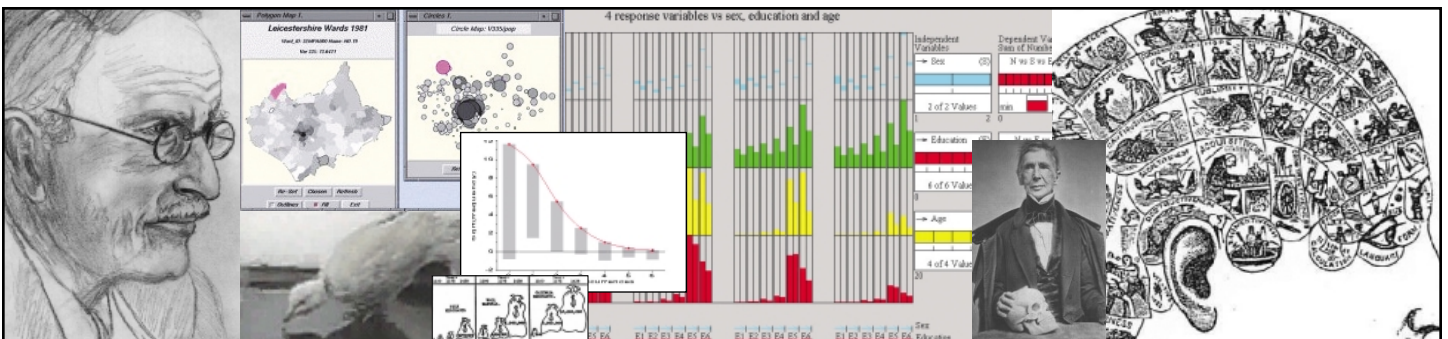


USING MARKET RESEARCH TO BUILD SUCCESSFUL BRANDS

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BEAKBANE MARKETING INC.

Going further, faster by diving deeper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	Using market research to build successful brands
4	The history of marketing research
7	Are answers to questions truthful?
10	Quantification versus insight
11	Research and “testing”
13	Testing strategies and positioning
14	What is market research useful for?
15	Inside information
16	Personality traits are nonactionable
18	Qualitative research and consumer feelings
19	Researching “creative”
20	Aesthetics and coherence
21	Metaphors, narrative and focus
23	The art of stimulation
24	Fishing versus testing
26	Vision and confidence
27	Some do’s and don’ts of qualitative research
	What are the do’s?
	Here are some don’ts
29	Total Quality Communications and research
30	Summary and key principle

USING MARKET RESEARCH TO BUILD SUCCESSFUL BRANDS

Market research is the most confusing and misunderstood area of marketing. Used properly, research is an invaluable tool in the development of an understanding of the consumer, which in turn is helpful in creating compelling communications and strong brands. However, market research is frequently misused and misinterpreted. Sometimes marketers use results to achieve the impossible – to provide certainty about market outcomes. Often it is used to sell initiatives within organizations and bolster management positions, which done improperly can cause potentially successful initiatives to end in failure.

How can market research help in the development of successful brands? How reliable is it? Can it bring certainty to communications initiatives? This paper answers these questions and outlines why market research is often misunderstood and how it can be used effectively. It also describes how research can be incorporated into the processes of Total Quality Communications (TQC).

Please note that this paper refers to “products,” not in the narrow sense of packaged-goods, but in the wider sense of everything a company sells, including services. For brevity, it refers to “packaging,” which in the case of services is taken to include corporate identity, web sites, brochures, and everything that forms the physical expression of the service to the customer.

It is instructive to start with the historic development of the discipline.

THE HISTORY OF MARKETING RESEARCH

The development of marketing as a corporate discipline is tied closely to the development of market research techniques. Marketing is a relatively recent invention having started in the 1920's, but it was not until the 1940's and 50's that it was recognized as significant enough to merit a company department distinct from "general management" and "sales management," a development that coincided with the increasing role of quantitative marketing research.

The reason marketing research was invented and became part of the practice of marketing is a complex and interesting story. Its genesis was in the academic discipline of psychology, particularly at the Universities of the northeastern United States, where techniques of "experimental psychology" were pioneered. Experimental psychology started out with the testing of animal behavior in laboratories, but later developed into the discipline known as "behaviorism," in which animals were subjected to "stimuli" and their "response" measured in some way. When applied more broadly, this mode of research was known as "research psychology," and when applied to humans was known as "applied psychology."

Measurement and quantification have been one of the defining characteristics of sound scientific method. But the first few decades of the 1900's saw a subtle transformation in how these techniques were used to study behavior. At the start it was considered perfectly good science to measure the details of how a single individual worked. Hence, the pioneering Russian researcher Ivan Pavlov measured the amount of saliva produced by a dog in a series of experiments and these were enough to demonstrate the physiology. As a result he was awarded a Nobel prize.

The source of behavior – the brain – was the holy grail of scientific investigation, but the tools of the day were not sensitive enough to allow the organ to be probed and measured, so psychologists resorted to other forms of quantification; in particular, measuring the "input" and "output" of behavior. This technique defined behaviorism, and through the charismatic promotion of two individuals, J. B. Watson and B.F. Skinner, this so-called science grew into the backbone of American academic psychology and underpinned the disciplines of "consumer behavior" and "management science."

