

“Research Shows That Most Research is Crap”

ISSUE:

Research seems to be highly ineffective at stopping marketers wasting their shareholders money

FACTBASE:

95% of new products fail within two years. Most ads contribute to the clutter rather than stand out from it. Most of these had been rigorously researched beforehand.

HYPOTHESES:

- 1) Research is a load of hokum
- 2) Research is sound; Marketers are ill-equipped to interpret it
- 3) Nobody reads research anymore

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN:

Pontificate from 25 years of marketing experience which includes an unusually large research component (first job was a researcher; at one stage ran one of UK's top 5 client research departments)

FINDINGS:

- 1) Research is a load of hokum.

I have some sympathy for this position. Putting complete strangers into a Moonbase-Alpha environment and asking them to talk about their first pet while the faint sounds of a party can be heard coming from behind a mirror is, in my opinion, not necessarily the best way to get people to reveal their innermost feelings.

The theory is fine, and focus groups have historically been a very valuable tool. But nowadays, the veil of secrecy has been lifted. They know they are being manipulated. So they now over-think the questions and **analyze** our strategies rather than respond to them.

Would any completely normal person willingly attend a focus group?

- 2) Research is Sound. Marketers are ill-equipped to interpret it.

All research is in theory true: this question was asked, and those responses were given. Researchers don't make the stuff up; they have even largely stopped inviting their relatives to be attendees.

Problems arise in how those responses, given by those attendees, to those questions, with those stimuli, in that environment, at that time, are interpreted.

In my opinion, such interpretive abilities do not appear overnight. The key elements are a sound grounding in research theory and practice, coupled with a decent level of experience, other complimentary information, and an enquiring mind. Unfortunately, the modern brand manager never has been trained in Research, has little experience, is too busy to read anything, and devote their enquiring minds to constantly enquiring why their salaries aren't higher.

When coupled with Researchers who invariably gloss over the up-front page that says how Qualitative should not be treated as if it were Quantitative – thus assuming that everyone understands this crucial fact - the resulting mis-information car crash is inevitable

3) Nobody reads research anyway

The single biggest problem is the management summary. I'm sorry, it should be declared illegal for the people who commissioned the research not to read the entire document.

Apparently, over 90% of all human discoveries and inventions were by accident. In other words, if you only look for what you are looking for, you won't find out anything new. Alexander Fleming didn't discover penicillin by reading management summaries in between doing e-mails while sitting in a meeting – he discovered it by looking at a month old moldy dish waiting to be washed. A hundred other people either didn't look at all or only saw a moldy dish, but his enquiring mind wondered why the entire dish wasn't moldy.

Even worse, nobody ever reads historical research either. In my experience, it is impossible for a competent person to read some old research and not come up with several new relevant insights. Why? Two reasons:

- a) There is a high probability that they are the first competent person to read it, some insights were probably always there
- b) They will have some newer information in their heads which will give a completely different context to the old research.

You may be surprised to hear that there are companies who offer to do just that: read your old research and glean new insights from it to grow your business.

CONCLUSION:

Research doesn't kill ideas – people do

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- a) Given that people by and large have stopped thinking about our products; more research needs to be at the point of interaction.
- b) The experienced and knowledgeable can't keep delegating it to the inexperienced and naïve.