

HOW MUCH CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION DOES QUALITATIVE RESEARCH NEED?

Good morning. I'm the MD of Sadek Wynberg Millward Brown, which is one of the largest qualitative research companies in the world. By way of context for what follows, most of our work concerns brands and much of it concerns positioning, NPD and communications. And whatever I say refers to qualitative research, not quantitative. And since I'm not Irish, if you're wondering why on earth I'm here, it's indirectly because we conduct a lot of qualitative research for Diageo Ireland.

The answer to my question, how much creativity and innovation does qualitative research need, is a certain amount. I hope to encourage you to be wary of demanding too much innovation from qualitative research, at least not without being clear what its purpose is and how it will answer your objectives. I hope to show you that there is already a reasonable amount of innovation within qualitative research, more than is generally given credit for. And I hope to make you enquire of yourselves what exactly is it you want, when clients say they want creativity in their qualitative research.

Today's innovation from me – though not much of an innovation in the grand scheme of things – is not to show any slides; or indeed any ads.

That's because I thought it would be a breath of fresh air to avoid a powerpoint pummelling; and because showing ads is such an easy cop-out, and often frankly, in a forum like this, an alternative to actually communicating something meaningful.

Every innovation carries a risk, even a small one like this. You're going to be looking at me for quite some time, and unless I am remarkably charismatic or entertaining or interesting, your attention may begin to wonder. I wanted to minimise my risk, so I thought I'd rely on the odd gem from people who had a lovely way with words. Occasionally therefore you'll be hearing some quotations. Plus, at the end, I've got a vaguely relevant part of a classic comedy script which should take us nicely to lunch, if anyone fancies a little laugh at that stage.

The title of today's conference is Creativity and Market Research. Let's just hold it there for a second. Creativity is a broad word - tax accountants are very creative, but when we talk of creative people they do not immediately spring to mind. So let's analyse what we mean by creativity.

It's been a few years since the management guru Gary Hamel observed that the major problem with managers in organisations was their lack of creativity. Shortly after he first made that pronouncement, the internet flowered and I feel that in a way this has loosened the bonds of creativity –

the world is not so grey and stifling as it was. Nonetheless, or perhaps as a result of this, great creativity is still the holy grail.

One simple definition of creativity is ‘making new and unexpected connections between two previously unconnected points’. But that does not do justice to the difficulty of creativity. Here’s how the Father of Science, Albert Einstein, described 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.”

Crikey! What I take from that is that the act of creativity can be hard to put into words, even for a man with a huge brain. It is interesting to note that Arthur Koestler said that, “True creativity often starts where language ends.” In other words, creativity is essentially sub-conscious.

At this point it is worth considering the relationship between creativity and qualitative research. Are clients looking for creativity in methodology, or sample, or physical outputs? Or is it that they are looking for creativity in

terms of insight and interpretation? Are clients looking for us to produce sub-conscious thoughts?

I would argue that we need to tread thoughtfully. Interpretation by qual researchers is based on our understanding of everything that respondents have fed back to us. Creativity it could be argued is based on a much broader variety of sources. There can be a tension here. The qualitative research approach is often based on rigour, on analysis, on logic, on finding patterns; whereas the creative approach is often based on intuition, unexpected connections, spontaneity, fun. Creative people are often unable to coherently explain their ideas, whereas qual researchers take pride in explaining things cogently. These differences are presumably why qualitative research is sometimes said to inhibit creativity.

Additionally, the truth is that for many of our projects, clients are not looking to get creativity from us. They are looking to get measured understanding and interpretation. Clients will have had plenty of creative input from their various agencies beforehand, and often what we are researching is the fruit of their labours. They want some sense of neutral evaluation, and sometimes pointers for development. Nor do clients' agencies really want qualitative researchers to provide creative thoughts, at least not obviously, for a variety of reasons such as lack of confidence in the ability of the researcher to be sufficiently creative.

Therefore I want to break this talk down into four areas:

- **the benefits of good old-fashioned qualitative research**
- **things qualitative researchers can do which are quite innovative
(existing innovations, as it were)**
- **issues around innovation**
- **specific creative development research**

I'm afraid I don't know who Lofti Zadeh is, but he or she said, "When the only tool you have is a hammer, all your problems look like nails." The point of that quotation is to lead us into considering whether qualitative research has enough tools in its box, or whether it simply relies on limited, boring, safe approaches.

GOOD OLD-FASHIONED QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The heart of qualitative research is about understanding underlying human motivations, needs and wants. It was developed from psychotherapeutic approaches, with certain obvious differences. The issues we talk about are generally less intensely personal in nature, and we typically converse with a greater number of people at any one time. We are concerned with talking to people and more importantly listening to them. As Epictetus said, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we

“speak”; although I’m sure you’ll agree that’s a dictum which is probably not followed enough.

