



"If marketers realize that sound is more than a device to activate emotions, but rather a type of language with which the essence of their brand can be conveyed, only then will they gain a better grasp on the value of audio."

CHRISTIAN SCHEIER

Founder, Joint Managing Director, Decode Implicit Marketing, Hamburg

Dr. Christian Scheier is one of the few neuropsychologists worldwide who combines research and practical competence in marketing consultation. After a scientific career at the renowned California Institute of Technology and the successful development of an agency for marketing research, he founded decode Marketingberatung GmbH together with Dirk Held. Dr. Scheier and Held have also co-authored two best-sellers: "Wie Werbung wirkt. Erkenntnisse des Neuromarketing" (eng. "The Effect of Advertising. Neurological Findings") and "Was Marken erfolgreich macht. Neuropsychologie in der Markenführung" (engl. "How to Make a Brand Successful. Neuropsychology in Branding"). Dr. Scheier is a sought-after international speaker on all things neuromarketing.

Reese: Most brands are extremely disciplined visually and verbally, but very arbitrary when it comes to audio. And that's despite the fact that some of the most successful brands out there – brands that are among the Fortune Ten – follow rigorous audio style guides. So why is it that only these few brands pay attention to their audio identity, when audio is so closely connected to a brand's economic success?

Scheier: I think at the core of it are two aspects. One is that the implementation and management of a brand's audio identity doesn't only require discipline, but also a certain capability. That, in turn, affects other aspects of brand building, or brand building in general, and it's why there's a strong correlation between market success, or brand equity, and strength in the audio space. The second, more important aspect revolves around why it's so hard for brands to find their voice. There seems to be a misconception about audio: It is seen as an icing on the cake, as a means to make things a little nicer and more likeable. Audio is not considered a driver of any sorts. But what is audio really capable of activating in the brain? That's where we can resort to neuroscience. What has often been overlooked is that music is a type of language. **Music, or sound in general, is capable of activating semantic areas of the brain – pretty much the same areas that are active when someone speaks to you. In fact, quite a lot of scientists see music as a precursor of language, evolutionarily speaking. You can activate semantic concepts through sound, and brand values are semantic concepts – "inspiration", for example, or "escapism", anything you would like your brand to convey beyond factors such as trust and personality. If marketers realize that sound is more than a device to activate emotions, but rather a type of language with which the essence of your brand can be conveyed, only then will they gain a better grasp on the value of audio.**

Reese: A Millward Brown study has found that consumers list sound as a substantial element in their purchase decisions. However, brands only devote a very small percentage of their resources to audio communication. Why is that the case?

Scheier: There are a few reasons for that. One is the so-called implementation gap. A lot of time is spent on brand strategy development: What type of values do we as a brand want to be attached to? What are the trends? Which consumer segments do we want to address? – and so on. But then you are facing the execution issue. **The potential of executing your brand values with a high level of discipline is underestimated.** That also applies to the visual space, but even more so for

sound. A second aspect touches upon what I mentioned earlier: It is difficult for people to grasp that sound is an excellent carrier of semantic information. Your consumers do not read strategy papers, so you need to encode the semantic concept across several sensory channels – not just through visuals, but through audio, through touch, and so on – so that it can be de-coded on the consumer's side. A third reason is that we need to get away from the common misconception of the right brain/left brain model. We have learned that the right brain is emotional and creative, and that the left brain is rational and text-based. This model is at the root of why most people don't use audio despite acknowledging that it is important. Why do people really buy a certain product? Science would answer: You buy because you want to achieve a goal. You want to wash your clothes, so you buy detergent. You want to get from A to B, so you buy a car. But obviously, there are more reasons for why you buy a certain product, and these are goals on a higher level that you're also pursuing. You buy a brand that stands for a value that's important to you, for example the concept of "sharing". Or you want a brand that not only provides you with soap, but with a soap that activates the concept of caring for your family. It's not about emotions and ratio. **We need to have a discussion about what the semantic concepts are that we need to trigger. If we have that discussion, audio cannot be an afterthought.**

Reese: But if you look at the decision-making process for music in TV commercials in Germany...

Scheier: Yes, it's a mess. It's based on likeability, at the end of the day.

Reese: The driving decision-making factor is not that the audio is congruent with the brand values, and I believe that is a highly irresponsible behavior.

