

**Notes for the APG debate at MRS conference 1998**

**Opposing the motion that 'While Advertising and Marketing have developed in the last ten years, Research has not'**

Dan has bravely proposed the preposterous notion (masquerading as a motion) that a whole generation has passed since he first attended an MRS conference, and not a single thing has changed in that time. Although, as the proud wearer of a flowery tie and flares as I speak, some changes may have just come all the way around while Dan was dreaming of Brighton in the old days. Nuremberg Rally? It sounds more like Woodstock to me.

Well, fellow professionals, I ask you to look around, and ask yourselves the question: "has research changed since the O'Donoghue Generation?". Count the number of the following:

1. Beards
2. Sandals
3. Laura Ashley Frocks
4. Suits from Dunn & Co

Now process your data. Hands up anyone who can see more than one of any of these things. I rest my case.

No, ladies and gentlemen, research has changed beyond belief, and the whole world knows it. The Proposer may scoff at dress codes, but the whole research industry has changed such that researchers of a generation ago would be unrecognisable today in more than just the proportion of polyester in their shirts.

First, it's changed in technology & methodology

- not just CATI and CAPI but HAPI - is it a fragrance? For a man or a woman?

Is it a data collection technique?

- mystery shopping/accompanied shopping/accompanied toilet cleaning -

brought to you by Wendy Gordon, God bless her.

- after brainstorming, synectics and semiotics- shamanic dancing and drumming. Yes, it's real. And you know who you are...

This doesn't sound like standardisation to me.

Second, research has changed in size

- world market research turnover has doubled in under a decade

- agencies dream of the days when European advertising budgets were growing at 15% pa

- and we measure it in Euros!

Third, research has changed in stature

- we all know how qualitative research grew out of clinical techniques
- today, brand managers as well as clinical psychologists recognise the therapeutic value of group discussions as they dose off...
- it's no longer just washing powder launches, it's national politics and whole governments that are informed by standard research techniques

You can see why the proposers are so tempted to pour scorn on 'focus groups' ; it wasn't market research that was the reason why of Tory policy, it was the bizarre belief that if you threw enough advertising money at a problem it would go away.

Look at the difference: the Thatcher years - the age of the Saatchis; now New Labour - the age of the focus group: that's got to be good news for the estate agents of Crouch End

(quote from the Economist)

(Show Campaign): Research doesn't need a PR agency to rescue its image, it needs an image consultant to manage it!

But the important thing is that while the face of research has changed, the fundamental skills of a good researcher haven't

Research didn't need to change: it was already a mature science, and it's thanks to the professional skills of the people in this room that Dan and his colleagues in advertising know about the changes in consumer behaviour. And research didn't need to change to take account of those changes.

At the end of the day, there is only one 'technique' in research: you ask people questions.

So there's really only two variables

- 1. who do you ask the questions of?*
- 2. what questions are they, and how do you ask them?*

There's not an awful lot you can change about that, and changing either of these two variables is hardly likely to affect enormously the way research is structured.

Certainly, there have been changes: research has informed advertising, marketing and the media about cleverer targeting

- what attitudes are important rather than what habits or postcodes
- so we find ourselves talking to more useful respondents, constructing samples which are more relevant and groups which are more coherent

...but none of these changes have fundamentally altered the way research is conducted.

We also find ourselves asking questions at different stages in the planning process.

- research is moving upstream
- yet becoming more direct - allowing the MD to talk to the punter, the MP to the voter and the anorak manufacturer to cybersell to the spotty American teenager.

But changing the questions doesn't involve changing the research

- and the questions certainly have changed, for instance because everyone understands a little more about how marketing and advertising works.
- but, *pace* Mike Hall, changing your units of measurement from Persuasion to Involvement doesn't entail changing the whole nature of the research, it means asking different, cleverer questions

So my argument is that while the *structure* of research has changed, it has only changed just enough to take account of today's world. And in making those changes, we as researchers should approach change with caution, since what we do is based on a simple, unchanging truth of asking people questions.