My point is, the central premise of qualitative research relies on face-to-face contact. To do our job properly, we need to appreciate not only what is said (and what is not said), but also how it is said. We need to assess body language. 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 fabulous piece of advertising?

As qualitative researchers, we 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? 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? Marshall McLuhan certainly had: he observed that “I don’t necessarily agree with everything I say.”

You can imagine it’s pretty difficult to capture all this detailed, personal, observational stuff over the phone or in an online discussion group. I’m sure improvements in video-conferencing will lead to improved virtual groups, but many of the difficulties will remain. In any case, any intervening medium, such as a camera lens or a viewing mirror, acts as a

kind of barrier. My experience of viewing groups behind the mirror is extraordinarily different to my experience of moderating groups in front of the mirror (or, rarely these days, in a room with no mirror at all). The mirror acts as something of a filter to emotions, so that in the viewing room impressions can feel quite flat whereas in the respondent room emotions can be much less muted.

Of course, the very act of talking about a feeling rationalises it, so that's why being in the same room, being able to sense the feeling, is so important.

Sometimes silence is a wonderful tool; it can say so much in and of itself, but also the interviewee will always be tempted to fill any silence with more words, which will add further enlightenment or layers. But it is rare these days that qualitative researchers are able to practice the art of silence in viewing facilities, as clients can start to get the feeling that they're not getting value for money!

Therefore we are strong advocates of face-to-face discussions, the number of respondents being appropriate to the objectives of the project and the nature of the topic. And in a sense I would suggest that innovation might consist of remembering some of the old ways of doing research; making it a more natural conversation, allowing for pauses, etc.

Let me now turn to interesting things that qual researchers can and do practice...

EXISTING INNOVATIONS

A good qualitative researcher will have any number of enabling or projective techniques up his or her sleeve. There are lots of writing exercises we can use, such as diaries or school reports. There are lots of games we can play, often around brand personification, such as Planet Guinness.

People can make things, whether 2-D or 3-D. People can choose things – colours, pictures, music – to represent their feelings. People can consider issues analogously, for example how would operators or brands in a completely different category approach this issue?

And if the topic is specific, then we ensure that the language around the topic is used in the warm-up so that respondents feel comfortable talking about it; for example, in advertising research we kick off by asking respondents what ads they like and why.

On many of our projects we pre-task respondents in some way, such as getting them to keep audio or paper diaries. Sometimes they have to take

photos of items which are in some way important to them. Sometimes they have to prepare collages. Sometimes they have to bring along favourite items. Sometimes we deprive them of a product or make them use a product much more than they normally would.

Even within the traditional format, as we might call it, of groups, things can be much more varied than they used to be. For example, the mass use of adcepts (which I define as embryonic ideas, just a picture and a line) to help develop a proposition and a tone of voice. We run groups where up to 100 adcepts might be included and assessed by respondents; you show them all at once, and only explore the interesting ones, seeing what floats to the top. They can allow the exploration of different angles within one broad territory; they can inject emotion through mood, humour and involvement; and they can bring territories to life better than verbal concepts can.

This is not a million miles removed from the concept of sequential recycling, by which I mean running groups over a number of closely-related evenings (for example, every other night over the course of one or two weeks) and amending the stimulus material after each evening. The benefit is that through this continuous learning you are able to keep on improving upon the original ideas, and to continuously look at things from new angles. It's also fast, and energising for both clients and agencies. It

does however require a lot of commitment from all parties concerned, especially the creative folks.

Plenty of groups these days are not of 90-minutes or 2-hours' duration. Longer, more workshop-type sessions may be appropriate, breaking out into smaller syndicates from time to time.

It may well also be that a greater number of respondents is appropriate. I am about to start work on a project for the governing body of a major sport, and as part of our approach we are going to hold a number of what we call 'Events', whereby at each one we gather 30 enthusiasts of the sport together for the best part of a day.

I think that sometimes insufficient consideration is given to thinking about who we might talk to. For new product development, or purely exploratory research, why not talk to experts, or what you might call 'Obsessives', or people whose relationship with a product or category has been specifically altered in some way? Or why not engineer conflict groups?

The importance of the venue for the fieldwork is generally under-rated too. If you are looking for a creative response from respondents, why not hold the fieldwork in a place likely to encourage this – rather than a typical

viewing facility, or uninspiring hotels? Why not a zoo, or an art gallery? We are looking to hold the sports Events at relevant sports venues.

The backroom, where groups are observed, does not necessarily have to be the fetid hell-hole it can sometimes be. Where you have two types of customer who interact with each other – for example, pharmaceutical companies have both end-users and physicians as customers – why not interview one set of customers (eg patients) in the front room, whilst in the back room another researcher interviews the second set of customers (eg physicians) as they watch the first set of customers being interviewed? It's a little tricky to control, but the results can be fascinating.

