

How to deliver consumer insight

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Insight is not synonymous with market research, but too many Customer Insight Managers (the Market Research Executive rebranded) are still only data gatherers.

- It is not just the collation of information but the application of insight that matters.
- Neuroscience, behavioural economics, semiotics, sociology, anthropology and ethnography provide new opportunities to garner, hone and apply insight beyond the traditional group discussion or segmentation study.
- The crucial question in insight mining is 'why?' For every response, keep asking 'why does that matter?' or 'what is going on here?'.
- Insight is a powerful tool if you can identify something penetratingly differentiating and relevant about consumers' motivation and behaviour that you can then use.
- The challenge is to translate it into strategic ideas that grow the brand and deliver profit.

[Merry Baskin](#)

Baskin Shark

This Best Practice paper, is an updated and revised version of Merry Baskin's 2010 paper, Consumer insight. Merry Baskin is founder of the planning consultancy Baskin Shark and a frequent contributor to Warc.

Jump to:

[Where to start](#) | [How to get consumer insights](#) | [Processes and tools](#) | [Further reading](#)

Where to start



Insight is usually pegged to the word 'consumer', but there are myriad kinds of insight in our industry – business, media, product, brand, strategic and competitive, just for starters.

This piece focuses on the 'people' sort of insight; what motivates our behaviour and preferences, because at the end of the day, most of what we do is about getting people to change their behaviour. Consumer insights emanate from a deep human truth, or the culture of the communities within which we operate, the latter gleaned from the beliefs or learned from the behaviours of others around us.

Insight is not synonymous with market research, but too many Customer Insight Managers (the Market Research Executive rebranded) are still data gatherers, rather than knowledge-appliers. Yet it is the 'application' of insight that really sorts the men from the boys.

The primary purpose of an insight is that it is actionable – it is a fresh and thought-provoking perception (about the consumer, the category, the brand and so on) that can be applied to improve a business solution, to challenge a marketing strategy, stimulate a

different communication idea. It can aid the development of a new product, the writing of a creative brief, or make an executional element resonate. Otherwise, it is an interesting piece of understanding, a bit of relevant data, a market research finding, a mere observation of human behaviour.

If the response is *'so what?'*, or *'and...? Your point is?'* then you haven't got an insight. If the response is *'Aha!'* (*'that makes sense, I can see now why that is so, I know exactly what to do with it'*) then you've struck gold.

Why do we need insight? Well, our communications efforts do not persuade shoppers to dash blindly into stores and start buying exactly what we tell them to. Many other factors come into people's decision-making – previous experience, reputation, familiarity, perceived quality and value, mood, values, imagery and so on, all filtered through their emotional, neuro-aesthetic responses to all of the above.

Just as people are never passive receivers of communication, nor are we simple consumers of products. We now have relationships with brands, we engage in dialogue with brand owners and we interact with our brands at all kinds of different touchpoints, and rarely do we do any of it in isolation. What is a 'relationship' but an emotional interaction?

Illustrative case history on Warc:

Many consumers all over the world are turning away from a culture of conspicuous consumption towards one that eschews waste and values resourcefulness. We are becoming more conscious of how much time and money we waste and how much rubbish we generate. Following on from a segmentation study, the US Glad rubbish bag company discovered that many consumers were trying to make smart choices that created less waste in their lives. Not only did they want to tell consumers about their new stronger bags with less wasteful plastic in them, they wanted people to reduce their wasteful behaviour. One core segment in particular they called the 'Trash Scentinels' – no that's not a spelling mistake – and through a breadth of further qualitative, ethnographic and neuro research among them, Glad and their research agencies unearthed and honed several insights about how to use their communications to drive engagement in a low interest category, educate consumers, effect behaviour change, initiate a national conversation about waste, and yes, sell more garbage bags.

How to get consumer insight

Mining for strategically applicable insights means generating them or catalysing their development from observations, common sense, and all sorts of soft and hard data. With the help of neuroscience, behavioural economics, semiotics, sociology, anthropology and ethnography, there are a lot of new methodological opportunities beyond the group discussion or segmentation study, previously the traditional default methods for gathering insightful data about consumers.

