

## The perils of segmentation

BY LIZ TORLÉE

### **Marketers need to understand what connects consumers, not what sets them apart**

The need to segment, it seems, is almost primal. There can be no other way to explain the continued obsession with classifying people into manageable silos with neat names. This is not to suggest that dissecting a target group or user profile is not an admirable quest. Obviously, anything that helps us to understand the many different ways people interact with brands is important. But there are some worrying beliefs and practices tied in with segmentation that should be challenged.

First, the persistent merchandising of psychographics as a broad-scale categorization tool. The word itself has an odd '70s ring to it, almost akin to psychedelic. It conjures up visions of groovy clusters of people, joining together to consume in harmony under weird and wonderful sounding handles-"reluctant rebels," "zealous renewers," that kind of thing. Psychographics became popular a few decades ago because demographics, as in the ubiquitous "women 25-49," can be far too arbitrary. They assume we all conveniently change our beer and shampoo on the stroke of midnight on particular birthdays-or, more to the point, that after a certain age we cease to exist.

But no matter what o'graphics are in vogue these days, there is a little marketing mythology at work here. Rarely are any of the silos truly distinct segments and the duplication/overlap factor inevitably muddies the waters. Group B shares certain characteristics with Group A; Group C has some of both. Then we learn that Group D is only 7% and could have been distributed among the other three but for some niggling characteristic that didn't harmonize properly. On hearing this all explained in a recent meeting, a computer sales rep who called on major electronics retailers asked: "I've got 15 minutes with the buyer, is there something new in all this I can tell him?" No one could answer.

Setting aside the statistical integrity for a moment, there are more profound reasons to question the value of this type of analysis. Today, one person rarely fits into a category for more than a few hours at a time. In fact, no one person is one person anymore. All individuals move through different facets of behaviour, different attitudinal segments-not just in their lifetime but often in the course of a single week. On Monday morning, you could be fitness conscious, planning to invest in the stock market and happy to give to the Salvation Army on a street corner. On Friday night, you channel surf, contemplate keeping spare cash under the mattress, tear up a health club flyer while gorging on a Krispy Kreme and hanging up on Greenpeace. Complex and ever-shifting circumstances provoke different needs, feelings and, of course, consumption patterns.

Today, people have multiple roles, multiple lives and wild fluctuations in opinion and behaviour. They move from one "segment" to another, one role to another, one set of needs to another-and, most importantly, one product choice or brand preference to another with apparent contradiction and alarming speed. How is a poor marketer to keep up?

By looking for similarities, not differences. Understanding what connects people to each other in the category decisions they make and the brands they choose is far more revealing than determining how they differ. And usually, what connects them is their mood and frame of mind not their demo- or psychographics. A 19-year-old female gay bicycle courier from Toronto and a 58-year-old male farmer from Saskatchewan have nothing in common: different demographics, completely different lifestyle and likely different values. But they both love Kraft Dinner, vote NDP, shop at discount stores, get their news on the Internet and go to Vegas.

To be fair, not all segmentation studies shoehorn products into existing broad-scale population groupings. Many start with the universe of category/brand users and then segment according to nuances of attitude and behaviour. So, with a food product, for example, there are group descriptions like "Comfort seeker" and "Convenience-driven." But even they can be arbitrary and misleading. The bicycle courier and the Saskatchewan farmer may sometimes love Kraft Dinner because they've got no time to fuss and sometimes because it reminds them of their childhood and the comfort of Mom's kitchen. In other words, they'll move across the segments depending on their mood or frame of mind. Trying to define the relationship in narrow silos undermines the deeper roots and the broader power of the brand. And anyway, who has the budget these days to develop a different campaign for different people with different propositions?

Could it be that the bigger picture seems amorphous and unmanageable and marketers feel driven to divide and conquer? Perhaps making people fit into creatively labelled categories provides a sense of control and progress. If so, it's an expensive and risky way to achieve it. Inevitably, what results is a creative brief that stipulates "primary" and "secondary"-sometimes even "tertiary"-targets, or uses the famous "without alienating such and such a user" phrase. Surely this betrays the need for a deeper and more unifying description of the people we are so anxious to appeal to. Research that helps find the similarities can be far less daunting and much more helpful.

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