That quantification could be used to turn the study of "behavior" as a self-defined entity into a discipline worthy of the label "science" transpired gradually, yet it was a dramatic shift in how quantification had been used in physics and chemistry. Measurement in these sciences was used to minimize subjectivity, establish causal effects and prove scientific "laws." A valuable technique used the newly invented discipline of statistics, which enabled multiple measurements to be analyzed, so the level of "confidence" could be determined. But when statistics was applied to psychology it was used in a markedly different way. The behavior of *groups* of individuals was investigated and the averages treated as "statistically significant."

*Treating people
as averages is not
the same as
understanding them*

These developments in the history of psychology are documented by the world's foremost expert on the subject Kurt Danziger in the book, *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research*. He explains how over the first half of the century the discipline of psychology developed. Practitioners relied on the steadily evolving use of quantification to become a respected academic discipline that rivaled the physical sciences in status. "Quantification," he writes, "seemed to mark psychology as one of the exact sciences and to distinguish it sharply from such questionable pursuits as philosophy and spiritualism, with which it had been popularly associated."

Measurement alone does not constitute science. Scientific measurements need "theories" or "laws" and the two need to be linked "objectively," which generally means causally. From a classical viewpoint, the defining characteristic of this scientific objectivity was that laws, or "hypotheses," were tested through experimentation to see if they were "falsifiable." Statistics was the way to reduce subjectivity in judging whether actual measurements fit data-points calculated from theory alone.

In the practice of the physical sciences, such as physics and chemistry, this approach leads to reproducible experimental results and technologies that are unquestionably useful. However, the measurement of averages in psychology allowed hypotheses to be arbitrarily conceived and "tested" so you ended up with an apparently genuine scientific discipline with the practice of statistics camouflaging the wobbliness of the whole endeavor. When the techniques were used on humans, it promised approaches that would allow groups of people to be "understood" and "managed." A ready market was found in education, government, the military and in commerce as a result.

Over the decades the imperatives for quantification became the hallmark of the behavioral and social sciences. With each passing decade few practitioners stopped to ask what they were actually measuring, or what it really meant to take large populations of people split into groups and treat averages as "statistically significant."

These practices have taken on the gloss of science but treating people as averages is not the same as understanding them. Statistics might camouflage ignorance, but it can never eliminate it or turn imprecision to precision. Using statistical significance tests as the standard for the corroboration of psychological hypotheses meant that theories were generally regarded as "confirmed" if results were different than those expected from chance alone.

These approaches were adopted by the marketing industry to make the practice more certain and professional. Danziger is harsh in his indictment of the overall approach: "This travesty of scientific method certainly allowed the growth of a major research industry that offered employment to many, even though its products can now be seen as having contributed nothing of either practical or theoretical value."

Marketing research can be invaluable in business, but as every professional researcher would attest, research can easily be misused. To use the oft-quoted words of David Ogilvy, research should not be used as a "drunkard uses a lamp post for support, rather than for illumination."

Where does illumination end and support start? To answer this question it is necessary to understand the most fundamental underlying issue: the unreliability of verbal accounts of research participants.

ARE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS TRUTHFUL?

If you ask someone if they are going to buy a new product and they say, "very likely," what does that mean? If you ask a hundred people the same question and they all answer in the same way, does that make the answer more reliable? The result is "statistically significant" so the answer is "yes."

Say you visit a police station and interview an individual arrested for shoplifting who denies it. Would you become more convinced of their innocence if you asked one hundred other suspects, each of whom denied their guilt? No. It is well understood that detainees are unlikely to give you unbiased and factual answers.

This example is extreme, but in every situation when you ask a question there are four reasons that people do not tell the unblemished, objective truth. The first is that they do not want you to know the truth. When you ask someone their age they will probably tell you the correct number, but they *might* not. Teenagers might add a few years, particularly if they are standing outside a bar. Middle-aged women might take a couple of years off. Ask someone their "household income" and they will probably *not* give you an accurate number, partly because it might be none of your business.

There are four reasons that people do not tell the unblemished, objective truth

Secondly, they might not know the truth themselves. If you ask someone why they drink a certain brand of beer they are likely to say, "I like the taste." In reality, the taste is just one factor among thousands. The other factors are perhaps more significant, including the influences of their friends, upbringing and propensity to thirst. "Taste" is just the first rationalization that comes to mind and the respondent knows it is an acceptable answer.

"I like the taste" is a convenient justification for many brand choices. Forty years ago if you asked someone why they smoked, the common answer was they "liked the taste." This answer is still used to justify the brand of cigarette chosen, but it no longer sounds credible as justification for smoking. People smoke because nicotine is addictive. Taste is not, and never has been, the true reason people smoke.

When giving "taste" as the reason for brand choice, respondents know their answer is plausible and socially acceptable. Rationally, it makes no sense because smoking leaves an unpleasant taste in the mouth regardless of brand picked.

Why is “taste” an acceptable response? Because “taste” and “flavor” have been fashioned as plausible motives resulting from years of advertising. Brands in the early part of last century were promoted because of mildness not taste. Marlboro, when originally launched, was advertised as “Mild as May.” In 1954, it was repositioned as a brand that “Delivers the Goods on Flavor.” The response “I like the taste” does not reflect the correct physiological reason, but parrots what the Marlboro man has said for years, “Come to where the flavor is.”

Respondents are unlikely to give an answer that makes them sound weak, even if it is the truth. They would be unlikely to say, “I drink the brand because my Mom drank it and I just picked up the same habit and have never given the matter any thought.” Everyone operates with a sense of how they are perceived. Am I saying the right things? Am I believed? Am I respected? But this sense is mostly unconscious and is the all-pervading ether of human interaction. Like the oxygen around us, we cannot live without it although we do not notice it.

