UF/IFAS CITRUS STATE

Looking closely at consumer behavior

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I recently bought a $30,000 pair of glasses for one of my scientists. They help him read minds.

Actually, what they do is track eye movements. Hayk Khachatryan downloads data from the glasses, which tells him where the wearer looked, for how long, whether she returned to a spot repeatedly and what she was looking at when she expressed a thought.

The data even reveal where she was looking when she said she'd buy.

Applied to citrus, you can imagine what these specs might tell us about how that same shopper reads an orange juice label.

STUDYING THE SCIENCE OF DECISION-MAKING

The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) has long addressed the human-dimensions aspect of science. Khachatryan is an agricultural economist in the UF/IFAS Department of Food and Resource Economics, so he studies how people make choices.

There was a time when producers drove the agriculture business. I scarcely need to tell you how consumers have grabbed the wheel. Access to information has put them there. Lamentably, so has access to misinformation.

So economists like Khachatryan have abandoned the classical economic assumptions that our decisions are rational and consistent. Perception and emotions rule, informed or not. The glasses are a way to get a better handle on linking cognitive building blocks to economic behaviors.

Photo courtesy of Tobii Pro.

Researchers are using high-tech glasses to track eye movement and gain a better understanding of how buyers make decisions.

Tracking eye movements helps us get past what consumers say they want and closer to what they actually do. In his experimental economics lab at the Mid-Florida Research and Education Center in Apopka, Khachatryan teases out what looks most compelling to the beholder, for example.

Khachatryan can tie visual attention measures to whether consumers will pay more for certain designations on a label, such as locally grown, certified organic or pollinator-friendly.

Or maybe how much attention they pay to sweeteners or juice content. The glasses can see it in their eyes.

With a wall of eight 75-inch screens, he can put a subject with the expensive glasses at the curb in front of a virtual yard. Then, by changing the composition of the landscaping — playing with the traditional turfgrass lawn vs. a native plants mix — he can detect at what point a consumer decides a landscape looks like too much work — a critical consideration in homeowners' decisions.

FUTURE FOCUSED

Khachatryan is one of the few scientists in Florida with these kinds of tools and the know-how to use them. His cutting-edge investigation exemplifies how IFAS can sometimes best help producers by focusing on consumers.

He has scarcely got his screens and glasses out of the box, but he's already talking about big ideas for the future. He has aspirations to work with UF's brain institute to measure brain activity and link it with eye movement to study shopping behavior.

He even talks about the prospect of exploring neuroeconomics as a way to better understand why and when people's decisions are driven by something more than logic. By figuring out which areas of the brain are active as people make certain choices, economists can begin to account for the role that things like emotion and social factors play.

That's the kind of aspiration our faculty brings to its work. Before I spend more IFAS money so Khachatryan can use a functional MRI, though, I want to see more of what those $30,000 glasses can show us!

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