

ACCESSING THE EMOTIONAL POWER OF ADVERTISING AT THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STAGE

Erik (the previous speaker) has shown that emotional approaches and rational approaches are not really simple alternatives, but that at the very least they complement each other. It is not possible to have a rational response without a preceding emotional response. One name that Erik didn't mention was Oliver Sachs, a neuroscientist whose books are full of entertaining if sad stories about what happens to people who lose their emotional facility (as a result of unfortunate accidents and so forth): the title of one of his books, 'The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat', provides a clue as to what happens. It could lead to all kinds of madness; rather than eating your food and sleeping in your bed you may sleep in your food and eat your bed – which in my experience normally only happens on a Friday night.

When you think about it, the pattern of an instinctive emotional response followed by a rationalisation of this response ('react first then think about it') is what happens in a qualitative discussion group. Respondents have an immediate almost instinctive reaction to stimulus which then gets discussed in a relatively measured fashion. The dangers for qualitative researchers is that the research either becomes over-rational and therefore typically over-critical (which is particularly apparent when dealing with fragile creatures such as creative ideas) or that it simply takes the immediate emotional responses and fails to understand what is causing these and how if necessary this might be altered appropriately.

I talked about discussion groups. That's partly because I'm not that fond of the phrase focus groups, as ideally they should be or should appear to be relatively unfocused, as that makes for a more natural and relaxed environment. It's also because they are indeed about discussing that's to say talking and especially, for me, listening. But we should also bear in mind something that's so obvious we can take it for granted, which is that a great deal of communication, in every sphere of everyone's life, is mediated by words. We talk, write, see and hear words all the time. Right here, right now, for example. And yet emotions are not words. They are feelings which are often hard to put into words.

Indeed, we all know that some of our most important thoughts are hard to put into words. Albert Einstein said - rather inelegantly, if I'm honest - of his own creative process, "The words of the language as they are written or spoken do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which serve as elements of thought take part in a rather vague combinatory play which seems to be the essential feature in productive thought, before there is any connection with logical construction in words or other kinds of sign which can be communicated to others."

So as qualitative researchers we have to take a thorough and thoughtful approach to understanding both what people can articulate and what they struggle to articulate. This is especially true as regards firstly the accessing of emotions and secondly the understanding of emotions. Whilst it is the case that

many emotions come to the surface readily, in the case of brands or product categories or our views about a topic we may never have really thought about (last week I spent a great deal of time asking women how they felt about limescale, as well as getting from other women the role of so-called 'yellow fats' in their lives) there may well be emotions which are either not easily articulated or indeed have not been consciously recognised. In these situations we would use a variety of enabling or projective techniques.

It's true that when it comes to researching advertising we use such techniques much less. Partly that's because the exploratory and positioning stages of research, when they would be particularly suitable, would have hopefully taken place before we get to the moment of researching advertising. But partly it's also because with advertising we are interested in people's immediate response, since despite all the immense efforts everyone here puts into creating great advertising, it is for the most part let's say not considered at a conscious level very much once the ad has passed.

Thus the early moments, say the first ten minutes of exploring a campaign route in a group discussion, are very important, and where we start to get a feel for the outcome. We have to balance the need for spontaneous response with the need to get some sense of uncontaminated, individual reactions. Sometimes we use what we call Private Response. This is where respondents are asked to individually write down, immediately after having viewed a possible TV execution

- what they thought about it
- what it said to them
- sometimes, what the brand was.

It means that we have a written record of what everyone initially felt. Plus, through the process of analysis we can see how this altered during the course of the group and what caused it. It is particularly useful for understanding communication. It can help to understand emotions although the act of thinking about and writing down an immediate emotional response can of course in itself temper such a reaction, so the extent to which we use this technique will depend on the objectives of the research.

Clearly conversation and writing are not the only way we as qualitative researchers assess emotional qualities and levels. I did rather like Erik's picture of the book called *The Body Language and Emotion of Dogs* and presumably various people are on the way to making neuro-linguistic programming as surprisingly big a business for pets as it is for human beings. Part of NLP is understanding body language and that's something which is extremely useful for the qualitative researcher. I went with my wife and kids to see *The Railway Children* at the theatre over the weekend, and there is a point in the second act where the mother – not, sadly, the Jenny Agutter figure – says to her children, "Don't just listen to what people say, listen to what they do". That should be the qualitative researcher's maxim. Of course I listen to what people say and how

they say it (the tone they adopt), but much of my time is spent listening to what they do.

Body language often belies the words coming out of the mouth. If you're leaning back with legs stretched out in front of you and crossed at the feet, arms folded and looking away, what am I going to think when you tell me that this is a sensational piece of advertising? That's why we as qualitative researchers don't take everything at face value. And let's face it, why should we? Do we believe everything everyone says to us at work, for example (or is that just my paranoia?!)? Have you never been economical with the truth, or told a little lie just to make things easier, or in fact just not bothered to say what you really felt?

A more acute aspect of 'listening to what people do' is being aware of what people don't say. These are not just things that you have been primed on by the client and/or agency, but also things that you would expect to be said given the way the conversation is developing. It's fantastically valuable, if sometimes tricky, to understand why people did not say a certain thing.

If you're a kinaesthete, by which I mean a person who tends to experience things viscerally rather than say visually or auditorily, another way you have of considering emotion is to feel the atmosphere of the group and the room. Call me old-fashioned or maybe mad, but I like to think of emotions as having a presence in the ether, and there are different emotions which will be produced during the

course of a discussion group and thus a number of atmospheres within the room. Again, they may re-affirm what is being said or they may go against it. What's interesting about this for viewers of research groups is that whilst they can see body language reasonably well from behind the mirror, it is much harder for them to have a sense of the atmosphere and mood within the room. It's as though the mirror is in this instance a barrier to witnessing qualitative research rather than an aid.

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