The third reason respondents do not report accurately is that the notion makes the presumption they understand the question as you intended. This is significant because language (and here I resort to jargon) is not disembodied and symbolic, but is embodied and contextual. The meaning of words is not clear-cut; it varies depending on individual experience, the particular situation, and on the status of both speaker and listener. Language varies with sex, age and peer group membership. When a teenager says “sweet” it means something different whether they are talking to a friend or responding to a questionnaire. Words also change in meaning over time.

It is obvious that words like “sweet,” “gay” and “hot” have changed connotations over the years. What is not so obvious is that the meaning of every word is evolving. Ask a seemingly simple question like, “Is shiny skin beautiful?” and the words mean different things to different people and varies with context. Some respondents, particularly younger ones, equate shininess with a smooth healthy sheen; others equate it with dryness that comes with overuse; and others equate it with the gloss of greasiness. Not only does meaning vary with what respondents believe words mean, they are also influenced by what they believe the speaker intends the words to mean. Depending on their understanding of the words and their sense of intended meaning, answers will be different.

What the researcher interprets as a difference in viewpoint might be a reflection of a difference in linguistic comprehension.

There is a final more fundamental reason. The concept of there being a “truth” is itself flawed. It seems reasonable to suppose that the world can be split into objective categories where some things are true and others are not. But this belief is a convenient oversimplification. What we interpret as “truthful” reporting of a position presupposes that we are constant in our behavior and that our statements are stable over time regardless of context.

This presupposition has arisen because it meshes with our personal intuition and reasons derived from religion, philosophy and psychology. Recent breakthroughs in the biological sciences, however, are revealing that the presupposition, while it might be convenient, is not how the natural world works, nor is it how the human mind works.

It might seem that as individuals we are unchanging beings, defined by our “genetics,” “culture,” “values” and “attitudes,” but there is overwhelming evidence that this is not the case. Instead we constantly adapt to circumstances. We react differently depending on whether we are with family, in a store, relaxing at home, in a research facility, or making decisions about marketing communications in front of our boss. We react completely differently in an extreme situation, such as walking along a deserted street at night where we are vulnerable to attack.

Extremes are unnecessary to illustrate this point. We constantly change our behavior according to circumstance and it happens so naturally, we don’t consider it significant. Our behavior varies according to how hungry or tired we are, and according to our mood. Even mundane details like thirst affect our ability to pay attention. In focus groups in the evening, you see dramatic changes in the level of engagement after respondents have been working all day. And they react differently according to who is doing the questioning. For some respondents, an attractive questioner will elicit more enthusiastic responses than one who is less attractive.

The net result of these factors is that you need to be very careful in interpreting research results, particularly if they are the product of answers to questions. It is more reliable to investigate people’s actual behavior.

QUANTIFICATION VERSUS INSIGHT

Let us go back to the example of the individual arrested for shoplifting. When you interview 100 other detainees and every one claims to have been wrongfully arrested, should you believe them?

Imagine sitting down with one suspect to discuss their situation. After building up a level of trust, they start crying and telling you how short they are of money, and how their children do not have the luxuries of other children at their school and so on. They continue to deny they took anything unlawfully, but their denial is half-hearted. The more they talk, the more you become convinced they are justly detained. How will this one interview cause you to think about the other 100 subjects who similarly claim their innocence? Of course, it will confirm your suspicion that every detainee has a good reason not to tell you the truth.

Now imagine that you heard something different from that one individual. They look you in the eye and describe with a firm and angry voice their arrest by an overzealous security firm, a firm that remunerates its staff according to number of arrests made. They are steadfast in their denials and from the description of their lifestyle you see there is little reason for them to be shoplifting anyway.

Remember, in both cases you have been talking to just one individual, so from an objective statistical standpoint, the 100 detainees who deny their guilt should take precedence over the single case. But a common-sense assessment of the situation tells you it does not matter whether the sample size is 10, 100 or 1000. If you have a sound understanding of one case that contradicts the results from the large sample, it is enough to cause you to question results from the larger sample. If you conducted a second in-depth interview and it confirmed the results, you would become still more certain.

It is easy to see with this example that *depth of understanding* is far more reliable than *quantity* of data. The issue with market research is no different. It is important to differentiate between accuracy of data and amount of data.

Increasing sample sizes does *not* always increase reliability. Sometimes it just serves to cover the lack of true insight and heighten confidence in bogus numbers.

Increasing sample sizes does not always increase reliability

RESEARCH AND “TESTING”

Managers within corporations and agency personnel find it invaluable to have market research numbers to justify decisions. They will say that a certain positioning statement was “preferred by a margin on 30%” over another, or that an advertisement “beat the category norm by 8 percentage points.” These types of justifications are useful simply because they sound so objective and factual, but it is critical to understand the reasons they cannot be relied upon.

The only source of data that absolutely *can* be relied upon is *sales reality*. If you launch an initiative and you track sales, that result determines how well the company does.

What is the relationship between market research results and sales outcome? The connection is not as strong as we would like. Say you had launched a marketing initiative and booked the sales. The clock is rewound, set running again, and everything is done in *exactly* the same way. Would the results be identical?

The conditions that you can simulate in research vary from reality in ways that are so significant that the results can never be viewed as anything more than guidance

According to traditional theory the answer is yes, but in reality the answer is no. The behavior of individuals is not generated as a result of inputs, but mostly generated spontaneously. People just feel like doing something or they do not. The market's behavior comes from the cumulative behavior of individuals, so the situation in its parts and in totality is inherently unpredictable. Classical economic theory hypothesized that people behaved “rationally,” and deviations from normal behavior were “irrational” and in effect random, and therefore self-canceling. But markets do not behave this way. They are complex-critical systems in which small effects become magnified. In words popularized by Malcolm Gladwell, there are innumerable “tipping points” and how they tip can never be predicted.

