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STRATEGIC NLP:
Using meta-programs as
strategic frameworks

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This paper is an introduction to a body of thinking we have been evolving over the last 5 years or so. It is about ways of applying NLP Meta-Programs strategically in research to provide very potent and vivid frameworks for target audience insights.

Essentially, you could say NLP (Neuro-linguistic programming) describes the software of our brains. Many of you will be familiar with parts of the NLP toolkit – Meta-Programs seem to us a rather underused element of this currently.

There are around 50 documented Meta-Programs, which frame every aspect of our responses to the world. So far, we have found around a dozen of these useful in market research. We have taken a few as examples in this paper, aiming to show you how they work and how we have applied them commercially. We plan to demonstrate how we have used this thinking in the context of different markets and types of research project, within the UK and internationally. We also aim to get you to start examining your own Meta-programs and to give you ideas on how you can apply the frameworks to your own work.

This is not intended to be an NLP primer – there are lots of excellent books and articles about NLP, some of which we reference in our bibliography below. A great place to start, if you would like to pursue this thinking further, is 'Figuring Out People – Reading people using Meta-programs' by L. John Hall and Bob G. Bodenhamer.

META-PROGRAMS - THE CENTRAL PLATFORMS TO OUR THINKING

In our research, we are constantly looking for patterns of thinking we can highlight for our clients as predictors of responses to propositions or communication approaches... However, we tend to pay more attention to the output of our participants' thinking than the process of their thinking.

We are all well aware that people think different thoughts! NLP asserts that *we use our brains differently* to think these different thoughts, that our brains are running different Meta-Programs and so interact with the world around us differently:

- Noticing different things
- Coding experiences differently
- Using different language patterns
- Giving more or less importance to different things

In the following pages, we have focused mainly on 3 Meta-Programs. We feel these are useful in that they are fairly clear to grasp even if you have never encountered NLP before and because they have broad implications for the types of projects we encounter on a regular basis. We have given a brief explanation of these example Meta-Programs at the start of each exposition.

TOWARDS vs AWAY FROM MOTIVATION

This is a core Meta-Program, as it relates to motivations. Essentially, 'towards' and 'away from' are the two ends of the spectrum illustrated in Picture 1.

- **Away From** people (on the left) think in terms of what should be avoided and are energised by threats: "If I do a lot of exercise, I won't get fat". *Away from* people can be prone to procrastination, they won't act until the penalty for not acting gets painful enough. They can find it difficult to stick to goals, but are good at trouble-shooting. They can make great combat planning officers in the military.
- **Towards people** (on the right) think in terms of goals and are motivated by achievement: "If do a lot of exercise, I will have a lovely figure". They can be great visionaries but may also be naive as they have difficulty identifying problems. They may indulge in too much blue sky thinking or set unrealistic goals, but they generally get a lot out of life.



Picture 1

Recognising Towards and Away From Characteristics

Ask a friend (or a research respondent) who goes to the gym regularly what is important to them about this. When they have given you the first answer, ask them what is important to them about that (you can continue probing to ladder criteria). Asking more than once is key; the first answer can be a headline answer, for example 'to get fitter'. It isn't until you look at *why* getting fitter is important that the underlying Towards or Away From motivations start to emerge.

So, think about the answers you are hearing; is your friend using negative or positive reference points? Are they avoiding problems or working towards positive goals? Ask yourself the same questions (this is harder, as you know the angles). Are you thinking of positive objectives or are you moving away from negatives?

Putting Towards and Away From to Work

The results of Towards and Away From motivations may be the same. The joggers get fitter either way; in terms of behaviour, they can look and feel identical. However, the way they get to this behaviour is different. This is crucial to us in marketing, as it predicates the types of offers and language that the different types will respond to.

- In housework, Towards people will be motivated by a good end result, while Away From people are avoiding dirt, germs or the negative judgement of others. Towards people may be more drawn to Flash Clean and Shine, while Away from people may respond more to Cillit Bang Grime and Lime (Bang and the Dirt is Gone!).
- In healthcare, Away From people are more motivated by fear (of symptoms or outcomes) than by a vision of the level of health they would like to achieve.
- In finance, Towards people are more likely to want investments so that they can enjoy life in the future; they will focus on an upside and work to gain a financial objective. Away From people tend to feel they need savings for a rainy day. They are more likely to think in terms of protecting their pot of money and less in terms of building it.