We will quite happily use other methodologies as appropriate, such as observation, say, or accompanied shopping, drinking, etcetera – accompanied holidays is one I fancy. These work on the basis of “Don't just listen to what people say, listen to what they do”. We don't carry out semiotics in-house but we have good links with semioticians who we recommend if we believe that a semiotic study is what the brand or client needs.

Finally, in this section, consider the roles we all play. Typically, researcher as neutral vessel, respondents as uninformed representatives of Joe Public and clients as viewers. In some ways this is a bit passive and a bit limiting.

If you the client are trying to be innovative, for example to come up with new products, then doing things differently might lead to different things. Tell the respondents what you're trying to achieve, so that they can be informed inputs rather than ignorant inputs. It makes them more involved and determined to help.

Don't just sit there watching – interact with the respondents, sit in the same room as them, bounce ideas around with them. It can make your time involved in fieldwork much more enjoyable and rewarding, as well as make you even more determined to give your customers what they deserve.

It is often very productive to allow the researcher to get you and your whole team – consumer insight, marketing, R&D, operations, finance, etc – together for a session prior to the start of the consumer fieldwork. They are semi-moderated sessions, and are a great way to collect all your thoughts, feelings, worries and prejudices. They can stimulate other ideas, they bring different perspectives to bear, they can give clients an emotional lift, and it broadens the researcher's understanding of the project.

NEW INNOVATIONS

Despite all this, one gets a sense from the client community of wanting to have some even sexier, whizzier qual research techniques. These often

seem to involve technology, somehow, and as I've alluded to we find technology can be a distancing approach rather than an intimate approach. I received an e-mail recently about new methods and techniques, which covered webcam interviews, mobile interviews, online bulletin boards, blog tracking, and chat-room participation. There may be a role for some of these – for example if distance or time is an issue – but others suggest technology still in search of a use.

Let me take blogs as an example: these days there is a lot of talk about blogs, and it may well be that these might be an interesting way to address research objectives, either qualitatively or quantitatively.

There are however issues with blogs. For a start, you do not really know the people who are blogging, you might not know what axes they may have to grind. If you pre-recruit, it rather defeats the democratic purpose of blogs. Plus you have to hope that whatever you're researching is actually interesting enough for people to bother blogging about.

And if I dare to include a few numbers...TGI calculates that 753,000 people in the UK have a blog, up three-fold over the last year. Two and a half million people in the UK claim to read a blog at least once a month. Sounds impressive doesn't it? Except it actually means that the average blog is read by 3 people in a month. That's a smaller number than a year ago;

relatively fewer people are now reading blogs than are writing them.

Moreover, anecdotally, actually the number of people starting to write blogs would appear to be starting to drift off. When the initial novelty has worn off, it becomes rather time-consuming. And whilst people might engage with you, they might also take the mick out of you, or nick your ideas, and so forth.

Please don't think I'm a Luddite. I think the internet is wonderful and even set up a company to qualitatively research websites in the 1990s. But I am very keen on the notion of 'fitness for purpose' and that is where sometimes I can rub up against the idea of innovation. Is novelty really a good enough reason to launch a research technique?

I welcome any positive development in qualitative research, which either does better than which we do already or does something which we can't currently do. But I would urge you to look beyond the veneer of the latest hip methodology, to ask yourself: what will this achieve, how does it fit with the rest of the methodology, how will it help answer the objectives?

I think Marcel Proust put it more elegantly..."The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."

Let me now turn to a specific type of research...

SPECIFIC CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

Whilst qual researchers have some skills which seem not to be conducive to creativity, they also have some skills which are very conducive to creativity. They create a relaxed environment, they should be socially adept, and they handle concepts and metaphors well. And my earlier distinction between qual researchers and creative people might also be considered as a simple description of the two halves of the brain; the left hand-side being more logical and the right-hand side being more creative. However, I believe that the very best qualitative researchers, like the very best planners, combine both sides of the brain in a harmonious relationship.

The difficulty for clients is in recognising who these relatively rare people are. It is not enough to be empathetic, or sensitive; great creative development research requires a specific talent which is the appreciation of ideas and creative structure. The job of qualitative researchers at this point is to guide and nurture ideas, be they advertising ideas, packaging ideas or any other type of communications idea. As we know, ideas are fragile and easily crushed.

Charles Brower put it rather well: “A new idea is delicate. It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn; it can be stabbed to death by a joke, or worried to death by a frown on the right person’s brow.”

Researchers who’ve worked in the communications industry, such as in advertising agencies, are often creatively-sensitive (and so they should be). There are of course good creatively-sensitive researchers who have never worked in adland, but my observation of them is that somewhere in their genetic make-up is the creative gene, even if it is for example by having a cousin who is a well-known novelist.

