

Probing the underbelly

BY LIZ TORLÉE

"Life happens too fast for you to ever think about it. If you could just persuade people of this, but they insist on amassing information." - KURT VONNEGUT JR.

Goodness, what would Mr. Vonnegut think of market research today? Information is now perhaps the closest thing to money. Everyone is trying to find new sources, new ways to amass it and, like money, no matter how much information you have, it's never enough. Whole industries are doing very nicely promising to manage it and make it grow. But-one further stretch of the analogy-information doesn't guarantee happiness. On the contrary, the sheer abundance of it, much of it a mere mouse-click away, is addictive. It is making people work harder than ever with less clarity than ever. And this lack of clarity means they develop an almost insatiable need-for more information.

Why is all this happening? Partly because it's so easy and partly because in a fast-paced and unpredictable world, the amassing of information is confused with the quest for a far more precious and abused notion: insight. And here's the irony: Insight is rarely found in information. Sometimes it is out there on open ground, so obvious that we all fail to grasp it right away; sometimes it is in the shadows and the corners, but always it is in the stories behind the numbers, the colour, texture and anecdote of life that information often renders sterile.

Consumers are way ahead of us here. They are sorting through the heaps of information we give them hoping we've found the insight, that little something to make their lives happier, easier, less stressful, more rewarding, more successful. Whatever we're selling and they're considering, they are hoping for some kind of inspiration-a Holy Shit factor. But, often disappointed, they end up trashing the expensive information we've so hopefully sent them. One of their most frequent complaints is that life is too damn complicated. You need a black belt in nutrition just to navigate a grocery store and something approaching a degree in pharmaceuticals to pick the right cold medicine. And, especially at this time of year, wading through wealth management dissertations leaves many breathless. After coming home to yet another glossy corporate profile jamming his mailbox, a man beseeched his financial planner "Please, please don't tell me anymore what you'll do with my money. For God's sake, just take it."

But, while consumers are resisting and rebelling, businesses madly churn out more truckloads of data. This is particularly true in the pursuit of "customer satisfaction" (or "customer delight" which seems to have supplanted it, at least for the optimistic). There is a fervent desire to know how satisfied you were with X before you switched to Y, and is your satisfaction with Y anywhere near what it once was with X, and how dissatisfied with Y would you have to be before you'd go near X again-and what day of the week might that be, and so on. The overwhelming question, of course, is: So what? Sitting brand stakeholders down in a room, taking their wireless gadgets away, and asking them what makes their customer happy and what pisses them off, always surfaces more interesting stories, with more revealing anecdotes than any number of quant. studies.

So, what to do with all the numbers? Well, sometimes, if you stand on your head, you can see their underbelly, the real story they might be hiding. For example, thousands of

people will "strongly agree" that they "want clear, smart information on how to save money" (and, by the way, all those who would prefer unclear and silly information, please stand up). Look from upside down, though, and you'll find what they really want is to learn how to spend money, not save it. "How much can I spend before I run out?" is a common concern, especially among those contemplating the end of peak earning years. Yet, sound strategies for spending and enjoying money are nowhere to be found. On another subject, almost every woman over 18 will strongly agree to wanting "a more balanced life"-which has led all kinds of companies and all self-help book publishers to promise it. But looking from the flip-side perspective reveals that they want the time and energy to enjoy full lives, bursting at the seams with family, career, home, friends, vacations, fun and relaxation-lives without sacrifice. That's a far more attractive concept than "balance."

Standing on your head, though, gets tiring. And funding all those studies to flush out that lovely elusive insight is expensive. True insight, the kind that drives creative strategies and ignites great flashes of brilliance, rarely comes from traditional, packed-with-data studies. It is far more likely to be found out there in the real world, in the bedrooms and boardrooms of real people, on the streets where they live and the places they go, just around the next corner.

Perhaps Vonnegut was right and that life really does happen too fast for us to ever think about it. But if we stopped amassing all that information, at least we'd have a bit more time to think. Who knows what we might come up with.

LIZ TORLEE is Joint Managing Director at Terranova Market Strategies Inc.
www.terranova-msi.com