Motivational language

- Towards people tend to respond better to 'enjoy' 'gain' 'get' 'achieve'
- Away from people will listen to 'avoid' 'fix' 'prevent' 'don't ...'
- Common Towards values include loving, successful, healthy, stimulated, excited, peaceful, serene, fun, humour, relaxed.
- Common Away from values include anger, depression, worry insecurity, loss, boredom, guilt, hurt, loneliness .
- Two books about presentation skills highlight the two ends of the spectrum beautifully
- "Never be boring again" by Doug Stevenson
- "The Leader's Guide to Storytelling" by Stephen Denning

IN TIME AND THROUGH TIME

This Meta-Program underlies fundamental aspects of the ways people think and behave in a whole range of markets.

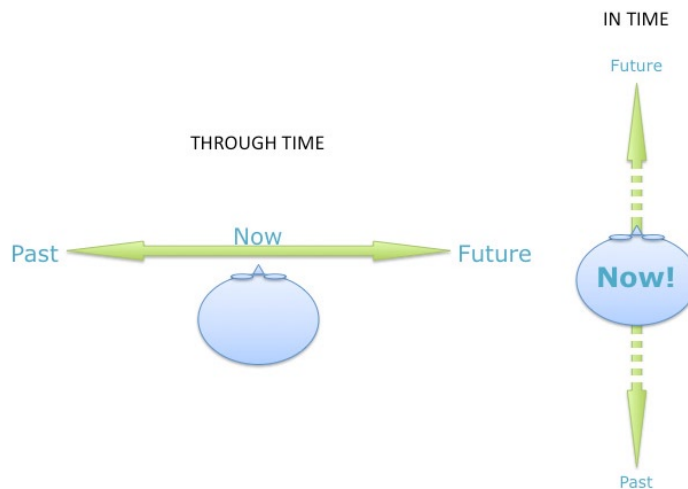
- **Through Time** people (glibly characterised on the left in Picture 2) experience life in a continuum. They are aware of connections between their past, present and future; when they think about the past, they think in terms of the steps that lead to now; when they think of the future, they can easily imagine steps to where they want to be. They are good at making plans and sticking to them, they will tend to prioritise this over more immediate satisfactions. They may actually miss out on the 'now' because they are too busy planning what comes next.
- **In Time** people (on the right in Picture 2) live in a sort of 'eternal now'. They are focussed on what they are doing right now and ignore time passing around them. They are open-ended in their thinking and may have several things on the go, without being concerned about finishing any of them. They are not good at sticking to plans generally. They cannot easily make sacrifices in the present for long-term gain; they are more interested in what is in front of them than any future implications.



Picture 2

Recognising In Time and Through Time from Characteristics

The classic NLP way of distinguishing between these two types is to get people to point out where they feel their 'timeline' lies. So, ask them to point to their future with one hand and their past with the other; finally get them to point to 'now'. Through Timers will point forwards and backwards and make a gesture towards themselves for 'now'. In Timers tend to indicate a left-right line just in front of them. Most people are able to point to their future and past quite easily and instinctively despite their initial puzzlement at so 'strange' a request.



Picture 3

The graphic representation of the results of this exercise in picture 3 helps highlight a key difference between the types. Through Time people can and do visualise their entire timeline, while for In Time people, the immediate future and past tend to impede their view of any more distant times.

Clearly, it is not always practical to get people waving their arms about in research projects; we often use that classic research mixture of observation and listening instead.

