

It's Not 'Art', But Marketing Research Can Be Creative

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I've never really thought of myself as a creative person. This attitude led me away from pursuing a career in art or music and into the logical, technical, and methodical field of marketing research.

Or so I thought.

I've since learned that the opportunity to be creative is not limited by subject or discipline; the only thing that limits creativity is one's own mental rigidity. In psychological literature, topics such as "functional fixedness," "mindlessness," and "learned helplessness" describe the lost opportunity for creative thought that occurs when experiences, context, or preconceptions interfere with the ability to generate novel or nonobvious solutions to problems.

Imagine you are in an isolated seaside cabin, putting the finishing touches on your first novel, which is due at the publisher tomorrow. It's 2 a.m. Suddenly, your electricity fails. You have just one candle, which you light with your one remaining match. You figure the candle will provide, at most, a half-hour of light, yet you have easily more than an hour of work remaining.

You look around, but there's virtually nothing in the cabin. Clearly, you can't burn the manuscript in order to keep the light going. Dejectedly, you continue to write, the light goes out, you miss your deadline. The next day, your friend asks why you didn't burn some of the pencils you were using to write with. But it never occurred to you that a pencil is also a piece of wood; yesterday, a pencil was just a pencil, hopelessly stuck in that single category.

The ability to go beyond the mundane and obvious and a rejection of the traps of repetition and preset categories is what defines creativity, and these same principles can be applied to any creative field including, God help me, marketing research. Let me illustrate how creativity can be successfully applied to four key marketing research tasks: research design, questionnaire construction, sampling, and analysis.

Research Design: Many years ago, NBC asked Oxtoby-Smith to design a study intended to select an appropriate symbol for a coming technology color (Andrew - separate the words) TV. Several attractive symbols were in the running, among them 'a rainbow, an inverted paintbrush with globules of colored paints clinging to its bristles, the NBC chimes in brilliant hues, a sunset, and, of course, the Peacock. All were striking, but the question was which one most effectively and pleasingly conveyed the "color" message.

In thinking about an appropriate research design, it occurred to us that, while the alternatives had been drawn and shown to us in glorious color, the overwhelming preponderance of consumers would, for some time, be seeing the chosen symbol in black and white.

Ironically, the key issue was which symbol, when seen in black and white, best communicated color. The result was a two-cell test, with one group seeing the symbols in black and white and one group seeing them in color. And so the Peacock was born largely because of its ability to convey color when seen in black and white. A less creative design would likely have missed the mark.

Questionnaire Construction: The best way to find out something from someone is to simply ask that person. Isn't it?

Often it's not. As anyone who has ever studied Freudian psychology would readily know, people often hold views which they can't articulate. The creative way in which questions and the accompanying research stimuli are designed play crucial roles in eliciting subconscious or sensitive information from consumers. We were commissioned to determine what characteristics are attributed to gray-haired people. During a pretest, we asked respondents to tell us what they associated with gray-haired people, and we got standard answers: Gray-haired people are more mature, older, etc.

We then had the idea of showing half the respondents a gray-haired person and the other half the same person with black hair and asking for specific attribute ratings. Not surprisingly, the result was a richer, more useful survey that uncovered some deep rooted stereotypes.

Sampling: Choosing a research Sample is more complex than simply determining how many respondents to interview.

The truly creative part is determining whom to speak with.

When we began working with American Motors in the early 1970s, one of our first contributions, and one which initially seemed counterintuitive to our client, was to narrow its previously used research sample of all potential new car buyers to only those who would consider an AMC car. Our rationale was that the data from nonconsiderers of AMC had been distorting the research because these responses tended not only to be more negative, but also were more heterogeneous and generated more random error.

The shift to a sample on only AMC considerers was more costly, but was ultimately warmly embraced by the client because it led to more sensitive and accurate research results.

Analysis: Creativity in data analysis probably is the most challenging, but most rewarding, task in marketing research. Innovative analysis typically draws on one or both of two techniques: searching the data at hand for moderating variables, and

drawing on previously conducted research or secondary sources to help explain and expand one's current research.

Recently, we conducted a study to determine whether the psychological age of older people (that is, how old they feel they are) was more predictive of their consumer behavior than was their chronological age.

The stimuli were ads that used endorsers of varying psychological ages. An initial look at the data revealed no main effect for psychological age; it was only through a more detailed search that a moderating variable was found - identification with the endorser.

Older people were influenced by an endorser whose psychological age matched their own, but only when they identified with that endorser, a finding that has important implications for advertising to the elderly

Drawing on other sources: The wisdom of turning to other sources to help explain current data certainly is not a new thought, yet its importance is often overlooked. For example, a look at 15 years of research revealed that we needed to revise the action standards we had been using for a pharmaceutical company. The new standards have been much more predictive of test market results. I am convinced that no one piece of research could have led us to the same conclusion.

All of this has made me realize that creativity is very much a part of my chosen field. My self-definition has changed, and I'm feeling renewed, even inspired.

I think I'll go home and paint a questionnaire.