Ethnography has become the popular technique of late, embraced by clients who want to really get under the skin of their customers, some spending up to 15 hours a day observing people going about their lives, without any specific agenda. This is a great way of introducing customer-centricity into product-led companies (such as mobile telephony, where the geeks come up with a technological tweak or a new widget and then tell marketing to sell it, whether or not the customer actually wants or needs it).

Another advantage, since there are no predetermined or preconceived questions integral to this method, observation removes the response and recall biases, since people are often not conscious of the things they did.

Similarly, encounter groups (where internal stakeholders from both the client and agency side get to meet 'real people') can be engineered online or face-to-face to develop new products or services collaboratively, not just hone communications. In the case of hard-to-reach audiences (such as drug users and dealers) attendees can include people dealing with the issue in the front line, such as police, community leaders and social workers. If you are Procter & Gamble, you set up a division called Connect and Develop, which is a form of crowd sourcing and co-creation for new product development. This allows them to expand their ideas and technology quickly, more affordably and effectively than spending vast amounts of money on internal R&D.

Then, of course, there is simple participation; immersion and first-hand experience (doing, feeling, seeing, hearing) of the customer journey itself; understanding the lives of the people you are targeting – knowing what it is like to spend a day queuing in a Job Centre, or what it is like to be elderly and living on a pension, or to suffer the constraints of a particular medical condition.

As the methods of collecting and collating consumer information evolve, it becomes even more important to be able to integrate findings and distil them down from key themes into actionable insights, rather than stop at the more superficial 'interesting observation' or 'curious factoid' that may be fascinating and surprising to the less insightfully vigilant, and just elicit a *'yes, of course'* from everyone else. These data are, however, potentially the bits of grit from which the pearl is made; the nugget around

which you can build your communications solution, or take some sort of action.

Illustrative case history on Warc:

UK Tribes is a long running research panel (or online insight community) among 16-24 year old C4 viewers. It segments UK Youth into 25 different tribes based on their self-professed cultural and lifestyle preferences, and weekly questions are posed to hundreds of them to help advertisers better understand this ever changing and often remote or alien seeming audience. Here's a cited example of an insight generated by the panel for teen fashion retailers: *"Brands which allow Tribes to express individuality are cutting through. For many young people it's now a case of fitting in by standing out. Tribes want brands that enable them to fit in but also stand out at the same time. The multitude of colours and designs offered by the likes of Converse and Dr. Martens are prime examples of this"*.

Processes and tools

1. Develop some hypotheses about the nut you are trying to crack, about the objectives of the comms task ahead and what you (think you) know about the people you are targeting. Who are they? Why are they the way they are? What are the drivers, influencers and barriers affecting their attitudes and behaviour? Remember, man is a social animal. The key is being able to get to the bottom of what people do, and why. Mind mapping can be a useful tool to help organise and span out your thoughts at this stage. Write your theory in the centre and then interrogate it, branching out your hypotheses as you go. You will be left with a one-page map of various themes that you can collate, craft and leverage.
2. Conduct a data gap analysis. Figure out what research and consumer knowledge you do have to hand, and what you don't have that you need to go and find out. Identify the optimum method (given your budget and timing constraints) and go fetch. Start with the most affordable: desk research – digging into government stats on demographics or syndicated data, your client's databases plus information from the media and social sciences about social, political and economic trends. Customer loyalty cards provide an insight goldmine into shopper habits, behaviours and preferences.
3. Conduct a careful study existing (historic) market research – if you're lucky, you will have a fresh, robust segmentation survey to hand. Dig deeper into the most compelling segments. Find out what really defines and motivates them. The Body Shop's Anita Roddick may have dismissed running a company on market research as like driving while looking in a rear view mirror, but there is no point reinventing the wheel by recommissioning rather than updating a study that has already been done and then left to gather dust by an over-ambitious brand manager who has long since moved on.
4. Don't forget the wonders of the online world – bearing in mind that while Twitterers and the bloggerati are not representative of the world at large, they are a very immediate source of knowledge. Online blogs and chatrooms, as well as the client's own customer letters, can be great sources of nifty, penetratingly honest data.
5. Commission or even conduct your own special qualitative or quantitative survey designed to unearth the emotional heart of the issue in hand. Or just get out there and informally observe.
6. When you have unearthed some great nuggets from your plethora of sources, collate them into groups of similar themes and start to craft them. Take your collection of interesting and (what you perceive to be) pertinent bits of consumer data, and use your instincts to identify any patterns emerging.
7. Some neat tools to consider: A great insight development tool is a variation on the ever popular 'laddering' technique; also good for brainstorming, proposition development and brand benefit tiering. Another favourite tool of mine is to try different 'lenses' through which to view a bit of consumer data, utilising various angles to try and figure out what makes people tick – Wendy Gordon calls them 'Mindframes'. They cover Kahneman's System One, Semiotics, Behavioural Economics, Herd Mentality, Likeability and Context, among others.
8. The main question – possibly the only question – you need to ask in insight mining is 'why?' You will begin to sound like a petulant four-year-old, but it works. For each one, ask yourself, 'why does that matter?', or 'what is going on here?'.