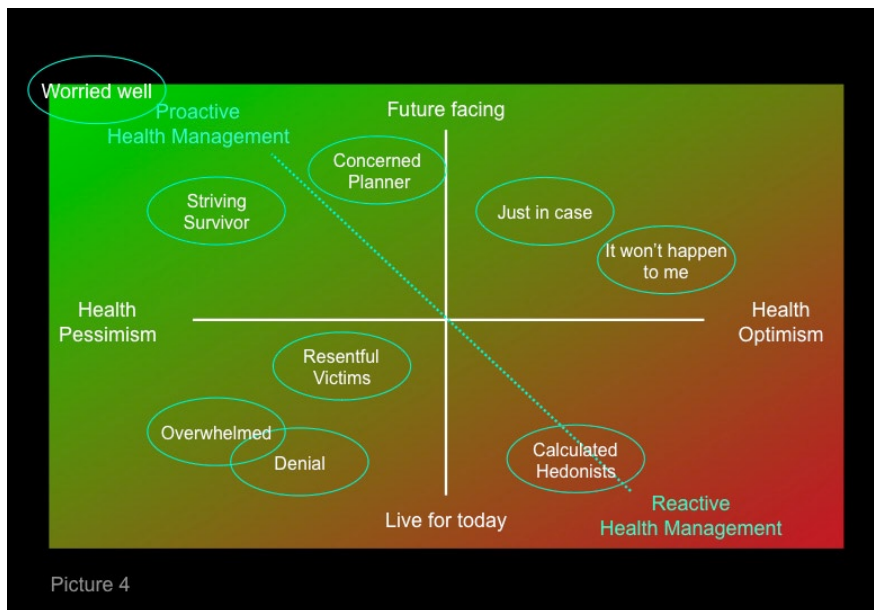
The comments respondents make may reveal the pattern with Through Timers focussed on future plans or concerns and referring to making lists to keep these plans on track. In contrast, In Timers talk more about what they are feeling right now. More subtle cues also exist: when someone uses one hand to punctuate a sequence of events, an In-timer will tend to start with their hand in front of them and count off the steps by moving the hand forwards whereas a Through-timer will make similar counting gestures from left to right.

We also ask respondents which describes them best: "I tend to live for the moment, you don't know what will happen tomorrow" or "I think it's important to plan for the future and I spend time doing that". We have used these attitudinal statements as recruitment criteria; it can be incredibly useful to separate out the two types before the fieldwork in markets where long-term thinking is important. The responses and dynamics in the groups are then much clearer; the individual groups are more cohesive and they are often very different to each other!

Putting In Time and Through Time to Work

Given that our relationship with time is something that most of us have never thought about, it is curious how much difference it makes in terms of predicting behaviour and attitudes. In the healthcare and financial markets, for instance, In Timers and Through Timers have very different profiles and need different messages to be motivated. Through Timers are natural savers or investors; thinking about their future financial needs is something they do spontaneously. In Timers are more interested in spending money now, living for the moment. They are naturally attracted to information on credit cards, but getting them to commit to a pension may be harder going.

The example below should give you a flavour of the difference this Meta-Program can make. Picture 4 is a summary of a qualitative segmentation based on a 6-market study of attitudes to high cholesterol treatment. Our participants' relationship with time emerged as a key variable in examining different patterns of behaviour and attitudes. We even found that whole markets differed from each other on this spectrum (there were more Calculated Hedonists and Deniers in Italy than in the US for instance). It's easy to see that one message will not fit all in this case. Some types need their problem to become more immediate so they can respond to it, others need the problem and solution breaking down into less overwhelming elements and manageable steps.



Broadcast media is not available to prescription medication brands in most countries currently; in this case, a restriction could be turned to advantage, as the brand could use direct communication in a very sharply targeted way.

Following on from the qualitative analysis, we worked with the media team and the quantitative agency to merge this thinking with a quantitative segmentation that was being developed in parallel and to produce a short set of 'golden questions' that would identify different attitudinal start points. This framework helped the Astra Zeneca marketing team and Proximity to deliver different communication packages for different clusters. The results from pilot tests in Mexico and Australia have been very positive.

