

Ad creatives' relationship with ad research

The disconnection between creative people and ad research is damaging the ad development process, argues **Sue Burden**, Diagnostic Research UK

I HAVE EXPERIENCED market research from all three corners of the magic triangle. I have seen it from an ad agency planner viewpoint (among others, at DMB&B), as a client market research manager (at Mars) and now as a market researcher at a research agency specialising in brand and ad research, Diagnostic Research UK. One of the greatest contrasts that this varied experience has shown me is the difference in attitude towards research between the ad agency creatives and the client 'creatives' – the product designers. When I moved to Mars to work on Maltesers and Mars ice cream, the product designers' enthusiasm and respect for the opinions of their consumers was striking. For an ad agency planner, often seen only as a 'fair weather friend' who was listened to only when research findings said the right thing, this was most gratifying.

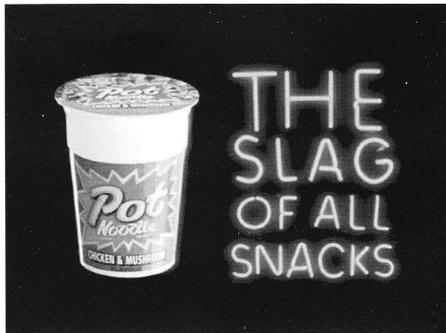
So why exactly is the role of research in advertising so problematic, compared to the role it has in other creative endeavours? Until 1995, I was working in advertising myself, so I had pretty good idea of what the issues might be, but being a researcher, I decided to check out this question more scientifically, with some research. Here, I will list my findings, and some suggestions for improvements.

In September 2002, I interviewed six ad agency creatives from a variety of agency backgrounds – big, small, inter-

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Pot Noodle: what would the researchers say?



national and national. I spoke with them in depth about their views on ad research – what worked for them, what didn't work and how it could be improved. (Many thanks to them for their co-operation.)

From negative to neutral

The views that emerged covered a spectrum, and as my sample was definitely qualitative, I obviously cannot say exactly in what proportion these views exist among agencies in general.

However, 'neutral' is about as positive as the views were:

- ▶ 'Research – it's not a huge concern – something you tolerate'
- ▶ 'There is eye-opening research and mind-numbingly dumb research'
- ▶ 'If research is used, I like to be involved'.

The more negative views were pretty damning:

- ▶ 'Research is a no-win for us – we can only lose from it'
- ▶ 'You very rarely see creatives coming

out of a research debrief with a smile'.

For professional market researchers and planners who spend a vast amount of time trying to help improve the effectiveness of advertising by using research, this is very disappointing.

Before all ad researchers decide that their hard efforts have never been recognised, the ad creatives who took a more neutral stance did have some positive things to say, starting with recognising the skill of the moderator:

▶ 'It is an incredible skill – understanding how a group should go – getting past the prejudices – reading the group'. Some had first-hand positive experience of research shining its proverbial light on key issues:

- ▶ 'A good focus group with a good moderator can be really rewarding – some ideas crash, some shine a light'.
- And others had been convinced that:
- ▶ 'The consumer knows more than we think'.

A common, more pragmatic view was:

- ▶ 'I work very closely with the planners – the more people on my side the better'.

However, this view smacks more of research being used for insurance, rather than illumination.

The pain of seeing an idea destroyed

One of the most frequently cited reasons for not finding ad research positive was bad experiences when viewing qualitative research groups on scripts or storyboards:

- ▶ 'A guy from another team was behind the glass seeing their idea being ripped to shreds – he never wants to go to another group again'.

This is frequently cited by creatives as a reason for distancing themselves from research and is not something to which one can offer a magic solution.

However, there are suggested ways to minimise this negative experience – the most important factors being understanding and sensitivity.

Sue Burden is managing director of Diagnostic Research UK – specialists in brand and advertising research. Sue was previously European research manager at Mars and planning director at DMB&B.



Tango: benefited from research

How can research cope with the shock of the new?

- ▶ ‘The “same-old same-old” goes through research – the script that challenges gets problems’.
- ▶ ‘Look at the work that has made brands famous – that is the work everyone admires and that’s the aim – to champion work that is a clutter-buster, not the ones nobody minds’.
- ▶ ‘The objective is to be edgy and challenging, but also on brief.’

This leads very quickly to another firmly held belief, that ‘the best ads are never researched’ – what a damning indictment

‘A lot of the best and most effective ads are researched, and I think it’s about time researchers started to stand up for the usefulness of their work’

for the research profession. Is it true? ‘Pot Noodles, “the slag of snacks” – what kind of research did that go through?’ I was asked. ‘The Tango ads would not have researched well’, I was told. But here I knew via a personal contact that this was not the case – the famous Tango ‘orange-hit’ ads had been researched and had benefited from the experience. So was this long-held shibboleth, dating back to the ‘Heineken refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach’ story, a reality or myth?

I believe that a lot of the best and most effective ads *are* researched, and I think it’s about time researchers started to stand up for the usefulness of their work.

What’s the point of a beauty parade?

We all know that likeability is an important quality for advertising to have – it can enhance recall and involvement. However, at the early stages of ad research, qualitative research is best used to explore and develop, rather than to ask 32 people which script they like best – but this does apparently still happen:

- ▶ ‘It’s OK if the research is “Did you get this?” or “Did you get the message?” It should not be “How much did you like this?”’.

