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The Research Trap

One of the pitfalls of the multibillion-dollar marketing research industry is that researchers don't get paid for simplicity. Instead, they seem to get paid by the pound. A true story may be in order.

The scene: The office of a brand manager at Procter & Gamble. The problem is what to do with one of their largest brands. I ask a simple question as to the availability of their research. I'm surprised by the answer: "Research?" We've got a computer full of it. How do you want it? In fact, we've got so much of it that we don't know what to do with it."

A flood of data should never be allowed to wash away your common sense and your own feeling for the market. You'll never see that obvious solution. It's worth reviewing what this flood is washing ashore. I checked in with Robert Passikoff of BrandKeys, my favorite research company. Here are some of his and my observations.

Awareness studies neither link to real customer behavior nor reinforce (let alone create) brand differentiation. In fact, although the phrase, "That's nothing that a whole lot of awareness won't cure" has become something of a research industry joke, those studies keep getting done. Note to everyone: Everybody is aware of General Motors and few are buying their cars.

Segmentation studies get fielded by the sector. True, segments are ultimately identified but are they segments you really want? Or need? Or can actually market to? Often these studies end up identifying individual segments that you can't actually reach via any known media. But there they are. And then there's the problem of changing your strategy to appeal to different segments. When you become everything for everybody, you become nothing in the mind.

Cross-tabulations allow you to "slice-n'-dice" data to your heart's content, but to what end and to what sample sizes? Lots of data, but no insights or real differentiation.

Satisfaction studies only tell you what happened the last time and nothing about what's going to happen the next. They tell you virtually nothing about the brand--and anyway, today if you can't satisfy the customer, you're not going to be in business very long.

Visual ethnology has become hot recently. It literally means a "portrait of a people." Researchers follow consumers around to see how they interact with the product. Somehow, how they relate to a product is going to tell you how to differentiate the brand. Here, interpretation rears its ugly head. Results differ from one observer to another and what is produced is open to multiple interpretations that are consistent with multiple--and inconsistent--personal points of view.

The latest research flavor-of-the-week seems to be using neuroscience to measure brands, advertising and messaging. It's based on a body of research into how the human brain processes stimuli like ads. And if you are hooked up to a machine that's a cross between an EEG and an electric chair, researchers are able to track millisecond-by-millisecond brain responses to messaging. Nothing invasive, distracting or out of the ordinary there. And again, it's after the fact.

Finally, one of my favorite examples of silliness is the galvanic skin response test. You can actually wear a shirt that then monitors the electric current that runs over your skin surface. When you are "aroused" by an ad or a product, researchers see your galvanic skin levels go up.

Researchers may promise to reveal attitudes, but attitudes aren't a reliable prediction of behavior. People often talk one way but act another. Mark Twain nailed it when he observed: "You can't get the truth out of someone until they are dead and dead a long time." What you really want to get is a quick snapshot of the perceptions that exist in the mind. Not deep thoughts, not suggestions. What you're after are the perceptual strengths and weaknesses of your competitors, as they exist in the minds of the target group of consumers.

And since the ultimate marketing battle takes place in the mind, you need no more or no less. Most everything else will only confuse you.

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