To give you a few other examples of the In Time/Through Time Meta-Program in action:

- In food and nutrition, a smoothie company were interested to learn that Through Time people were better at planning to have their 5-a- Day, while In Time people could more easily be stimulated to have 5 *today* on a one-off basis.
- In a car buying study for Renault, we found that Through Time people tended to be more savvy, looking at the Total Cost of Ownership (although they might not use that language) including things like fuel consumption, cost of servicing, residual value etc. while In Time people tended to focus more on the appeal of the car per se. Through Time people would set a budget and work out how best to deploy it, while In Time people might fall in love with a car and buy it regardless of budget.
- In pensions, the effect of the Meta-Program is mitigated to a degree by the fact that many employers offer a pension plan to their employees as standard. Only very strongly In Time people (or people in very tight financial circumstances) will ignore free money from their employer to avoid making a personal contribution. However, Through Time people were more likely to be among the few who manage their pensions actively, checking on the features and performance of the investment funds in their pension pot, looking in detail at the implications of their projected scenarios and proactively trying to improve their pension outcome. Most In Time pension scheme members are not even aware they can do this. They are not motivated to engage with the information provided about their pension scheme as the outcomes are just too distant for them to contemplate.
- In a study on teenage binge drinking, immediate, personal consequences (throwing up rots your teeth) were often more powerful than potential long-term problems (liver damage, relationship issues).

INTERNAL vs EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL

People are wired differently in terms of the source of their motivation and judgements.

- Those with an **Internal Locus of Control** get their motivation from inside themselves and use their own reference points in judging how they are performing. They tend to feel that what happens to them in their lives is a result of their own actions. They are self-reliant and can be cynical and stubborn; they will strongly resist outside influence unless *they* judge it to have value. They seek out information and then use their own set of criteria to help them decide how to proceed. Their criteria may be good or faulty so even though they think they are right, they can still be mistaken.
- Those with an **External Locus of Control** are motivated by feedback from the outside world. At the extreme, without this feedback they can feel quite lost, as if they had a form of sensory deprivation. External LOC people feel that life happens to them, that other people's actions help or hinder their own possibilities. They are influenced by others and will feel more comfortable doing what others have done before them or following the advice of experts. They value other people's opinions to help them make decisions. If things go wrong, they may comfort themselves by thinking that at least they weren't the only ones to make this mistake, suffer from this problem.
- Although most of us have a natural position on this spectrum, this can vary somewhat depending on context. So, for instance, someone with a strong Internal Locus of Control in terms of evaluating investment options or whisky may not be entirely comfortable following their own judgement in fashion or leisure.

This Meta-Program makes a big difference to the way people process communication. Someone with a strong Internal LOC, on hearing their boss say 'you need to work faster' may have the reaction 'that's interesting'. At the other extreme, an External LOC person may take an opinion as an order. 'He said it would look better without the wall I'd better knock it down then.'

We have used context specific attitudinal statements to separate Internals from Externals in research samples. For instance, in a healthcare study we might ask them to select between two statements: 'I think it is important to follow the advice of healthcare professionals' or 'I like to evaluate medical advice carefully before making a decision'. The resulting groups run very differently. A group full of people with an Internal LOC may spend the first 5 minutes questioning the purpose of the research and the moderator's credentials!

Recognising Internal and External LOC from Characteristics

To identify internal or external LOC directly, the easiest method is to ask someone, 'How do you know when you have done a good job/chosen the right car/cleaned your house properly?' An internal LOC person may give you a slightly baffled look with the answer 'I just know'; alternatively their explanation of how they know will be a list of their own criteria. In contrast, externals will give an explanation that contains references to how other people view their performance/decision; 'My friends comment on how nice my house looks', 'I got a pay raise, my boss must approve of me'.



Picture 5

It is also possible to distinguish between internals and externals by listening to what they say and by watching their body language. Internals will use a lot of “I think” or “I believe” to introduce opinions whereas for externals it will be “my friend thinks” or “experts say”. Internals often point to themselves when giving an opinion or make emphatic pointing gestures to their listeners. They may also cross their arms when listening to you or clasp both hands over the back of their head (see the various coaches in Picture 5). Externals tend to keep looking at their listeners to gauge their response.

Putting Internal and External LOC to Work

In market research terms, we have found LOC to be relevant in many contexts. In car buying, we can offer a good example of context specific Locus of Control.

- People who are ‘into’ cars will have their own criteria for choosing one. They know what they want and may be interested, but not influenced by what others think.
- People who are financially savvy will have a different, but equally clear set of criteria for choosing a new car.
- Those who are neither can find it extremely difficult to choose; they have few criteria and often feel they lack the knowledge to judge the barrage of options that come with this expensive and very visible purchase decision. This group are very likely to turn to others to help them make their decision. They can be influenced by salesmen, but may actually avoid interaction with them for this very reason. They can get stuck in their purchase decision process and may delay a decision for months until it becomes critical or until something (a promotion, a limited edition) or someone (an adviser/influencer) helps them choose. They may only, finally feel they have made a good decision when others tell them so.

