



A bad case of research myopia

Get real, says Tash Walker. Single approach methodologies never work, they just provide more of the same rubbish. Get up close to respondents and get the context right.

I was having an interesting debate at the breakfast table the other day. Probably it was a touch too early in the morning to do so, but that's just the way it goes sometimes. It went something like this:

Me: "I was reading Hadley in The Guardian the other day on Sheryl Sandberg and..."

Other half: "Let me stop you right there, I know what you are about to say."

Me: "That's weird because you know what? I hadn't actually said it yet."

Other half: "You don't need to, I already know that it is going to be something to do with why men are shit, and women are better blah, blah, blah. I know this because you used the words The Guardian and that's all they go on about."

I mention this for two reasons. First, it demonstrates why political debates at the breakfast table are rarely good for any marriage. Second, it neatly demonstrates a point I've been wrestling with for a

while in the world of research. The issue is myopia. The problem is that in research you find it everywhere.

In a debate, we are immediately suspicious of the singular viewpoint. As my other half pointed out, we feel as though we are only getting part of the picture, we readily move to dismiss such views because we distrust them as a source of meaningful stimulus for thinking (although quite frankly, in the case of my husband, I'm not sure he was looking for more stimulus over his Weetabix on this particular occasion).

By our nature we like views that give us the stuff that allows us to make our own minds up. But why doesn't research adhere to this principle?

Much of the qual research that is briefed starts with the premise that you will carry out x number of focus groups/accompanied shops/depths, multiplied by the number of people you speak to within that session and you get varying degrees of robustness from your responses. Blah, blah, blah. This is a nonsensical, myopic view of the world.

The thing is, speaking to anyone at one moment of the day, for an hour of their life, will never give you a genuine picture of either their life, or a genuine response to any material you might be testing. As Oscar Wilde once said, to do this once is misfortune, but to repeat the exercise is beginning to look like carelessness. Talking to lots of people in the same way isn't going to give you more stimulus or add more value, it is simply going to give you more of the same rubbish.

Technology just means there are absolutely no excuses any more. To get into people's lives across a few days no longer means camping out in their living rooms. It can be done with little fuss just by using a few simple principles, as in the following:

Gain intimacy

No-one is going to reveal their deepest darkest secrets/bad habits to a stranger. This is common sense. At The Mix, we blog with respondents for at least a week prior to meeting them in person. In practice this means you build up a relationship by speaking one to one via a blog daily, asking them about their day, what they have been up to and gaining their trust.

It also means you get to see a picture of their lives at home. App technology means now that it is incredibly simple to set up blogs on a smartphone, which can then be used to upload on the go imagery, brands that are loved/hated, what their cupboards look like and all manner of visual stimulus.

Get the right context

Asking someone about beer while they are sat in the sterile environment of a focus group isn't ever going to really cut the mustard now is it? Real life happens outside of a focus group room, so get out there. If it's beer, talk to people in a pub. If tea, go for a brew at someone's house.

And for the love of God, go talk to them in store as well. Talk to people in a way that makes sense for them, not you. See the brand in every way that normal people see it, whether that's the 48-sheet ad they see on the number 43 bus on their way to work, or just sat with them in front of the TV after a long day at home, in the office or wherever.

These are the places where you can learn something. And those smartphones we were talking about? Get them to upload videos of stuff they find interesting, or boring. Anything and everything that constitutes their normal existence

Do it over time

If an hour of the day isn't going to reveal a great deal to you, how do you get round this? You need to be present for the good, the bad and the ugly. On a Monday morning, your behaviour might be quite different to that of Friday night – in fact, it's very likely that it will – and if you work on brands, you need to know about this stuff. The un-met need can only be discovered this way.

Apps, once again, come in handy here. Ours is set up to prompt a response at certain times in the day so that you get a real spectrum of emotions, not just the stuff they think you want to here.

With their agreement, you can also monitor people via their social media updates as well. This means you get to observe real time how they are arranging their nights out, what they're up to during the day, what interests them in conversations and the language they are using when they post.

If you are using just one research method I'd argue that you are really only getting one viewpoint. Research in this guise tends to condense people into a neat account, but I'd argue that real life is alive and messy, and social and irrational. If you work with brands you should be excited by real life and real people, they are your lifeblood and you should strive for more out of them than what they happen to say in a focus group.

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