Qualitative researchers need to be on their guard to avoid this kind of facile beauty parade – qualitative can be used much more productively to explore meaning and relevance.

Ad tracking – unknown territory

If qualitative was an area that creatives only occasionally came close to, then ad tracking was the unknown – they hardly ever attended debriefs:

- ▶ ‘I’m not involved in tracking research – I don’t hear about it unless it’s very good news’.

Their views on the vital process of finding out if the thing they had created did what it was supposed to do were also limited by their lack of familiarity with this kind of

research:

- ▶ ‘Tracking is “box-ticking” – the worst side of research’;
- ▶ ‘The tracking people always comment on the level of branding – client pleasing trick.’

Thinking back to working with new product designers, I know they were avid readers of any tracking information, eager to find out how the target had interacted with their creation. They also knew that this information could be invaluable help to them for their next new idea.

Here, I believe that the big ad-tracking suppliers could make a real difference – why don’t they have a ‘Guide to ad tracking for creatives’? Surely, the more people using their research, the better it is for them?

Inappropriate pre-testing

- ▶ ‘Right at the beginning, the pre-testing company and client agree action standards for example, brand recognition up six points, then the brief changes, but for the pre-test the same measuring stick comes out and doesn’t change’. ▶

Ways to minimise negative experience

1. Marketers and ad agency management should avoid using groups as a way of giving the *coup de grâce* to ideas they know won’t work.
2. Market researchers themselves often have a shrewd idea of how the target might react, so they can warn creatives of a potentially rocky ride.
3. Make sure that the qualitative research focuses on development (which qualitative is good at) rather than evaluation (for which you obviously need a quantitative sample).
4. Often, the best way to get the creatives involved is with earlier research before the brief is even agreed.

‘Time spent at the early stage pays off massively – not just in ensuring that the creative brief is built on relevant consumer insights, rather than myth or supposition – it also builds team spirit between agency and client’

It seems obvious, but why aren't the creatives involved in agreeing the action standards of a copy test? And more importantly, why isn't the test design responsive to the needs of the situation? At DR, our copy tests are objectives-driven, rather than being out of the 'sausage machine'. We ensure we have a written statement of communication objectives before we start, so we can tailor the research design as well as the findings to answer the right questions. This brings us more of a challenge, but helps avoid wasting clients' money on research that doesn't fully answer their objectives.

Early research pays off

- ▶ 'Research to get insights for creative development – I've heard of it happening – but by the time you're testing scripts it's too late'. Is this as a result of poor timing?
- ▶ 'The brief lands on our desk and we have two weeks to do it ... anything that's not a necessity gets chopped'.

Or is it a lack of priority on the early development research that can make such a difference and save time later on?

Time spent at the early stage pays off massively – not just in ensuring that the creative brief is built on relevant consumer insights, rather than myth or supposition – it also builds team spirit

between agency and client. Some of the creatives I spoke to positively supported the use of ad research:

- ▶ 'I'd much rather research earlier than later – rather than have last-minute problems'
- ▶ 'There are a lot of studies that steer the planners, then a huge leap of interpretation to create the brief'.

Their reaction to this sort of research was enthusiastic:

- ▶ 'The groups we did to work out the brief were really massively useful and insightful'
- ▶ 'Getting to know the market is the most helpful part'
- ▶ 'We could use it [early research] more in other projects'.

This was the kind of research I encouraged at Mars and I know from experience the success it can bring. We were even able to cut back on other types of ad research when using early pre-briefing research.

A question of money – innovation needed

I have a hypothesis, based on my experience in ad agencies, that creatives are not encouraged to participate in market research because the ad agencies' profitability is calculated on the basis of the time spent by each individual on each account. Creatives are relatively highly paid and the more of their time spent on your account, the less profitable it is. However, creatives themselves recognise the value of being involved more with certain types of research and in the long run it often saves the creatives' time, not to mention improving the quality of their work. The attitude that says creatives should be shielded from ad

Involve creatives in research planning

1. Ensure that creatives are party to the copy test action standards.
2. Use a copy test that can be flexible to the specific needs of your campaign – standardised, mechanical test designs will tend to give standardised mechanical results.

Using creative development research to kill subsequent problems

1. Make time for early creative development research.
2. This type of research is separate and complementary to brand equity research – it is a focus on communication.
3. Make the creative teams the key client for this type of research – arrange it on dates to suit them.
4. If you're at an ad agency that wants to produce more effective, original ads, then think about changing the way you work to include this type of study.

research also seems patronising and backward-looking.

The example of other industries

Other industries have responded to increased competition by getting their designers closer to the consumer – I have worked on many new product development projects where the designers were trained to speak to consumers themselves in order to come up with better ideas faster than the competition. Maybe it is time the ad agencies brought in a little innovation to their basic structures and ways of working – using research positively with the creative teams could be the way forward for the ad industry too.

What do you think?

If anyone would like to challenge, discuss or explore these views, please let me know.

Through this article, I would like to propose that researchers, planners and marketing people connected with ads that are successful in awards should publicise this fact.

Any ad researcher or planner who wants to help prove that ad research does benefit award-winning ads please send the details to me and I am proposing we set up a database (possibly via the MRS website) to champion this involvement. ■

sburden@dr-uk.com