

http://bcm.bc.edu/issues/spring_2014/inquiring_minds/double-vision.html#

Double vision

by Dave Denison

CSOM researchers Brasel and Gips track what catches the eye

The proof was in the chocolate. When two Carroll School of Management professors, S. Adam Brasel and James Gips, set out to investigate the effects of fast-forwarding on television advertising, they created mock ads for two brands of chocolate bars and embedded them in an episode of the nature show *Blue Planet*, which they then showed to subjects. In one commercial, the brand logo was placed in the center of the screen. In the other, it was on the periphery.

Participants in the study had no recollection of seeing either of the ads, which were fast-forwarded at 20 times the normal speed. Yet, when viewers were offered a candy bar as they left the professors' lab, they chose the brand that had been featured in the center of the screen, by a two-to-one margin.

Because they were using eye-tracking technology, Brasel and Gips had a good idea why. In their first research project together, published as "Points of View: Where Do We Look When We Watch TV?" (posted online by the journal *Perception* in September 2008), they had shown that TV watchers tend to fix their gaze on the middle of the screen. It was apparent from this new study that images placed there can register in the brain even when seen for just a fraction of a second.

The results of that experiment, published in the *Journal of Marketing* in November 2008 and reported in the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, and *Wired* magazine, marked an early phase in what has become a rich collaboration between Brasel, an associate professor of marketing, and Gips, holder of the Egan chair in the information systems department.

Both men are self-described "tech-heads." Gips defines his specialty as "human-computer interaction." He recalls walking into the computer lab at MIT as a first-year student in 1963. "I was hooked after a month. I loved it." Brasel worked with eye-tracking technology at Stanford University while completing his Ph.D. in 2004 in marketing (with a concentration in consumer behavior). Shortly after Brasel came to Boston College in July 2004, Gips got in touch with him. Gips also had a strong interest in eye-tracking; in the 1990s, he developed EagleEyes and Camera Mouse, products that allow disabled children and adults to control a computer with eye movements.

Brasel, 38 and built like a middle linebacker, is a media studies enthusiast who says he's always had "crazy amounts of music and movies and books" in his life. Gips, 68, is literally the graybeard of the duo. His conversations bend toward ways technology can assist people, such as in revealing the "active internal life" of disabled individuals whom "others don't perceive as being conscious."

In 2005, the two created the Marketing Interfaces Lab on the first floor of Fulton Hall. A robotics lab in the 1980s and later Gips's EagleEyes lab, the windowless room holds computers, video editing machines, and an infrared eye-tracker, which is narrow, rectangular, and black with a dark red window and sits unobtrusively on a table beneath a monitor. According to Gips, Brasel "does the lion's share of the work," organizing and conducting the experiments and writing the papers. Gips describes his main role as being "the question asker." Brasel says it's the thinking they do together—often in the lab, sometimes over dinners—that he values most. "We collaboratively figure out what these papers are going to be about," he says. "What are the series of questions we need this paper to answer, and how do we go about answering them? It's really hard to do that stuff alone."

Among the questions the two have recently researched: how often consumers' attention shifts when they are multitasking, as when using a laptop while watching TV; how the use of touchscreens affects online shoppers (they buy more); and the extent to which same-language subtitles make TV advertisements more effective.

"The way that consumers are using media in their everyday lives is undergoing a sea change," Brasel says. And humans have not sufficiently adapted to realize in real time what exactly is going on when they immerse themselves in relatively new media technologies. As Gips puts it, "Our brains just aren't built that way." The work of the Marketing Interfaces Lab allows painstaking observation of how people absorb and make use of electronic media. "We see what they're actually doing, and compare that to what they think they're doing," Brasel says. "And sometimes those disconnects are really interesting."