

Moving from validation to inspiration

Researchers can change in-house perceptions by changing their deliverables

By Michael Carlon

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The prevalence of 360-degree marketing, or marketing activation as we called it at Unilever, is a direct result of media fragmentation. Brands have to use "surround-sound" tactics to reach an ever-elusive consumer base. As marketing activation has become more and more popular among brands, consumers are constantly being bombarded by messages in more and more places. As a result, marketers using surround-sound tactics are required to apply breakthrough thinking - sometimes resulting in the creation of new media vehicles and avant-garde messaging.

Eatbigfish is a consulting firm that helps marketers navigate these waters successfully. Through its books *Eating the Big Fish* and *The Pirate Inside*, as well as through its consulting practice, this firm teaches marketers the keys to thinking like a challenger as well as how to encourage this thinking throughout their organizations.

In a nutshell, the philosophy is all about maintaining your brilliant basics (understanding your target, knowing the core equities of your brand, etc.) while at the same time documenting the conventions of your category and breaking them. For example, Apple decided to break the PC color barrier when it launched the iMac. Jet Blue decided to sell food on its flights as a choice to consumers - and the list goes on. Eat Big Fish helps smaller brands play David to the industry Goliaths - and the challenger mindset helps to provide the slingshots. (Note, the challenger mindset is also useful to those larger brands who may be the Goliaths of their industry by helping them to think like a David.)

Not limited to marketers

This line of thinking is not limited to

marketers; researchers can apply a challenger mindset to their roles within organizations. We will always be asked to maintain our brilliant basics (understanding HH panel data, product/category forecasting, tracking consumer trends, maintaining technical skills, etc.). However, there are many conventions and beliefs that we as researchers must be willing to break in order to maintain relevance with our marketers as well as grow as a discipline.

Written from a marketer's perspective, these include:

- "Marketing research costs too much money, and I don't really see a return on this investment. I would rather take this money and place it in a different area."
- "Fielding a study takes too much time. I can't wait four weeks to have this information - I needed it yesterday."
- "My consumer and marketing insights group only serves to evaluate or kill my ideas."

While seemingly separate, these three viewpoints are all related. And while marketers would like to think they are a result of some flaw in the research process, they are actually the result of the way many marketers choose to work with their researchers. How many times has an internal client come to you with the following type of request?

"We have briefed the agency to come back with some ideas as to how we can best launch Product X. We have been working hard over the past two months, and this is what we came up with. We are going to partner with so-and-so to generate buzz through PR. We are doing advertorials in Magazines X, Y and Z. We are going to drive consumer interest through a promotion and Web tie-in. We are going to have product placement on Reality Show X and we are working with Wal-Mart on some great retailtainment programs to get products to fly off the shelf. What we don't have are any consumer insights to back up why we believe this is a great plan. The agency made some stuff up, but it is not that strong. We have a meeting to

sell this into the V.P. of marketing next week and have to include some consumer data or else the program will get delayed. We cannot afford any delays as creative for the magazine is due in three weeks and we will miss the boat with the reality show because of its production schedule."

Situations like this are doomed to failure. Costs would be astronomical as the field time will be rushed. Not to mention, regardless of method, it is very hard to plan, field and analyze results in the span of one week. Finally, it sets up the research as something that will be completely evaluative and not at all strategic. What will happen if consumers hate the idea? A lot of hard work will have gone down the drain and the brand will be set back in its plans. In short, no one can end up looking good in this situation.

To turn the above-mentioned beliefs that marketers hold about marketing research on their heads and to prevent situations like the one outlined above, the onus is on research managers everywhere to move away from providing a service that validates ideas to providing a service that helps to inspire ideas. This requires a step change in how we as researchers work with our internal clients. The following collaborative process will aid in this change and serve to add efficiencies to the research process and reduce the overall investment required in marketing research initiatives.

Consumer immersion program

Prior to planning initiatives and agency briefings, the market research manager leads key stakeholders (marketing managers and their agency partners) in a consumer immersion program over the course of three weeks. Week one is designed to uncover all past work that has already been done on the target as well as outline key learning gaps. Week two is designed to fill in learning gaps mostly on a qualitative level. During week two, all stakeholders should have hands-on interaction with consumers, which may include ethnographic interviews, focus groups, shop-alongs, etc.

Note: These activities should be sprinkled with creative/projective exercises for consumers to complete in order to uncover thoughts/feelings that are largely subconscious.

During week three, the team meets to share and group observations from the experiences, craft insights and select which insights are most fertile for including in an agency brief.

As a result of the program, insights will help to drive the planning process. Agencies then will have the inspiration they require for crafting ideas around consumer-relevant marketing programs. Additionally, the marketers who must then evaluate these programs can do so through the lens of the consumer. Finally, the process can help to uncover those category conventions that are ripe for change.

While the process will lead to a number of program ideas rooted in insight, many marketers will still want an objective way to choose between the outcomes as they may be unsure about which is the most appropriate direction and/or manage-

ment may want some quantitative evidence supporting a decision. Since the market teams are still early on in the planning process, there should be more than enough time to field a quantitative study to aid in decision-making. This process will be efficient as the ideas to test will already be available and the sell-in of the research will not require as much time (with such a clear understanding of the objectives, a questionnaire will help write itself). In short, up-front investment in insights will eliminate a time crunch on the back end and reduce costs. Finally, as ideas rooted in insights have a higher chance of succeeding than ideas not necessarily rooted in insights, you reduce the risk of having to go back to the drawing board after testing.

The one caveat I have for testing ideas is that it is nearly impossible to evaluate and validate the non-conventional ideas that result from adopting a challenger mindset. Oftentimes, the ideas/positionings that stem from a challenger mindset are so new and different to consumers

that they do not know how to react to them. This being the case, the role of the researcher is to inform marketers about the brilliant basics for their category and brand as well as to outline the category conventions ripe for change. Insight work can be done to help stimulate ideas on how the conventions can be changed and even help to draw a line in the sand that consumers would not want you to cross while also validating/evaluating non-conventional ideas which should not be attempted.

Change the conventions

As marketers are beginning to change the conventions of the categories in which they play, marketing researchers must also change the conventions of how we work with marketers. By becoming known as a department providing consumer and marketing inspiration in addition to consumer and marketing insights, researchers will increase their value to their organizations as well as bring excitement and a sense of adventure to the work we do. | Q