These researchers, whilst creatively-minded, realise that they are not creatives per se. We’re rather like film or theatre critics, constructive critics lets call ourselves, except we are typically reviewing work-in-progress rather than final work. We do not generally suggest specific creative alterations, but rather hope to inspire by suggesting ‘what might be’, and then highlighting things to consider and address on the way to that sometimes distant but always desirable goal. Remember, having vision is everything. As Yogi Berra said, “You’ve got to be very careful if you don’t know where you’re going, because you might not get there.”

So apart from hiring researchers who are creatively-minded, what else should clients be thinking about in order to help with creative development research specifically?

In terms of methodology, groups are for example a very good way of getting people to talk about advertising – the environment fosters creativity and the exchange of ideas, which in turn helps the original creative ideas to flourish. Group members inspire each other to think further and deeper, so helping the researcher to understand the underlying strengths and weaknesses. The permutations are almost endless – for example, groups comprising pairs of friends can be very useful in unblocking ‘posturing’ and in facilitating a more comfortable environment in which people can really say what they feel.

As noted before, an issue which sometimes could bear more consideration is the question of who to talk to. Normal samples consist of users and non-users, or regular/ occasional/ lapsed users. That’s fine as far as it goes, but if you are truly looking for a rich response, what about considering people whose views you don’t want to hear? Such as brand-rejecters, or people who couldn’t care less.

Frank A. Clark said, “We find comfort amongst those who agree with us, but growth amongst those who don’t.” William James was more trenchant:

“A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely re-arranging their prejudices.”

Or if the advertising is meant to be appealing to, say, early adopters, then let’s make sure we talk to such people. We have used an approach whereby we recruit people by asking them if they are more likely to be asked for advice than to ask others for advice, on the grounds that if others look to you for advice, you are likely to be ahead of the game...on the steep part of the curve.

For creative development work, it’s also reasonable to distinguish between the creative target (typically, younger and/ or more ad-literate) and the brand target. As ever, the questions should come out of the brief; who really is the target for the communications work? Remember that the brand target, which is more likely to be loyalists and/ or older people, in other words folks with relatively entrenched opinions, are likely to be of less help in taking an idea forward.

One of the most productive uses of qual research in terms of communications development is exploring ideas in a number of media. Not just TV, not even just print and radio, but also as they might be manifested on the web, through the line, in-store and direct mail. The more expressions we have of an idea, the more able we are to understand where

the idea is strong and the more chances we have of finding the nuggets which can unlock an idea's potential.

Stimulus material. It's frankly amazing how little qualitative researchers are involved in the production of stimulus material. We spend a lot of our lives dealing with it, we know what works and what might be difficult to research, yet clients very rarely ask us how we think ideas can best be expressed in stimulus form. Were you to do this, not only would you most probably end up with more effective stimulus material, but you would also ensure that the researcher had a greater understanding of the ideas. Very often a narrative CD and key frames are appropriate, but sometimes they are not. We recently had occasion to bring an actor into the groups, to perform the scripts, as much of the creative work depended on tone and performance.

The key is to find whatever seems to be the best and simplest expression of the idea. In its early stage creative research, the stimulus might look quite rough. And perhaps the researcher shouldn't show one script after another, in strict rotation; maybe they should show two at a time, or perhaps immerse respondents in the entire campaign at once...

It's important that there is flexibility in all areas: for example, as appropriate, using scripts as stimulus material rather than something

which might literally be shot; evolving stimulus as a project progresses; having informal chats along the way.

There's a mini-theme running through here. It is, involve your researchers as part of the overall team, and as early as possible. Ordinarily we are outsiders, called in on an ad hoc basis as and when necessary. We do the research, present our findings, and very often hear nothing from the clients for ages. I realise that you are all very busy, but that approach is probably not getting the most out of your researchers. We are, or should be, as ambitious for your brand as you are. I feel very proud of my contribution to the growth of Domestos globally over the past few years and know that I have been an important member of the team. My pride doesn't detract from my professionalism, and if anything it makes me even more determined to help grow the brand. You trust your researchers, otherwise you wouldn't be employing them in the first place. So what's the risk?

John Hegarty, the H in the much-lauded ad agency BBH, once said that he liked to use qual research to minimise risk. Whenever we do something a little different, we take a risk. I took a risk having no slides today. My suggestion to you, as people whose jobs involve various kinds of risks and whose brands do new and different things, is that you shouldn't need to take a risk with the qualitative research. Relatively so-called conventional qualitative research has plenty to offer which will lead to valuable findings;

specifically, in the search for leading-edge creativity, qualitative research, if conducted well, can indeed minimise risk and maximise opportunity.

Thank you. Now for Reggie Perrin...