Take the example of disposable nappies. Rationally, they're convenient, less messy and they work. Why? 'They make my life easier.' Why? 'Providing I change frequently, my baby stays dry and comfortable and doesn't get nappy rash.' Why? 'Because nappy rash is horrid, avoidable, and makes my baby suffer.' Why? 'Because caring parents should look after their babies.' Why?

'Because they are helpless and terribly precious.' Why? 'Because we have great hopes for him to grow up and be a happy and healthy, well-rounded person.' Why? 'Because he is an extension of us and we don't want to let him down.' Why? 'Because if he turns out wrong, it is our fault and it means we've been lousy parents. Why? Because he'll be emotionally constipated and in therapy for the rest of his life.'

What this example illustrates is both the huge role emotions (guilt, love etc) play in something essentially practical and convenient, and how the marketer can stop at various stages on the ladder, reflect upon, consider and share the various product, strategic and communications options. Pampers always focused on efficacy and dryness, via various technical layers and blue liquid demos, stress-tested by some authoritative nursery maid who spent her daily life dealing with nappies. Huggies, on the other hand, took it up a notch and talked about how their elastic-sided nappy allowed baby greater freedom, without leaking, to crawl, to walk and explore, to grow and be stimulated. Both brands offer the emotional benefit of happy babies. Which is the more emotionally rewarding for the parent? Which brand had the better insight? Why do you think Pampers adopted the Huggies strategy in the end?

Curating customer insight is a powerful process if you can identify something about people's motivation and behaviour that is genuinely helpful to the (creative) team. The challenge is to translate that understanding into strategic and creative ideas that grow the brand and deliver profit to the business.

Further reading on Warc.com

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[When the low hanging insights have fallen](#) by Simon Blyth and Mark Simmonds Market Leader Q1, 2015

[The Feldwick Factor: Knowing when you have an insight](#) by Paul Feldwick, Admap May 2010

[Marketing to women](#) by Jane Cunningham and Philippa Roberts, Admap March 2007

[Why is good insight like a refrigerator?](#) by Jeremy Bullmore, Market Leader, Summer 2005

[The insight story](#) by Suresh Ramalingam & Aruni Ghosh, ESOMAR 2009

[Local here, global there – how can we build brands that travel globally and are loved locally?](#) by Saurabh Sharma, Warc, February 2010

[Springsight or thinsight?](#) by Mark Simmonds, Market Leader, Summer 2008

[Home Office/COI – Acquisitive Crime](#) by Alice Huntley, APG Awards 2005

[Co-creating with consumers: a new way of innovating](#) by Ana Medeiros and Andrew Needham, Market Leader, Spring 2009

[Glad: Stronger stand against Waste](#) - DDB San Francisco et al, ARF Ogilvy Awards, 2013

[C4 UK Tribes](#) – Channel 4 & Crowd DNA, MRS Awards, 2013

Other reading

Mindframes - 6 enduring principle from 50 years of market research – by Wendy Gordon, published by Acacia Avenue, October 2016

See Feel Think Do – the Power of Instinct in Business by Andy Milligan and Shaun Smith, Cyan Communications, March 2006

Added Value – the Alchemy of Brand Led Growth by Mark Sherrington, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003

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