

Notes for the APG Debate at the 2001 MRS Conference

Seconding the motion that "Researchers hide behind objectivity and fail to take responsibility for their findings"

In proposing this motion, Miranda spoke from the perspective of someone who commissions and uses research; I'd like to add two more arguments from a researcher's perspective which any researcher in the room can understand and agree with. The motion does imply criticism of our industry, but I think these problems come from confusion over how we use words – but sadly, they've become a big issue for all researchers.

First of all, the very process of conducting market research is itself a totally subjective one. And that's where the word problem comes in: because we call ourselves researchers, people (ourselves included) get us confused with those other kinds of researchers: academics and scientists and other seekers-after-truth. When a scientific researcher observes an experiment, or an academic or social researcher observes a phenomenon, they acquire hard evidence – data – which, so long as it's analysed correctly, constitutes objective findings or results of the experiment. Of course the fun starts when other scientists or academics start questioning the methodology, the analysis, the interpretation and so on, but they're arguing about the presentation of hard data.

We are not like that. We are market researchers, and we may have borrowed their words but we can't borrow their methods. Why?

Because we work in a subjective world, a world of soft data. There are no results, and there are no laws to be proved or disproved.

At a very well-respected qual company I used to work at, there was a sort of motto: this is an art not a science. OK, so it was written on the ratecard, but I'd still argue that market researchers' artistic endeavours extend beyond estimates. And the reason we work in a world more akin to art than science is because of the nature of the data we're dealing with: with the possible exception of those clever chaps in the observational wing, our data is *given* to us by our respondents.

Incidentally, at the risk of this sounding even more like a public school debating society, that interpretation is closer to the root of the word data, from the Latin 'to give' – as in donation. It's a gift, not fact; whether its qual or quant, national survey or wacky workshop, we deal with information that our respondents have chosen to give us.

An example. I'm doing a group the other week. Early on in the group Julie (name changed to protect the innocent) tells me that the ad I've just shown her is simply marvellous and right up her motivational alley. An hour, half a ton of jelly beans and six press executions later, she opines that it's a bag of shite and that she'd rather watch that Dale Winton on Channel Five.

I go behind the mirror to find the clients in predictable uproar. The research-hating Marketing Director has the ammunition he needs: "you see? How can I take this seriously? She's either confused or lying or both!"

Someone needs to be shot, clearly, in the name of justice. But is it the client, for being an insensitive, people-ignorant number-cruncher? Or is it the respondent for being so fickle, shallow and uninvolved? Neither. It's me. Or rather, my industry for giving the impression that the world of marketing is full of black and white, truths and facts. Julie spoke the truth on both occasions: she liked the ad, and then she didn't. This is the real world. I might like the brand when I see it on TV, but like it less when it makes my colours run. I might remember its advertising tomorrow, but on Wednesday mix it up with Direct Line's. I might think it's a warm and friendly company, and tell the researcher so, but be less impressed when the checkout assistant's having a bad day and I get cut up on the way home by a badly-driven delivery van.

Brands today are too complex for objectivity, and that's why my second point is that researchers are to blame for not alerting their clients to this fact. It's very tempting to hide behind this mask of objectivity that we've inherited. I know I have – when you've come from the totally subjective and highly opinionated world of advertising agencies, being a researcher is just marvellous. You can stroll in to any meeting and hold the floor for hours if you want, because you're the only one in the room with the facts! You've spoken to the real people, you've got the data! Even the marketing director can only argue with your interpretation, so you can always just offer an alternative explanation and sound even cleverer!

Fabulous, but false. You can only get away with this because, in a world of opinion, there is such a crying need for anything that will pass muster as an 'objective view'. The client wants some objective data to prove to the board that the strategy will work. The agency needs to prove to the client that the work will be famous and effective. They need objectivity, and we purport to give it to them.

Shame on us, because this really is hiding behind false objectivity. We should present our data as what it is: the opinions of our respondents at the time we asked them to give them. We should present our findings for what they are: our interpretation of these opinions. And we should be clear that our recommendations are our best guesses at what is likely to happen in the real world, based on a valid but entirely subjective set of evidence.

It's still more than anyone else in the room will have, so there's no need to feel naked and unworthy without our so-called facts to back us up. And our clients value us more for our informed opinions derived from our data than for parroting reportage.

So vote with us to pass this motion. Recognise that the criticism is not unfair, but in accepting it give the world of marketing a clear signal that as researchers we would rather step out from behind the false god of objectivity and stand up and be counted for our opinions and our contribution. Say that we will listen to our subjective respondents and draw constructive conclusions from what they say. Be honest in our recommendations and recognise the limits of our methodologies. And in making this step forward, let's be proud of our contribution and unafraid to take responsibility for it. Of course we'll get it wrong sometimes, but if we're to be respected members of our clients' teams, we need to put the false world of fact and objectivity behind us and embrace the difficult but far more rewarding, real and useful world of subjectivity and responsibility.

Pass the motion. Thank you.