enlarged, while an Australian study of skilled racket-sport players found that brain areas associated with the racket arm were larger than in a matched group of non-athletes.

Even just a few weeks of spending significant time with a particular activity can lead to a re-allocation of neurons. We can therefore expect consumers who spend a lot of their day immersed in the digital environment to have experienced some changes, that is, to be better at or more sensitive to certain things while being worse at others due to a re-alignment of neurons with the demands made on them.

## **The upsides of digital exposure on the brain**

With these disclaimer of some generalizations in mind, let's start with the positive developments that come from intense and extensive exposure to a digital environment:

1. Consumers enhance their fluid intelligence, i.e., their ability to find solutions to practical problems.
2. Reaction times become shorter.
3. Consumers get better at what is commonly called 'multi-tasking' – not actually doing two things at once, but switching their brain's attention quickly from one task to another.
4. Consumers are exposed to and engage in a wider range of activities and contexts, albeit somewhat superficially.

All this suggests that digital natives are more receptive to games and challenges that can be addressed by using fluid intelligence. They like variety and typically want more of it, but because they are used to multi-screening it's more difficult to maintain their involvement.

## **What does this mean for brands targeting digital natives?**

### ***1. Younger consumers are used to fast moving experiences and lots of variety.***

This means they will reject slow moving ads and tepid engagement opportunities unless they have high emotional content. They are also used to frequent dopamine releases and thus are always looking for even stronger dopamine hits. Research has shown that young people get bored much more easily than older people, because of the highly active environment they have gotten used to. It's a challenge for brands to not just live up to their expectations, but to exceed them when it comes to being fast, different and rewarding.

### ***2. Spending time on social media rather than face-to-face with other people leads to a deficiency in social skills.***

The very important nuances – such as facial expression, tone of voice and body movements – lose significance as they are not a part of most interactions. This means marketers can't assume digital natives will pick up important nuances in ads or videos – you do need to be quite explicit. This doesn't prevent brands from priming their audience, but the key message must be clearly stated.

### ***3. They judge their own standing within their peer group largely by the role they play online.***

Allow younger consumers to discover something that's sharable or offer an experience that gives them bragging rights. Digital natives are always looking for something they can bring first to their group of 'friends' as this is how they establish their position - and get a dopamine hit to boot!

### ***4. As online answers are immediately available, consumers spend much less time exploring contexts and options.***

This results in a lack of exploration skills, which means digital natives are often unable and - more importantly - unwilling to deal with complexity. Marketers should keep things simple and, if lengthy explanations are required, break them down into smaller steps, gamifying the experience to ensure dopamine releases will motivate your audience to stick with your message. Also, create impulse buying occasions that require less cognitive processing.

### ***5. They use the internet to associate with and get information from third parties who hold the same views as they do – aka, confirmation bias.***

Digital natives consume content that they can relate to and 'talk' to people who share the same likes and dislikes. This means that their own views are constantly reinforced and they fail to see contradictory ideas as potentially valuable.

When you have a disruptive message try to engage your audience first with something familiar. Keep in mind that it is very difficult

to change the perceptions of this target group, regardless of how compelling an argument you have. If you are able to let them experience the benefits of your offer (sampling, test drive, etc.) do that instead of arguing the benefit.

**6. Research indicates that people who take pictures during an activity experience less involvement, excitement and satisfaction than others who focus on what they are doing or are part of at the time.**

Either capitalize on the desire to record and share (a tactic often used by marketers) or take the counter-approach and promise a great time when they turn off their gadgets and spend time with the brand in the real world.

**7. The growing trend towards self-monitoring sees consumers delegating their intuitive understanding of their body and mind to gadgets.**

Digital natives are receptive to being told what is good for them – as long as it is simple and individualized. This opens the door to all sorts of DIY assessments that are likely to engage this target group.

**8. The digital environment limits creativity.**

Younger consumers may do something new more often, such as Photoshop pictures or put their own YouTube video together, but ultimately the sharing platform determines what can be done, limiting creativity.

Introducing digital natives to something new should ideally be gamified, offer a shareable output with brag value, and be facilitated by the intuitive use of an app.

**9. Online shorthand encourages a superficial and rather primitive communication style.**

Brands must keep it simple. Break longer stories down into bites, use video rather than words whenever possible, and don't expect digital natives to read long copy - make sure the key points are covered early on. Marketers should also acknowledge they are often facing a hostile audience when it comes to advertising to digital natives - delivering great dopamine hits to them and headaches to you!

Though these points are generalized, they provide a starting point for marketers to consider when engaging this critical consumer group. For each brand, this engagement will look different: it depends on the position of the brand, ambitions as a brand owner, budget and on the marketer's ability to find creative ways of tapping into what makes digital natives tick.

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## **About the author**

Peter Steidl is a neuromarketer, and principal of Neurothinking.

Peter has worked as a marketing academic, a researcher, an educator, an author and a speaker. He has also worked as an advertising, brand identity and media strategist; a business consultant; and a brand facilitator. Peter has been at the coal face and seen theory put into practice. Through his consultancy business, Neurothinking, he focuses on the application of neuroscience insights and concepts to brand – working with big businesses and big brands across a myriad of categories and in many different countries.

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