There is now considerable literature on “complex-critical systems” or systems that operate in zones of “self-organized criticality.” The human mind is one such system. Others are groups of people and markets. Mathematical breakthroughs in these areas are providing marketers with a comprehension of why earlier generations of marketing theory have proven so unreliable in linking expectation to sales outcome.

When you recognize this reality, which has now been demonstrated so extensively it is irrefutable, you recognize that the purpose of research is to learn about consumers and optimize the variables not to “test” anything. You cannot “validate” decisions and “test” the effectiveness of executions except by launching them in the helter-skelter of the real market.

The reason that research “testing” is unreliable is because people’s behavior does not result from inputs, and further, small changes in conditions can have substantial effects on behavior. The conditions that you can simulate in research always vary from the reality of the market in ways that are so significant the results can never be viewed as anything more than guidance requiring skill and insight to interpret. Knowing this helps one to define research methodologies that are useful and actionable.

TESTING STRATEGIES AND POSITIONING

In traditional marketing the “brand” is defined in a document known as the “brand strategy.” This document contains a summary of the “positioning,” its “proposition,” the “functional benefits, and the “brand character.” When communications are conceived, this document forms the basis of the “creative brief.” The creative team is expected to come up with a creative “message” and as a final check communications might be “pretested.”

Companies often spend considerable effort researching brand strategies and spend little on how strategies are expressed. This approach is seriously flawed because the consumer’s experience of the brand is defined not by a marketing document, but by the experience of the brand itself and the brand’s communications. The brand strategy is what defines the brand *inside* the corporation – but that is not where the value lies. The brand’s value is outside the corporation, entirely in the consumer’s head.

It is not possible to optimize brand success by testing “strategies.” The only way to test different strategies is by exposing the consumer to the product and brand communications – not the strategy.

It is not possible to optimize brand success by testing “strategies”

Testing strategies is like testing consumer preferences for a meal by showing them different recipes – strategy being akin to the recipe. You can show the respondent a recipe for spaghetti and another for roast beef and ask their preference. You might want to probe their experiences and attitudes towards beef and spaghetti *in-depth*, but what are you researching? You are researching their *prior* experiences and generalized opinions about the recipes, which might not be a fair expression of the

meal you end up serving. Recipes can only be tested by serving them as part of an entire meal in a real dining situation. Even someone who does not like beef, when served in a novel way, with excellent wine and lovely surroundings, might enjoy it. And if the guests were delightful they might rate it as the experience of a lifetime.

In the hands of a skilled moderator you can get many useful insights about strategies, but not through testing. One way to do this is to have respondents imagine situations and concepts. Another is to elicit reactions from hundreds of words and pictures or have them create brands or metaphors for situational needs. These methodologies can provide valuable information about how the customer thinks, which provides the seeds for the development of brand strategies.

If you need to test strategies, never show the consumer the strategy; show them the expression of the strategy – packaging concepts, advertisements, or whatever is closest to their forming an impression of the brand in a realistic market situation.

WHAT IS MARKET RESEARCH USEFUL FOR?

If verbal accountings of respondents cannot be taken at face value then what can research be used for? Every situation has to be judged on the problems that need to be solved and on the risks associated with wrong decisions. As a general principle, the collecting and analysis of factual information is more reliable than other forms of behavioral research.

*Research can
be used reliably
to collect “facts”*

Ascertaining the future behavior of consumers is always speculative even when it seems it should be clear-cut. One example of this unreliability is seen in public opinion polls designed to measure voting intentions at election time. How does the voter plan on checking off one choice from several on a ballot paper? In theory, polls should be reliable, but in practice they are unreliable for predicting election outcomes. In the same way, asking shoppers about their hypothetical intentions is not useful because a supermarket is an inordinately complex situation. They are faced with thousands of choices – and not all choices have equal cost – they pay.

Research can be used reliably to collect “facts,” such as number of males who live in Washington, D.C., who own a car. When measuring this type of data the larger the sample, the more reliable the data becomes. When it comes to finding more speculative information, particularly verbal accountings of “attitudes” and future behavior, sample size is far less critical than the quality of insight. Expanding the sample does not make research more reliable, but merely provides a false sense of security.

Polls and customer surveys provide numbers that are useful in tracking opinions. Hotels and restaurants can ask about levels of “satisfaction,” which can be used by management – but carefully, since changes in the market can cause fluctuations for superficial reasons. This is clearly seen in the political arena. Public opinion of a candidate can plunge in the polls if their appearance looks odd in a televised debate. Suddenly competence is swept aside as columnists take to ridiculing their fake tan and their hairstyle.

In a situation like this, does it really matter what the statistical significance is? Wait a little while and the results will be different.

INSIDE INFORMATION

Not always do you need to requisition market research to find actionable information. Sometimes the richest sources are found within companies and from competitors. Before you spend money on research, dust off old research reports, talk to customer support staff, the order desk, warranty and repair personnel, the sales force, production and logistics personnel. What do they say? Look at competitive activity from around the world. Some of the best ideas are inventions by other companies refined to new heights of sophistication.

