

At the MRS Conference in 2000, Rupert Howell, then President of the IPA, stirred up feeling in his keynote speech criticising the research industry.

Peter abused his position as vice-Chair of the APG to contribute this response to the newsletter 'Sharp Stick'.

I've never met Rupert Howell, and I've never knowingly researched his agency's ads either, although I like the fact that they're often the ones that respondents talk about in warm-up sessions. I didn't even get to hear his speech at the MRS conference. I was doing groups in Battersea, sad man that I am. I read the article in the Guardian, though, and it made me grumpy all the way to Brussels.

Although Rupert points the finger most obviously at quantitative research, he clearly means to include qualitative as well (or else those clever quant chaps have started handing out crisps and warm white wine in hall tests).

The article paints a picture of qualitative research that is unimaginative, backward-looking and a slave to likeability. I recognise that picture, but it's a very old one. Today, even respondents have grown beyond likeability as a criterion for judging ads. Respondents themselves are aware of the strengths of advertising that is still being talked about at the end of the group, and of the weaknesses of easily-liked but formulaic little stories, so how can advertising researchers possibly ignore them?

The main issues in most advertising group discussions are to do with the apparent message of the advertising and how that relates to the brand in question, often with regard to its future intentions rather than what it has done in the past (*'you know, I always thought of brand x in such and such a way, but if they're going to do advertising like that, maybe they want to be seen as so and so'*). Discussion is rarely about likeability, except where that is recognised as the advertising strategy. Comprehension, originality, enjoyment of the ad – yes; but mostly respondents and moderators alike are more concerned with the values and promises the brand seems to offer in its advertising, and how these fit into everyday life.

This is hardly ground-breaking stuff, I admit, compared with all the future-now methodologies qualitative research is supposed to be inventing, but it at least attempts to look forward, by getting under the skin of the advertising and evaluating it against relevant

objectives. This means, of course, a deal of work going into each research project to ensure that the researcher is properly briefed to understand the advertising strategy and the reasons why it came to be, involved early enough in the process to make sure that the research can answer the questions needed, and given enough opportunity to ensure that the right objectives are set for it.

In this sense, I firmly believe that clients – and agencies too – get the research they deserve. Invite the researchers in, get them to talk to the client about their business aspirations, to the planner about the behavioural quirks the advertising's designed to exploit, to the creatives about what's going to make the idea come alive, and suddenly you'll find someone who's as keen to look beyond first responses to the underlying strengths of the ad as you are. Ask them their opinions on sample design, on stimulus material and on methodology (even on what you should be looking out for) and you'll get some informed suggestions about how you might make it easier for respondents to share your vision of the advertising too.

But there's one area of responsibility where agencies need to start putting their faith in their research colleagues rather than threatening to withdraw it, and that's in educating their clients and managing their expectations. The vast majority of advertising research has to walk an impossible line between a creative desire to let the idea expand beyond the constraints of its current format, and a political requirement to 'prove' that it will do what the agency said it would. Good research can provide insights into both, but even the best can't shoot the ad or guarantee the effect. Allow researchers to concentrate on developing the idea, adding to the pool of information about the ad, and you'll end up with a sound understanding of its potential sufficient to make the judgement as to how (and if) to execute it.

I, for one, would far sooner spend my life developing advertising than 'testing' it. But how many client/agency relationships have enough faith to make that judgement themselves?