Scheier: Yeah, but why is that the case? I believe we lack conceptual tools to really bring it up to the same level as the visuals.

Reese: Besides a lack of strategy, research and measurement, I believe there's also a lack of audio testing. We have testing partners that we've worked with to develop robust testing methodologies for measuring multiple parameters with audio assets. We believe that you can't base decisions on likeability only.

Scheier: That is true. **Whether you like something doesn't actually matter. You can want something without liking it. And you can like things without wanting them. We need to tap into the "wanting" part, the part**

that is driving purchases. "Wanting" in the human brain happens – unlike in the chimp and animal brain – not only based on simple, functional things, like "Oh, that's cool, I can open a bottle with this", but also because of higher-level things based on meaning, based on semantic concepts. We pursue concepts. Humans are concept-consuming beings. We consume the notion of togetherness, of being a loving mother, father, et cetera... It sounds very philosophical, and it is, but when it comes to consuming things, it becomes quite concrete. And whatever channel I use, the conceptuality is the common denominator in the brain. I can use visual codes and auditory codes, and if there's a mismatch between what I present to people visually, and the sound that goes with it, then it's as if I was multiplying everything by zero.

Reese: You subconsciously know it's incongruent.

Scheier: Exactly. It just bounces off.

Reese: If I lied to you, you would see that my visuals don't make sense paired to my audio, and you subconsciously know there's something wrong. You make the immediate decision, "Wait a second. I don't trust you."

Scheier: Exactly. And if you think about the famous experiment where consumers bought French wine when they heard French music, and German wine when they heard German music – why does that work? Because it's congruent on a semantic level. The goal of branding must be, at all time, this consistency and discipline. It's all about activating the same concepts wherever people interact with a brand. Once you understand it and absorb it, you will not allow for a decision-making process like you have described it to happen.

Reese: For me it's very hard to understand that brands don't look at music as an asset the way that brands like Coca-Cola or Telekom do. A lot of money is burnt because the economic power of a consistent audio behavior is underestimated.

Scheier: Out of ten CEOs, how many do you think would see audio as a key success driver in the first place? To me the really crucial question is whether you have a KPI (key performance indicator) on the brand. Are your managers being partly paid and rewarded for their consistency in triggering the brand values across the touch points? Because if they're not, then it's all just lip service. Just measuring brand awareness is sort of trivial. But do I trigger my brand values consistently over time? That's where the consistency comes in.

Look how few companies actually have KPIs on the brand, on the content of the brand, what it should stand for. You can count them on one hand. As long as you don't have that, you have no means to evaluate what is or isn't helping you. If there's no KPI, no one cares. If I'm not being punished for being inconsistent, well, so what? There's no reason why I wouldn't be playing around. For me, that's what it all comes down to.

Reese: Unless we can prove an isolated return on investment on sensory channels such as audio, CEOs and CFOs won't understand how important implicit marketing is.

Scheier: I'm actually quite optimistic. I think that things are changing. C-level managers used to focus on the concept of the homo economicus - the idea that you just need to see the balance sheet and not think about branding and consumer insights. But a shift is happening, mostly thanks to the Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman. He changed the way we think about people and their decisions. His book "Thinking Fast and Slow" highlights the importance of sensory interfaces to the intuitive decision-making system that drives our purchase decisions. Sensory channels are now recognized as being important for driving decision-making. If you keep running with the old models, you may learn a few things about the relevance of audio, but it will not trickle down and make you do things differently. Behavior change is not a consequence of information.

Reese: Yes, that's what it is about at the end of the day. We're in the behavior-change business.

Scheier: You need to follow a framework where audio is automatically a clearly integrated part of the brand management, a system beyond ROI topics – that of course as well – but where you really understand that it's an extremely efficient channel. It's like a language.

Reese: And I think once we get there, there will be a really high demand for companies that get it and who know how to make the most use of it.

Scheier: Yes. It's exactly what we experience. Our company has been leveraging this insight from day zero... and it used to be extremely hard to make people aware of it. Today, everyone knows there's this implicit decision level, so the questions we get are, "Okay, we need to measure implicitly, what are the tools you can make available? How can we code for the implicit system in the consumer's brain?" That's our core business, and I'm quite optimistic about the more subtle, implicit marketing channels.