

UNDERSTANDING GUT REACTIONS

Fundamental Human Needs and the BASE Framework

by Abe Rutchick

Imagine that there is a one-kilogram bar of gold (worth about \$43,000 as of this writing) at the bottom of a pit. A ladder on the side of the pit provides easy access to its floor, and all you need to do to retrieve the bar is climb down, grab it, and climb up. There is one problem: the pit is completely full of (non-poisonous) snakes. Assume you know that you are physically capable of reaching the bar and climbing out safely. Take a moment to think about your feelings as you stand at edge of the pit.

Now, imagine a second situation. Same gold bar, same pit, but this time the pit is filled with mud. As before, you know you are physically capable of reaching the bar and climbing out safely. Again, think about your feelings as you stand at edge of the pit.

Why do we have an immediate gut reaction to the first situation, but a slower, more thoughtful reaction to the second? Or, in



other words, why would many of us be \$43,000 richer in the second situation?

The fast, automatic, instinctive parts of our brain – those that kick in when we consider the gold bar in the pit – evolved to quickly address fundamental human needs. Some

of our goals align with fundamental human needs – those that human beings have always had to address – and some do not. Pursuing fundamental human needs (such as noticing and remembering someone who never takes his turn to buy a round of drinks, picking up on any signal that somebody might be interested in us, or avoiding entering a snake pit) is easy and natural, and we are good at doing it. Other pursuits (like driving, playing gin rummy, and solving logic problems) are unrelated to our fundamental needs, and we are not as good at pursuing them.

If we come across a new thing or a new person, we want to know if it is going to satisfy or threaten one of these basic, fundamental needs. Thus, it makes sense

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that when we assess gut reactions (fast, less conscious, relatively automatic reactions) in a consumer behavior context, we should assess reactions relevant to fundamental needs.

What are “fundamental human needs,” then? Psychologists, philosophers, and others have thought a lot about

this idea. If you’ve taken introductory psychology, you might remember the “hierarchy of needs” proposed by Maslow, and there are others: a need for mastery, a need for affiliation, bodily needs, a need for esteem, a need for control, and so on.

We have integrated these theoretical perspectives with our experiences in marketing research to develop a framework of fundamental human needs that matter in a consumer context.

WE CALL IT THE BASE FRAMEWORK.

First is **Belonging**. This has to do with the love and support we get and give to our friends and family. Human beings are born helpless, and stay helpless for longer than any other species – we literally need other people to survive. Research in psychology has shown that being socially isolated actually weakens our immune system. It’s even been shown that physical and social pain share some of the same neurological structures: looking at a picture of someone we love helps us resist physical pain, and taking aspirin reduces how sad we feel when we’re ostracized. So Belonging is a basic human need. In the space of consumer concerns, we need to evaluate products and brands on questions like: **Is this thing friendly? Is it warm? Does it help me care for, connect with, and be generous to others?**

Next is **Appeal**. This has more to do with attracting people to us, seeming cool and popular and desirable by mates and new acquaintances. Being highly regarded, having self-esteem, is a fundamental human need – think about things like cyberbullying, and how damaging it can be if self-esteem is threatened. And we attune to Appeal automatically: psychological

research has shown that we automatically adjust our behavior to match the accent and nonverbal behavior of other people – but only if they are high in status. When we think about Appeal in a consumer context, we ask questions like: **Will people like me if I'm using this thing? Will they be jealous that I have one?**

Next is **Security**. This covers things like safety, food, and shelter – unquestionable basic, fundamental needs, directly about survival. And threatening these needs can have profound consequences. When we feel that our safety is threatened, our bodies respond by inhibiting our growth, healing, and immune system so that they can address the immediate issue at hand. This process, over time, is harmful. Even experiencing a sense of uncertainty can change how we make decisions and perceive other people, driving us toward things that are familiar and comfortable. When thinking about products and services, we ask: **Is this thing made well? Is it safe? Will it break at a bad time?**

Finally we have **Exploration**. This is creating, discovering, and experiencing new things. Finding new places, developing new resources, and broadening our experiences has been crucial to our development as a species, and matters for our development as individual people. The richness of the environment that babies grow up in has an influence on their cognition years later. The kinds of questions we ask here about brands and products are: **Does this thing excite me? Does it make me want to get out and do**

things and create. Does it inspire me?

Together, these needs represent the BASE framework; they are the things that people have gut reactions about.

SO WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS APPROACH?

First, we have to *assess whether our categories, brands, and research questions are ones that tap fundamental human needs*. The answer to this question tells us whether we want to use a measure that taps gut reactions or something more explicit, thoughtful, and specific. For example, whether a bank is trusted is a question well-suited to a gut reaction assessment. It was important to our ancestors, as it is to us, to figure out who we can trust; thus, our gut reactions drive these judgments. On the other hand, whether a car is environmentally friendly is an inherently reflective question, ill-suited to a measure that taps gut reactions.

Second, we must *understand the architecture of the category*. Which of the needs are most important, and the **WAY** that they are important, depends on the category. Sometimes, you just want to win on the need that's most central for a category – whoever wins this need wins. For example, the cosmetics company that does best on Appeal might dominate the category, and the other needs might not matter much. In other cases, there might be “table stakes” needs that are very important, but are cost of entry – satisfying them is

expected. All airlines must be competent at Security; failing there dooms brand health. And the most important needs may not be obvious, emphasizing the importance of targeting research toward them.

Third, once we have assessed the way in which fundamental needs play out in the category, we *measure how well we satisfy fundamental needs* for consumers. Different brands stand for, and emphasize, different



needs. For example, in the airline space, Southwest emphasizes Belonging. They position themselves as friends and allies of the customer: friends don't charge fees to check bags, and Southwest is famously helpful to people who almost miss their connections. Their logo is a heart. On the other hand, Virgin America emphasizes Appeal. Their space-age white seats, cool

purple lighting, and music at the ticket counter evoke desirability and popularity. Assessing associations with fundamental needs allows us to determine how we can

best position our brand or product, whether by reinforcing existing strengths, shoring up weaknesses, or capturing desirable white space.

There is increasing recognition that gut reactions matter in consumer behavior, and that capturing gut reactions is essential in building a complete understanding of many research questions. As we do this work, however, we want to make sure we aim our tools at the right targets – gut reactions to the fundamental human needs of the BASE framework.