The most critical area to understand is the satisfaction chain. This is the chain of interactions between the corporation and the social context of the end consumer. Who are your immediate customers and what do *they* want? What do *their* customers want? What does the final purchaser want when they present the product to the end consumer? How does the product affect how the consumer views themselves in relation to their superiors and peers?

The simplest forms of observation are often the most instructive. For instance, watch consumers about to make a purchase. How do they act and how do you think they feel? If you can place yourself in their shoes you will make better decisions about marketing communications.

Information about products and lifestyles are sometimes most useful when gathered firsthand. If you want to find out what people think when they are shopping – go shopping. If you want to find out about customer satisfaction in a specific restaurant, eat there and serve in it. This can be a chore and you have to be careful about how you interpret the experience, but if you approach the situation with sensitivity, the insights can be profound.

PERSONALITY TRAITS ARE NONACTIONABLE

Consumer segmentation is a popular technique in marketing, and while it has the gloss of science much of the time it is a waste of time. It can be overapplied, particularly when it comes to developing brand communications.

It is tempting to try and understand the consumer by placing them into categories. The most well-established categories are “values and lifestyles,” which fall along three dimensions: “*principle oriented*,” “*status oriented*” and “*action oriented*.” These typologies sound impressive but are sobering when you know the history.

Adapted from the personality type indicators developed by Myers-Brigg, who plotted personality along four dimensions: “*extroverting-introverting*,” “*sensing-intuiting*,” “*thinking-feeling*” and “*judging-perceiving*.” These categories were based on the writings of the famous psychologist Carl Jung who based them on the mythologies of ancient Greece, which in turn originated in the four quarters of the Zodiac (the signs representing earth, fire, water and air). So values and lifestyles typologies are based on astrology. Jung acknowledged that there was no scientific basis for his explanation writing, “my scheme of typology is only a scheme of orientation.”

*Understanding
social dynamics
takes sensitivity*

People’s “attitudes” are not static; they change from minute to minute and are dependent on the situation. Rather than using hypothetical groupings of personality types, it is far more useful to segment the consumer based on behavior, especially if you can

figure out ways to target communications directly to them. If someone has just purchased icing sugar, it is a good time to sell them cake decorations.

It might appear useful to know that cake bakers tend to have “*introverting-sensing-feeling-judging*” personalities, but that ignores the many cake bakers who do not fit the stereotype. Some might bake on weekends with their nieces while during the rest of the week are aggressive “*extrovert-thinking*” and “*action-oriented*” corporate lawyers.

In nearly every instance, information about personality traits and values is useless because there is no way to communicate with one typology without reaching all others at the same time. More useful is to target individuals who bake a lot, say individuals who read *Ladies’ Home Journal*. The environment of the communication is more important to consider when conceiving communications than characteristics of the target.

Much has been written about splitting markets into categories that reflect levels of “loyalty.” Common sense tells us that “fence-sitters” are less valuable than “loyal” consumers. However, these categories have little bearing on the level of commitment of the individuals. Just because someone repeatedly buys the same product does not mean they are committed to it – they might be so disinterested they cannot be bothered to pick something different. There is abundant and irrefutable evidence that “loyalty” is linked to market share – it has never been shown to be an independent variable. For this reason, it is rare to find instances when targeting different categories offers any meaningful advantage.

The conclusion is that it is more profitable to understand the *changing* circumstances of individuals, rather than splitting populations into invariant groupings based on hypothetical “traits.”

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND CONSUMER FEELINGS

When developing brands and their communications three critical areas need to be investigated:

1. How does the consumer see themselves and their needs? What is important to them, particularly in the appropriate social context?
2. How do they view the competing products? How does your product fit in with the competitors and how can you exploit market gaps?
3. How do they respond to different communications messages? In particular, how do they refer to related situations and feelings. What are potential metaphors that could be used to make relevant feelings concrete?

These areas should be probed with a sensitivity towards how the consumer behaves, but more importantly how they *feel*.

The term *feel* is not meant in the happy-go-lucky sense of “feeling good,” but deep-down *feeling*, as an amalgam of lifestyle, immediate needs, aspirations and self-image, particularly in a social context. In order to maximize the opportunity to genuinely learn from research, set biases and preconceptions aside. One should try to listen and observe as if for the first time, not from one’s own perspective, but from theirs, so you hear with their ears, their eyes, and feel as they feel.

A prerequisite for effective use of research is that the observer tries to understand how the consumer understands and uses words and also how they behave in different situations. How do they see the situation? How do they feel when they hear and see various words and pictures?

In order for this to be reliable, recognize that the consumer’s accountings for their own behavior is a rationalization, not the cause. Therefore, never have the consumer intellectualize and explain their behavior from a rational perspective. And never ask them to make marketing decisions for you.

First impressions are valuable. Is their attention piqued? Are they confused? Do they get bored? Do they smile? Do they frown? And, how do they think *other* people will view the situation?

Unfortunately, this approach does not seem objective and scientific, but that should not be the concern. Research allows for the optimization of deliverables that maximize the chance of success in the marketplace, not to provide therapy for insecure executives. Sales and profit are the true arbiters of performance – not research results.

Every situation has to be viewed on its merits. Research has to be planned to fill in gaps in knowledge so decisions can be made with confidence, without wasting time and resources.

RESEARCHING “CREATIVE”

It would be invaluable if there were ways to test creative executions before money was committed for media and packaging, but no reliable technique has been developed. Every form of testing involves simulating the behavior of customers by extrapolating artificial situations to market situations, with a tacit agreement between research subject and researcher that they will “act normal.” But acting normal is not normal, as behavior is determined by a subtle interplay of context and feelings. In asking someone to act normal, they do precisely that – act like they think they are expected to, not how they actually would.

