

AQRP Newsletter 'In Brief'
Verbatim article April 1998

Peter Dann argues that research companies should not be judged by their projective techniques.

In the world of marketing and advertising, there are certain unshakeable truths, accepted by all, sufficiently contemporary for the speaker still to sound in touch, and consequently repeated until they become the corner-stones of received wisdom, on which are based strategies, campaigns and full-day seminars with four-course lunch.

For example: the Internet will render conventional marketing redundant within x years; everything interesting in brand communications now happens below the line; French people say more interesting things in groups; qualitative research is an unimaginative discipline that has not seen a worthwhile innovation for at least a decade.

Now, in spite of being a full-time, paid-up qualitative researcher, I don't really have a problem with the last of these 'truths' (the first three I can get tediously argumentative about); after all, I'm not ashamed to work in a mature profession where quality and discipline of thought count for more than innovation for innovation's sake, and since the authors of these remarks tend to be friends or acquaintances from advertising agencies, I can usually find a riposte based on the 'pot + kettle = black' model.

However there is an unfortunate corollary, and this arises because the buyers of research - be they brand planners, agency planners, research managers or whoever - are not their own masters. To get their budgets signed off, and their cards marked for advancement, they have to *impress* somebody. And whoever impressed their client or their boss by recommending four groups with the option of two in the Midlands?

No, this is a brave new world, and a better one at that, where brand strategies have to be innovative, advertising strategies have to be unique, and where research proposals need to show that the researchers and the people commissioning them are the red-leafed mustard in the salad bowl of marketing. But how *do* you judge a research proposal? And, more importantly, how can you prove that it is as innovative as you and your client are?

The answer, all too frequently, is to latch onto or even demand some kind of projective or enabling technique in the proposal, preferably with a sub-brand name, and to use this as evidence of creativity on the part of the research company. It is becoming a common experience to be asked when preparing proposals to include some new techniques to impress the client with, or even to list 'our techniques' in credentials presentations. Indeed, clients seem actively to look out for new techniques, and researchers have learned to supply them.

I don't have anything against projective techniques: in their proper place, and used with restraint and caution, they can interrogate the parts that even the most sensitive questioning cannot reach. But I strongly believe that pressure to include wacky examples in research proposals is potentially harmful.

First, because it is rare when preparing competitive proposals to know the full details of the project in hand. Even if the brief has covered the background in some detail, researchers cannot be expected to know enough about the topics and issues to recommend detailed projective techniques any more than they could write a discussion guide until after the full briefing meeting.

Second, because the pressure to include something innovative can lead to researchers recommending projective techniques where they are inappropriate: where there is no time for respondents to explain their answers, where the technique itself over-emphasises the subject, or where the objectives of the research are to explore top-of-mind reactions rather than 'hothouse' opinions.

But the most damaging effect of this emphasis on 'techniques' is that it leads to *less* emphasis on what is important in judging a research proposal. Have the researchers really understood what is required to meet the objectives and made their recommendations exclusively to that end? Have they shown that they can cover all the objectives with their recommended methodology? Have they thought about the implications for the sample design? Have they explained in what order they intend to cover the topics, and why? Do they give a clear picture of what the groups or depths will be like, and what they expect to achieve in the time allowed?

These issues are harder for researchers to explain, and harder for buyers to compare between one proposal and another. But they are much more sound indications of who has really thought about how to answer the brief and provide the information the client needs at the debrief. And, ultimately, it is only at the debrief that one knows whether the right researcher was chosen.