And I will argue again that, for most researchers, change for change's sake is a bad thing

Without really saying why, Dan argues that research needs to change - he argues rather vaguely that we need "less of the same and more of something *new*". This is an all too familiar pressure from clients and especially advertising agencies to make themselves look clever with a differentiating new "technique", which leads all too often to a dangerous willingness of researchers to supply something new, just for its novelty value.

In my part of the industry, it's an insatiable demand for inappropriate projective techniques

- used to judge one proposal from another
- focuses attention away from the important things like experience, sensitivity and understanding of the problem and clear recommendations on how research will help solve it.

Since Dan clearly prefers Edinburgh to Birmingham (I can't imagine why), I'll also refer to the ESOMAR conference, and a paper in which Tracey White, Sue Redfern and Jennie Maitland did me the honour of quoting an article I wrote for the AQRP newsletter. Presumably if I return the favour, that should be at least another three votes for me and Chris.

Reporting on a survey looking at the pressure from clients to provide alternative qual techniques, they wrote:

*“...when standard discursive approaches or familiar but tried and tested techniques are suggested, there can be a reaction of slight disappointment.”*

And again, that some researchers

*“...felt that they had lost a brief purely on the basis of not being creative enough, when they were confident that a more radical approach would not necessarily generate better quality data. “*

In other parts of the industry, most especially quant, there's a proliferation of scary methodologies developed not because there's a way of answering unanswerable questions, but because of pressure to answer them

- prove to my board how effective my advertising is
- prove to my finance director what my brand's worth
- give me a precise description of exactly who my target market is and, if possible, their names and addresses.

These are just two examples of how buckling in to pressure for change where it is either unnecessary or technologically impossible can cause great harm in an industry which can only do one thing: *ask people questions*.

Which brings me on to one area where we do agree with the motion:

“Consumers - the people we ask the questions of - *have changed*”

Not in the way that so-called leading-edge commentators would have us believe (not yet anyway)

- the global village is still little more than a hamlet
- portfolio careers are what happens when your steel works closes, not what you aspire to when you fancy a mid-thirties career change
- our customers still spend four hours a day watching TV and none at all surfing the net.

*How have they changed? They've sussed us out.*

Allow me to offer you some genuine verbatims to illustrate the point:

Advertising

*Moderator (for it is me): So what are they trying to do with this ad?*

*Respondent (full time housewife, mid forties): It's obvious really. Have you seen Tesco's share price recently? They've overtaken Sainsbury's and now they're kicking them when they're down. Sainsbury's probably can't afford to hit back at the moment..."*

Marketing

*Moderator (not me this time): What do you suppose their factory's like, then?*

*Respondent (part-time secretary & housewife, thirties): Factory? They don't have a factory! This is one of those brands manufactured by marketing whizz-kids in glass office blocks!"*

Research

*Respondent (student, male, 18/19): we've talked about all these different TV ads and films and stuff, and how different it all is, but if you put a semiotic view on it you see that the big themes in popular culture don't really change over time..."*

- like politics and journalism, advertising, marketing and research are disciplines that don't have any mystique any more.

*How do we respond?*

- not with ever more complex advertising propositions
- not with clever clever research techniques

But by dealing with consumers honestly and openly

- all of us in advertising, marketing and research now need to earn their trust

By asking more straightforward questions

- is it just that I'm a very unadventurous moderator, but if you are talking to people who are fully conversant with terms like marketing objective, advertising objective, target audience, core message, rational and emotional support, tone of voice and even production budget, what's the point in attempting to hide your questions?

Of course you can't just repeat the answers, you still have to analyse the data and ask your own questions of their intent in giving those answers - yet another core skill of research that hasn't changed.

So, in conclusion, yes - consumers have changed. Yes - the structures and the industry of market research have changed, and a great deal for the better. Yes - as Chris will come on to argue - the *structures* of advertising and marketing have as well. But the truth of research has not - and nor should it try to, unless it has a demonstrable benefit. It still just asks questions. That's the craft that you and I practise, and we should be proud of it.

So let's talk about the areas where our industry has changed, but fight for the right to leave unchanged the basic truths at the heart of research. Vote with us to defeat the motion, and the next time someone asks for something new for the sake of novelty, stop and ask "why? If it ain't broke, don't fix it."