A context specific stance on LOC will still tend to relate back to an individual’s basic wiring; those who rely on their own judgement are more likely to ensure they have criteria for judging. However, people can move from one stance to another. In a recent finance project, one participant had been badly let down by an IFA and had deliberately developed his own knowledge and criteria, so as not to have to rely on others in the future.

LOC Motivational Language

Both types are persuadable by advertising but the approach required is very different. An Internal LOC person wants to be given information and invited to make his or her own mind up; ‘These are the facts, you decide’. An External LOC person will respond well to recommendations; ‘Doctors say that...’, or communication couched in the imperative, ‘Do it!’.

The famous L’Oreal strapline, ‘Because I’m worth it!’, seems designed to appeal to those with an Internal LOC who can then decide to agree or disagree with the statement. The line changed a few years ago to famous models saying ‘Because you’re worth it!’, this endorsement is likely to engage those with an External LOC more while the cynical Internal LOCs are likely to react with a “says who?”.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF USING META-PROGRAMS IN RESEARCH

Visual, Auditory, Kinaesthetic (VAK)

This is the Meta-Program that most people think of when they think of Neurolinguistic Programming. The theory is that people use their brains differently to code their experiences and retrieve their memories. Our brains ‘think’ by ‘seeing’ images, ‘hearing’ sounds and ‘feeling’ sensations in our minds. People tend to develop one of these systems more strongly and then think in this style. Visual people will notice a person’s appearance and facial expressions, Auditory people are strongly influenced by tone of voice and Kinaesthetic people are responsive to feelings and emotions.

In research, this can strongly influence reactions to stimulus material or projective techniques. We routinely identify our participants for creative development research, when some ‘get it’ immediately and others don’t, it’s really useful to know if all those that do are Visual.

Options vs Procedures

Options people look for the different ways (options) they can do something. They are interested in criteria and reasons. Procedures people are motivated by having a clear process to follow: First step A, then step B. Procedures people tend to answer a 'why' question as though they had been asked 'how'. "Why did you choose that car?" may yield an answer of "My old car was getting old, I looked at the information online, I visited different showrooms, I test-drove some cars" without ever mentioning they wanted a big boot and space for the kids.

This emerged as a useful way of looking at responses to Video on Demand in a recent study. Most channels initially focused on emphasising the extra choices they now offered, which engaged 'options' types, but left 'procedures' types cold until backed up by a bit more explanation on how to use it.

Big Picture vs Small Picture

Another Meta-Program where we have encountered strong effects in communications research is Big Picture vs Small Picture. Big Picture people are motivated by big concepts: fears or hopes. Small Picture people want to get their head around the details; they need to understand the finer points before they can relate to the overall concept.

This Meta-Program is worth looking out for in any kind of idea development research, but perhaps particularly in new product and service development. A well-known retailer was introducing an extra service with their new catalogue; 'three ways to shop, two ways to get your goods'. For Big Picture people, this was all they wanted to know. Small Picture people couldn't think about the potential relevance to them until they understood exactly how the options worked and inter-related.

This need for detail can mean that Small Picture people take longer to get to grips with new ideas; it can be worth planning for this in the research design, by pre-sensitising or recalling part of the sample. Giving people time to think will often provide a more realistic response.

SUMMING UP

We hope we have managed to get you excited about the constructive, vivid way NLP Meta-Programs can frame target audience insights.

- They are an under-used part of the NLP toolkit
- They embody human truths, so they resonate instinctively with research *users*; including creatives, R&D, sales, retail buyers....
- They help us understand, frame and predict responses
- They have clear implications for marketing elements like product design or communication

So far, we have used this thinking to:

- Stimulate stronger project hypotheses
- Put vivid context around targeting or positioning issues for clients
- Frame segmentation thinking
- Embody hidden market dynamics in sample structure
- Explain contradictory responses to new products and communication concepts
- Generate engaging insight platforms for NPD workshops

We would really like to hear how it works for you.

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