The most reliable method is to observe results in the marketplace. Determining communications’ effectiveness is difficult, especially pinning down the effect of any one element alone. So more exact methods of linking message exposure to purchase behavior are required.

One way to ascertain the effectiveness of marketing communications is to measure sales from individuals who have definitely seen a particular stimulus. Curiously, this form of research, known as “single source,” is not widely used in North America, although it is the best way to determine the effect of thematic advertising. In the book *When Ads Work*, John Phillip Jones, the leading expert on this type of research comments, “Whether or not pure single-source research eventually becomes a part of the American market research scene depends on the ability of advertisers to appreciate its great value.” He adds, “It is difficult to accept that advertisers would prefer to risk wasting money on bad advertising than to spend money to discover definitively whether their advertising is bad or good.”

Relying on the intuitions of creative staff is not enough

Aside from tracking and analyzing actual results in the market, the next best opportunity for learning is to explore how to communicate in ways that are meaningful to the consumer. In order to build brands effectively, relying on the intuitions of creative staff is not enough. It is necessary to understand the different ways the structural elements of communications can be optimized. The key elements are *aesthetics*, *demonstrations*, *metaphors* and *narrative*, and to be effective they need to be presented with *focus* and *coherence*.

These techniques have been used by artists and writers for eons, and with advances in epistemology, linguistics and the biological sciences, these areas were previously believed to be beyond the purview of “scientific” comprehension, but they are amenable to being understood through insightful research.

AESTHETICS AND COHERENCE

The most important factor in brand value is sensory appeal – and that includes how it looks. There is no doubt that products that taste good, smell good, and look good are more valuable than those that do not. Good design adds substantial value. Everyone appreciates beauty. Everyone likes environments that feel good. Everyone likes well-designed, easy-to-use products. Everyone is drawn to communications that are interesting and easy to absorb.

Conversely, unattractive products do not sell. No one wants to drive an ugly car or hang out in uncomfortable, ugly places. No one likes products that are inconvenient and badly designed. Nor do they like boring, badly designed communications that are difficult to understand.

One of the oddities of marketing is that aesthetics is considered a troublesome detail of “execution.” The reason is that the discipline is an offshoot of the social sciences, which in turn developed from the hard sciences, whose practitioners have always seen the subject as standing above the frivolousness of the arts.

This is a serious shortcoming because aesthetics, all things considered, is pivotal to the core requirement of business, which is to *get sales that are profitable*.

Research has a key role to play in defining how aesthetics can be used to build value and help create effective communications. To understand how this works it is essential to understand that design is not about making things look pretty; it is about making things *pleasing to use and communicating feelings*.

Research helps determine what to communicate and what feelings are appropriate. Every effective design works because it is reminiscent of something that brings to mind previously experienced sensations.

Originality of the wrong sort runs counter to effective communications

This fundamental principle runs counter to traditional views about creativity, in which *originality* of designs is thought to define their effectiveness. Often, originality of the wrong sort runs counter to effective communications. Web sites for advertising agencies frequently have irritating navigation bars and are difficult to read.

Research can be used to help explore appropriate sensations, so the appropriate look and feel can be created for a brand. Once defined, it should be adhered to rigorously in all spheres of company communication. The more it is used in a coherent manner, the more persuasive and pleasing the communications become.

METAPHORS, NARRATIVE AND FOCUS

How do we communicate? There are two ways: through actions and through words. In the same way, when selling a product, you can demonstrate its functionality or you can describe it.

Product demonstrations have proven the most effective way to sell product, whether door-to-door, online, infomercial, or 30-second TV spot. You do not need sophisticated research to validate the approach, but you do need creative to prevent boring and condescending demonstrations. Procter & Gamble has been the most consistent practitioner of this form of communication. Advertisements for Swiffer show the kids dusting and Mom looking happy, a dramatically different portrayal than the husband as the center of her universe – the traditional depiction.

When you use words, they are by nature metaphorical and derive their power because they allow the mapping of experiences from one domain to another, while preserving the inference. Words are most communicative when used as metaphors for physical situations. The Yellow Pages slogan, “Let your fingers do the walking” makes its point by relating the physical act of walking from one store to another with looking up information.

When personality is added, the metaphor becomes more communicative. The Energizer Bunny is likened to the battery that never stops and “just keeps on going.”

Research helps determine which are the most appropriate metaphors. Some metaphors endure: the Marlboro Man, the Pillsbury Dough Boy and the Green Giant. But they are a challenge to invent and make plausible. For years, the Green Giant alternated between terrifying and dorky, eventually becoming the Jolly Green Giant we are familiar with today.

Another successful metaphor is “Mr. Clean,” a smiling, bald man with huge muscles who “gets rid of dirt and grime and grease in just a minute.”

Metaphors are particularly useful when selling an unfamiliar product with an intangible benefit. For instance, Fugawi Inc. sells software that allows use of handheld GPS units for way-finding. The corporate tagline explains: “Know where you are going.”

Metaphors can be tricky to invent, so it is useful to use research to probe which might be the most meaningful to avoid clichés.

Another technique is to use narrative and tell a story. The effectiveness of narrative at making consumers feel appropriate feelings is well proven in the arts. It is a quirk of marketing history that this fundamental principle of effective communication is rarely used. The mark of an effective narrative is that it involves scenarios, usually with people, that the consumer can see in their mind's eye. They should feel like they are there and participating, able to write themselves into the narrative.

