

## Where did the innovation go?

BY LIZ TORLÉE

### **Creative research tools are out there, but marketers cling to old ways**

The definition of insanity, it has been said, is doing the same things over and over, the same way you have always done them, and expecting different results. With this in mind, I'm hopeful the whole concept of innovation has taken on new life. There are conferences dedicated to innovation, and it has even found its way into corporate titles: Manager of Strategy and Innovation and Director of Innovative Ideas, for example.

Why, then, does the thought of innovation provoke such panic when it comes to planning research?

I should state for the record that I spent roughly 20 years of my career whining about research and how unfair and unimaginative it is. Then, closing my ears to the horrified gasps of old friends in creative departments, I "crossed the floor," convinced there must be better ways of exploring people's hearts and minds, and how they relate to the thousands of products and services that crowd their lives. I wanted to get closer. And guess what I found? There are better ways. There is new thinking-smart, sensitive research to make any marketing strategy more potent and persuasive-documentary, day-in-the-life research; improvisation and role-playing techniques; cross-generational dialogues; and new approaches to infield observation (especially in ethnically diverse markets)-to name but a few. There are very bright ideas out there and very bright people paying for them. But, sadly, in both cases, not nearly enough.

It is astonishing to look at the changes in social trends, the fundamental shifts in the way people make decisions and develop brand loyalty, and then have a Manager of Innovation call for "a couple of focus groups" to "test some concepts" and begin stammering when something more innovative is proposed. In a world of chaos theories, tipping points and viral marketing, surely it's time for the old, tired measures to be held up for more systematic and critical review.

What happened to instinct, intuition? We need a few Directors of Gut Feel challenging research to be more entrepreneurial and actionable in real life. When that woman in the grocery store saw you pick up a frozen something, did she ask if the stuff was good or how you would rate it on a 10-point scale? When you left the restaurant the other night, did the waiter ask whether you definitely or probably would or definitely or probably wouldn't return? Do people ask you if you enjoyed the game or whether they should play like that much more often; they should play like that a little more often...and so on. No one ever has conversations like this but we go on living complacently with six-figure research studies pretending they do.

Let me give you an example. If you ask people to rank the importance of various attributes of insurance companies, they will place "good relationship with broker or agent" and "competitive price" right at the top of the 10-point scale (9.8 and 9.7, respectively). But if you sit on their basement stairs with them and view the one-inch-deep mucky water and slush from a burst pipe, you will hear: "That relationship stuff, you know, the

sympathetic 'we understand' bit-that's all crap. We just need someone who knows what the hell they're doing to get us out of this mess." Comments like this provide far greater insight into how to market insurance.

Everyone secretly knows there is no such thing as a truly predictive research formula. Everyone can cite concepts that have tested badly and done well, and vice versa. Yet we are too often confined to clumsy methodologies, dutifully plotting a 0.587 ppt increase on a graph and wiping the sweat from our brows.

Focus groups still account for the lion's share of qualitative research and have become default requests. They are automatically factored into budgets, and timetables and RFPs are sent out with management already predisposed to them. Yet even the most creatively structured focus groups-which should surely be the price of entry-are seriously limiting.

I'm told it's a question of selling to management, that is, we've always done it this way, we can't rock the boat. Never mind that the boat isn't going anywhere.

So here I am on the other side, still whining, I guess. I think we need a revolution or two. Anyone involved with research, including me, needs to work a lot harder at refining exploration and measurement approaches, and developing new ones to meet rapidly changing needs. And anyone who buys research must aggressively challenge the routine methodologies slotted automatically into their plans, and be willing to try out the many new approaches that already exist and have proven their worth.

If we all work at this, then every meeting to present research results will be so exciting that the agency's creative team gets there first, the client CEO makes a point of attending and the Innovation Manager will be dealing with disgruntled e-mails from those who weren't invited. If we don't, if the same questions and same answers are regurgitated, people will continue to dread the whole thing. They will chew their pencils and check their watches, hoping desperately for new insight while going quietly and steadily insane.

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