

How Does it Feel?

Using the Affect Wheel to Establish the Impact of your Communication



Mapping Feelings

This diagram to the right is the **=mc consulting** version of the **Circumplex Model of Affect**. This is widely used in psychology to describe emotions based on two primary dimensions: **valence** (pleasantness vs. unpleasantness) and **arousal** (activation vs. deactivation).

The model was originally designed to provide a framework for understanding and measuring emotions systematically in a therapeutic setting. It's now used in psychological research, particularly in studies of mood, emotional responses, and affective states. It's super useful in the decision science field.

Key Features of the Diagram

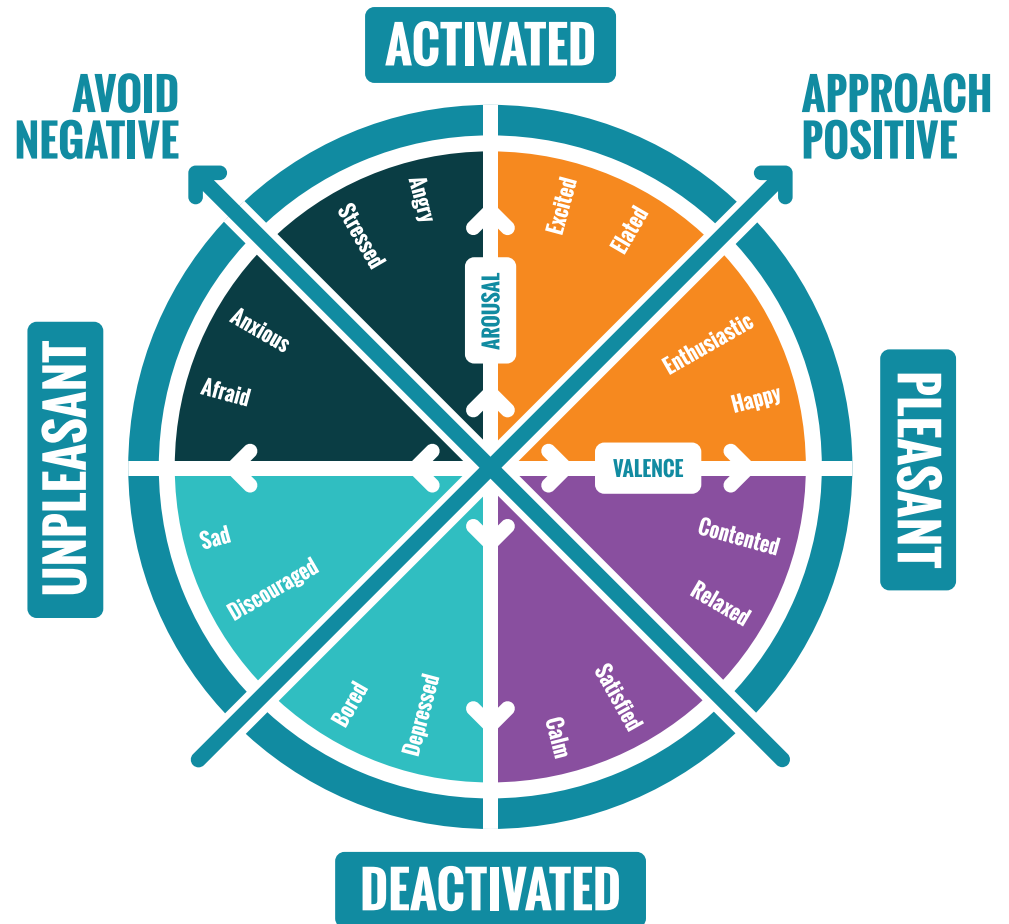
■ AXES:

- **Valence** (horizontal axis): Ranges from unpleasant (left) to pleasant (right).
- **Arousal** (vertical axis): Ranges from deactivated (bottom) to activated (top).

■ QUADRANTS:

- Top-left: High arousal, unpleasant (e.g., “stressed,” “nervous”).
- Top-right: High arousal, pleasant (e.g., “excited,” “enthusiastic”).
- Bottom-left: Low arousal, unpleasant (e.g., “depressed,” “bored”).
- Bottom-right: Low arousal, pleasant (e.g., “calm,” “relaxed”).

- **DRIVERS:** The diagram also includes motivational directions like “avoid negative” (unpleasant, high arousal) and “approach positive” (pleasant, high arousal). These align with behavioral tendencies associated with these emotional states.



How we use it

We ask audiences to place images/messages on the wheel then use those insights to establish how best to frame the Call To Action.

Puppy Problem

In the **=mc consulting decision science** team we use the wheel to establish what emotion we want any specific image or message to generate.

So if the image of the sad puppy in this advert below is meant to make people sad, does it do that? And if the image makes people sad does the Call To Action reduce that sadness? The key idea here is that emotions are a feedback mechanism on our behaviour. We adopt behaviours in order to improve our emotional state, to increase positivity or reduce negativity.

How effective is this advert? Consider what it is trying to do. In what ways does it work and in what ways not?



Beaten. Neglected. Starved.

Will you help feed a dog like Archie until we can find him a home?

When we found Archie, he weighed 3.2kg – just half what he should have. He hadn't been fed for two weeks and was so close to death that his temperature didn't register on the vet's thermometer.

Thankfully, he was brought to one of our rescue centres. And here, he was given the food and care he so desperately needed to survive. But there are many more neglected, abused dogs like Archie – and many more hungry mouths to feed.

Text FEED to 70099 to give £3
to feed and care for a dog like Archie.



Image used for illustrative purposes. The RSPCA does not make promises or guarantees. Your gift will be used to further our work where it's needed most. By using the RSPCA logo and messaging on your communication you acknowledge that you are supporting the RSPCA and its work. By using the RSPCA logo you agree that we may use your name in our communications. If you wish to opt out, please email: optout@rspca.org.uk

Origin and Development

- **Map the Mental Mood:** The model was first developed by **James A. Russell**, a psychologist, in 1980. Russell's work aimed to map emotions in a two-dimensional space to better understand their relationships and how they are experienced. Since then there have been many more complex developments of this basic wheel.
- **Russell's 1980 Paper:** 'A Circumplex Model of Affect' was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1980, Vol. 39, No. 6, pp. 1161–1178). In this paper, Russell proposed that emotions could be organized in a circular structure around the two axes of valence and arousal.
- **Theoretical Background:** The Russell model was distinctive with emotions plotted based on their *intensity* (how pleasant or unpleasant they are) and *arousal* (how activated or deactivated they feel). e.g. "happy" is high in pleasantness and moderate in arousal, while "stressed" is high in arousal but low in pleasantness.

If you want to deep dive, **Lisa Feldman Barrett** and others have built on Russell's work, integrating it with theories of emotional construction and core affect.

*How effective?

Interestingly, although the advert attracted a lot of attention, it wasn't very effective in converting people to donors. There are a number of challenges:

- We need to be aware of the difference between attention and impact. So although this advert attracts attention though Archie being "beaten, neglected and starved" the impact is not clear.
- The *puppy* (Archie) himself doesn't look especially sad or neglected. If anything he looks a little bored. You may not want to use '*Puppy Pain Porn*' but this is just confusing.
- The *visual flow* of the message didn't work. Western readers tend to move from left to right and here the image encouraged you to look first at the puppy (the eyes) and then move to the left.
- See the heat map of eye attention opposite. This also creates confusion since we first recognise the puppy and its condition and we then see the how the words contradict that.

(Thanks to the brilliant Phil Barden for this example.)

© 2020 Phil Barden and Decode



“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

— Maya Angelou