The key to all sound communications is focus. What one thing will you say about your product? What is the most distinctive point of difference you can play up? Your research should define the most meaningful product focus or "unique selling proposition."

Research can also be used to explore which narratives have the most relevance to the consumer, and which are implausible or overused.

THE ART OF STIMULATION

Consumers rarely provide useful insights unless prompted. If you fish around for inspiration you are likely to end up with nothing of value. You need to utilize techniques that prompt the consumer to come up with useful and relevant comments that are actionable. This means that the step of “creative development” has to come before the research, rather than after. And, after the research, a further step of creative refinement.

Creating stimuli that elicit useful responses from consumers is extremely high skill. The stimuli should always be simple and clear with one sentiment expressed. Never show two pictures or a collage because you do not know what the person is looking at when they react. Never show several phrases at a time or multiple sentences unless they form a single narrative with one focus.

Creating stimuli is akin to entering into a conversation. Say something the respondent finds stimulating and wants to comment on. If you are asking the obvious it is a waste of time, so too, if it is boring. Confusing, indistinct or ambiguous stimuli will be difficult to interpret.

When figuring out how to stimulate someone into giving you information, bear in mind that results should be actionable. There is no point in finding out about platitudes. Of course, everyone likes lovely clean homes, tasty food, refreshing beverages, fresh-baked bread, well-behaved children, good value, reliable products and polite service. There is no point in confirming impossible dreams; everyone wants to stay young forever, feel respected, have more money, and a cure for cancer. Clichés and promises that are impossible to deliver are not worth validating.

Clichés and promises that are impossible to deliver are not worth validating

There is a considerable amount of skill required in developing stimuli that give the right balance between confirming approaches you know are effective and discovering new ideas.

Always approximate as closely as you can the final presentation and context of the message. Magazine advertisements should be presented in a magazine; packaging should be fully mocked up and presented in the way it will be experienced. If the purchase situation is key, product should be presented on a shelf along with competing products.

In principle, you should create realistic and focused stimulations. Start from the bedrock of what you are certain of, and push creatively towards insights that are speculative, including situations that are serious, funny, poignant, and whatever helps communicate the brand proposition in refreshing, relevant ways.

FISHING VERSUS TESTING

There are two extremes in consumer research. One extreme starts with an open mind and no preconceived notions about how the consumer thinks. The other extreme starts with several well-defined hypotheses that can be “tested.” In this case you have a firm idea of the possible outcomes.

The first extreme is like ocean fishing, not being sure of what you might catch: a squid, a shark or a herring. The second is like putting down a net and testing to find the relative quantities of several different species of fish. In this case, you can say there are 30 per cent more mackerel than herring.

Neither extreme works well. If you go fishing and throw out the line hoping something bites, you will be unlikely to catch anything. Likewise with research; if you are not sure what you are looking for hoping that consumers will provide inspiration and ideas, you will likely end up with nothing. Better to know where the fish are, which fishing techniques work best, and which tackle to use.

The second extreme means knowing what you want to test, one or more hypotheses and testing them. In this situation, you are asking the consumer to make a decision for you. While this approach is well accepted and seems “objective,” it misinterprets the function of research. The purpose of research is to allow understanding of the consumer to optimize company initiatives, not to ask consumers to make decisions on the manager’s behalf.

Quantitative surveys should never be used to pick between options directly. If you have three packaging concepts and you are not sure which to launch, do not use research to pick for you. Quantitative numbers might be reassuring, but the initiative is more likely to be successful in the marketplace if the research is used to learn what the packaging communicates, and the respondents’ stated preferred reason for it. The packaging can be selected based on the desired strategic position required for success in the market. In some cases, the design can be optimized by selecting desirable criteria from several concepts.

Whenever you use research to help you make decisions between options, bracket where you think you will end up. Do not only test options you believe have most appeal to the consumer. Push the envelope either side so you get a read on the reaction to the more extreme position. When launching a “premium” product, find the consumer reaction to a concept that is super premium, positioning it like Tiffany’s jewelry and Rolex watches. That way, you are more likely to uncover the skepticism expected outside the research situation.

The testing of product recipes is sometimes regarded as one of the more reliable uses of research. What formulation do consumers prefer? Here too, do not be too trusting of statistics and quantification. The Coca-Cola Company spent \$2 million on consumer research before they launched the ill-fated New Coke. In reality, consumers do not taste brands “blind” and their sensation of “taste” is affected by context.

When consumers take a sip of a sweeter liquid they tend to prefer it over a less sweet liquid, but that is no reflection of what they prefer over longer periods, or in different situations. The company’s decisions would have been more informed if they had tested fewer consumers and probed their reactions to formulas that pushed the parameters, so sweetness would have elicited reactions of puzzled objection.

Good research elicits reactions that managers can judge. If you attend research groups and the stimuli are greeted with gentle nodding of heads and polite affirmation, this is not a worthwhile outcome. On the contrary, where possible, push respondents beyond their comfort zones, so you become more confident of where you want to go in the market.

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VISION AND CONFIDENCE

Whenever you interpret research results use experience and judgment. Remember that over history the most successful marketing initiatives would never have been launched if consumers had been arbiters. Consumers would have killed Mickey – the mouse with big ears and squeaky voice. They would have nixed the idea of bitter coffee served in large cups for triple the price of a regular cup at a place called “Starbucks.” None of the more extreme new fashions would ever catch on if they were pretested. Who would vote for bell-bottom trousers, tattoos or belly button rings?

