



What is an Insight?

By David Amers, Partner, The Leith Agency (& Head of Leithal Thinking)

Marketing is one of those professions where it is so much easier to claim than it is to deliver. For example, the word 'innovative' appears in almost every organisation's brand architecture, and yet it is rarely a defining characteristic from a customer viewpoint. 'We are driven by consumer insight/ we are consumer focussed' is another almost universal claim. There's no denying that companies want to put their consumers at the heart of their business. What is less clear, however, is the general quality of consumer insights and the effectiveness of their application.

This is perhaps unsurprising given that clients can have a different view about what exactly an "insight" is and how they are unearthed. 'Insight' is a hostage to fortune word. When applied to consumer behaviour, it promises a deep psychological revelation, a discovery of the new and unseen. And, this is a problem because it sends marketers and their research companions in search of a Holy Grail, an undiscovered gem, totally unique to their brand, consumer or organisation. The fact is, an insight of real value may be more prosaic than that.

Years ago, as a qualitative researcher, I presented my guru boss with a very detailed, rigorously analysed and thorough research presentation. Having looked through it he said (think wise, spiritual voice) 'This is full of really good stuff but you need to know the difference between a finding of interest and one of value'. He was right. Even now as I sit through long debriefs, I'm aware that they are loaded with interesting findings but lacking in real insights. My boss's assessment made me realise that an insight is, first and foremost, a research finding of real value to the marketing problem or challenge set by the client. An insight may not be unique or psychologically deep; it is simply liberating, unlocking the marketing problem.

Great brand insights are often very simple, but they've all allowed subsequent marketing communications to soar. Tango is a full flavoured orange drink. Boddingtons is creamy and comes from Manchester. Crisps are irresistible. VW's are less expensive than you think. Sweating is unattractive.

I worked with a client once who was keen on clue hunting. The brand managers were asked simply to gather clues as possible insights. This always struck me as like asking detectives to look for evidence without knowing what the crime is. The insights that matter reveal themselves only when people look with a specific focus in mind. Total focus on the objectives and challenges is like a light shone on the findings.

Essentially, an insight is more a springboard than a scientific breakthrough. It allows the marketing activity to achieve greater effectiveness. This also means that insights are fluid. What may have been the killer insight for a brand or issue previously, may have found its relevance and impact reduced over time.

Great insights are not easy to unearth but they are perhaps not as difficult to find as people think. Identifying the liberating, breakthrough observation takes confidence and an ability to put simplicity ahead of complexity. It means accepting that the obvious may be more valuable than the esoteric because, ultimately, insights are only effective if they can be applied successfully. Many of the insights mentioned earlier became great retrospectively, once it was evident that they drove powerful marketing activities. Whether or not an insight has the potential to deliver requires researchers who understand the practical implications of their recommendations and who can identify a liberating observation from a merely interesting one.

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Leithal Thinking is a strategy, research and design agency borne out of The Leith Agency in Edinburgh (<http://www.leith.co.uk>). We were set up to allow clients of all shapes and sizes to gain access to the strategic planning and creative expertise that has been central to Leith's growing success over the past 25 years.

We're a large collection of planners, creatives and researchers offering imaginative thinking to solve our clients' problems, helping them meet their challenges effectively. We are skilled communication practitioners who understand the broader business implications of our recommendations. We don't just offer great thinking, we also know how it should be applied. We help brands grow by transforming insight into powerful, engaging solutions.