All great ideas in business start with a vision. Someone comes up with an idea and with persistence, drive and courage pushes until it sells. If it does not catch on they change the approach and try again, and if it still does not work they refine it until it does. No one can hope for success if they do what everyone else is already doing.

One of the greatest dangers when using research is to lose courage and forget the original vision, ending in executions that are so watered down they are inoffensive to everyone. Research should start with confident, single-minded propositions. As you go through the process, find ways to strengthen propositions, making them more focused, communicative, interesting, edgy and confident.

Remember that consumers only give feedback based on their prior experiences, so if your vision pushes beyond what people are familiar with, it is highly unlikely they will respond positively. A negative reaction should not matter; what matters is the reasons they give.

A negative reaction should not matter; what matters are the reasons

Do they reject a concept because they are unfamiliar with it, or is the concept fundamentally flawed? Visions that are sound may not have instant appeal. The consumer might need to be *persuaded*. And that is the job of communications professionals.

SOME DO'S AND DON'TS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

What are the do's?

Research is a critical discipline and there are many ways to use it. The most critical requirement is to find a research specialist who understands the subject and has the courage to offer honest, forthright counsel. Here are a few do's of research:

- Learn to look at your products through the consumer's eyes. Keep an open mind and recognize that they do not have the same priorities as you. Be sensitive to their feelings; in particular, how they view themselves in a social context.
- Where possible conduct research in situations that are representative of the real situation. Go into stores and people's homes to see how they actually use and talk about the product.
- Recognize that research is research and people know they are being researched and behave accordingly. Never take what consumers say at face value. What people say they do and what they actually do is not the same.
- Always maximize learning from pre-existing sources of information. There is a great wealth of information within companies. Tap into this information and incorporate these ideas into the research program to test their validity. Sometimes the best ideas are old ideas reinvented. Be open to ideas no matter where they come from.
- The moderator is key. Hire an expert who knows how to stimulate a group and not put words in their mouth.
- When testing concepts, make sure you are testing meaningful differences. There is no point in asking consumers to remark on details.
- The key question should always be how you can make communications more communicative and single-minded. Is there a unique insight?
- Do not prejudge how consumers think and react. Push the envelope and observe with an open mind.
- Always go for quality of data not quantity. As a general principle of marketing it is better to appeal to a few people a lot, rather than many people just a little.

Here are some don'ts

Here are a few of the ways not to do research:

- Do not expect the consumer to do the creative work for you. “Fishing expeditions” are rarely worthwhile. The creative part of the exercise has to be worked at by people who have the skill and mandate to craft ideas.
- Do not ask consumers to make marketing decisions. Marketing executives should make decisions based on an in-depth understanding of all the contributing factors, including consumer reactions.
- Do not “test” marketing strategies and positionings by showing them as textual summations, nor use research merely to bolster strategic documentation and internal recommendations.
- Do not lead consumers or use them to validate your preconceptions. Be open to what they are telling you through words, reactions and gestures.
- Only look for and test information that is actionable. Knowing that customers like “high quality” products is no help, nor is knowing they want a drug that can “cure cancer” unless you can make the claim.
- Do not waste time segmenting and categorizing the market using psychographics unless there is a way to use that information.
- Be skeptical of fancy research techniques if they put respondents in situations that are dissimilar to the realities of the market.

TOTAL QUALITY COMMUNICATIONS AND RESEARCH

The effective use of research is pivotal to the process of Total Quality Communications (TQC). Research should be fully integrated into the creative process so that the quality of the communications is maximized.

In TQC, the objective is to develop a compelling brand proposition and communicate it consistently in such a way that the consumer gets to know and like the brand. The idea is to build on what has been done in the past, improving the communications at every step. It is not effective to reinvent the brand as soon as the company personnel have become tired of it.

In TQC, the process is critical. First, the vision has to be internalized. Second, the broad context of the company and market needs to be understood. Third, there needs to be a choice of creative options that facilitates decision-making through an analysis of their effect on the consumer. Lastly, the communications have to be given voice in communications deliverables.

In TQC, the creative step is not left until the end. Creativity should be part of the process throughout, and the strategy should be conceived as a means to developing a distinctive and appealing brand experience for the consumer. Executions should be tried in the marketplace, steadily refined, and not reinvented unless absolutely necessary.

The emphasis should always be on what the consumer perceives, not on internal brand architectures and corporate documentation. The strategic thinking and the research is the support for the process, not the purpose of the process.

The process of getting to the final result is important, especially as an opportunity to get buy-in and commitment from the personnel expected to execute it. In TQC, the complexities of the process of developing corporate communications are recognized at the start, and the skills of the entire team are leveraged. Research can play a role in educating the team about the realities of consumer behavior.

SUMMARY AND KEY PRINCIPLE

The single most important purpose of market research is to help develop valuable brand propositions that are meaningful to customers, and communicate them in compelling ways.

Use research as a tool to understand the consumer and make better decisions. Most of the time consumers' verbal accountings is not a reliable indicator of their actual behavior so never expect the consumer to make marketing decisions on your behalf.

Marketers need to be sensitive to the intricacies of customer feelings. Research can be invaluable in helping to understand the consumer and their relationship with other people and the market. Used well, it is an important part of the process that contributes to short-term results and long-term success.

For further resources including briefing guidelines please go to www.beakbane.com/diving

If you have any comments or suggestions regarding the contents of this paper or would like further information on *Total Quality Communications*, please email Tom Beakbane at tom@beakbane.com or call 416 787-4900 ext. 232