

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 62 July 2010

Why Do Qualitative Research

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Readers of this Newsletter will know that I am a consistent advocate of the need to do qualitative research if you want to make your campaigns work. There are numerous examples in previous Newsletters and a simple summary at http://www.campaignstrategy.org/advanced_1.html. In essence qualitative research gets at what people really think and how they might really react, whereas quantitative tells you how many people responded to a question you posed to them.

In this *Newsletter* I have pulled together a few examples of why. In other words, things we wouldn't have known without research - but which were important for getting communications right. Not all of these are from campaigning but the principles apply.

I often work with people in NGOs in particular, who find it hard to convince managers or colleagues of the need to do research. Some mistrust 'consultants' or think they can cut corners on communications. I usually suggest asking them "*what is it worth to get it right?*" If it doesn't matter if your communications fail, then why are you doing them? If you are spending £50,000 or £5,000 on delivering your communication, then it's worth spending at least ten to twenty percent of that on research, otherwise you are simply gambling the whole lot. That's a form of research in itself but it's the most expensive and risky type - it's called blind guesswork.

Just Shout Louder

Others are resistant to doing research because to be honest, they don't want to amend what they'd like to say, ask or offer. This is often the *Longer, Louder, Harder* school of campaigning or advocacy. The old joke about the Englishman abroad applies: if foreigners don't understand you in English, just talk more loudly. These colleagues often see research as a waste of money and a threat because it may 'change the campaign'. In values terms these are often the *Concerned Ethicals*, as their drive for ethical clarity ('purity of message') makes them want to get someone to take an action 'for the right reason' (ie their reason). If this is your commitment then stop here - there is no point in doing research unless it's purely to get more people exactly like those you already have onside, to support you. And you may of course already have exhausted that seam.

If you want to reach and engage different audiences then you will certainly need to do different things. The more different the audiences are, the more obvious this is. The pitfall is that they may look very similar to you but actually think quite differently. As thoughts are not written on their foreheads, you can't rely on what people say to direct questions because: what they say to a direct question is not necessarily the truth, may be more-or-less than the truth; or may be more about the relationship they want or don't want with the questioner; or may be driven by their unconscious need to define or maintain self-identity; or affected by mental communications filters, framing, values or heuristics; or by their sense of agency or lack of it; or because their current actions are inconsistent with a possible 'opinion', and because people guess and rely on heuristics when they can't give an analytical answer (eg for lack of knowledge). That may be useful as a way to demonstrate 'opinion' but it doesn't necessarily reveal what might translate into action (see <http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/usingvaluemodes.pdf>).

So whether it's through depth interviews by a trained facilitator or in focus groups, constructor groups or a host of other techniques all designed to get around such problems and uncover perceptions people probably aren't even really aware of, qualitative research is the best insight into what people *really* think and why, and should be used to assess the state of perceptions in potential audiences, and formatively, in creating, designing and refining specific campaign asks and offers.

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One reason why I advocate the use of values analysis often featured in these Newsletters (eg as done by CDSM, Y&R, Environics, Sociovision and Sinus), is that the process of mapping values segments people according to a host of cross-correlated unconscious drivers, attitudes and beliefs. This means that if you start with these groups rather than say groups defined by age, sex, lifestyle, lifestage, ethnicity, geography or wealth, you already have groups who are likely to be more similar than dissimilar (maybe by one or two orders of magnitude) in perceptions of a campaign concept.

Students at a Picnic

This is not to say that qualitative research is foolproof. It has to be done well, by experienced moderators who understand psychology, and who are realistic in their interpretation. You don't want to spend money on something which throws your brief back at you, or to be told something that the researchers think you want to hear. My colleague John Scott who runs KSBR (www.ksbr.co.uk) told me this cautionary tale :

Research on something novel (in this case a food product but it could be a campaign idea) can easily lead to groups trying to 'help' the moderator, especially if you show them three or four options and then work on the 'best' one. People can develop commitment to their choice and invest hope in it.

In the case of food, John calls this the 'students at a picnic' problem: They choose the 'best' food option. When asked when people might eat it (Breakfast? Lunch? Supper?), after discussion which makes them think more deeply, they conclude that 'no, nobody would eat it for those meals'. But they still feel committed to it so they rack their brains and decide that maybe it might get eaten 'at a picnic'. We then discuss with them who might eat it. When it comes to it, they can't imagine themselves eating it. Or their friends. Certainly not their spouses or children, as they know what they like. This is unusual and new stuff. Only someone more experimental would eat it. "I know" says one - "students !". Students do strange new things so it would work for them. Everyone goes home happy that they've defined where it might get eaten and who might buy it.

The only problem is that students don't generally do picnics. The marketing solution is not really a solution at all and anyone who went out and made and marketed a product on this basis would most likely have a flop. So before commissioning qualitative research you need to do some formative work with your researcher to define a sensible well targeted project informed by what you and they already know, and be sure that your researchers are capable and motivated to stay with you and make the project work. Enough of that. Here are some examples things we wouldn't have known without research - but which were important for getting communications right.

Qualitative Examples

Irish Sea : *"The Irish sea is the most radioactively polluted sea in the world"* was a favourite line of Greenpeace campaigners in the UK. Until someone did some qualitative research and found that a lot of people thought *"oh well, at least it's not near us"*. They didn't know where the Irish Sea was - though Greenpeace campaigners assumed anyone would know that.

Sirens and Yellow Signs: Research into 'fear of crime' for the police showed that hearing sirens and seeing yellow incident boards on pavements increased fear of crime as it signalled prevalence, rather than giving reassurance ("we are on the case") as was intended.

Abandoned Cars: Research in Brighton showed that by reducing the size of orange "Police Aware" stickers placed on the windows of abandoned cars, reduced fear of crime locally.

Fish fingers: Ask men why they buy fish fingers and they will tend to cite attributes like convenience, nutrition, crumbly breadcrumb exterior etc but the 'real' reason is that buying fish fingers and eating with their children, gives them permission to eat kids food again.

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Broadband: Phone companies talk about Broadband a great deal among themselves because it fascinates them; they see it as the future etc. Most people however feel that their contract is tailored to their phone – not Broadband usage - and that ‘Broadband’ is less ‘tailored to me’. In other words what interests the user is very different from what interests the supplier. (This applies to campaigns in *spades!*)

Ozone Hole Pepperpot: Research for Greenpeace found people in the UK were resistant to the idea (true) that there was significant depletion of the ozone layer over Britain, as the “hole” was associated with images of Antarctica. But the idea that it was perforated like a pepperpot (again fairly close to reality) was believable.

Ozone and Holidays: Brits were reluctant to criticise ICI (producer of ozone depleting chemicals) and little that Greenpeace campaigners wanted to say about ICI would convince them otherwise (it was seen as a rare ‘British Success’). But hearing that the consequent thinning of the ozone layer might rob them of their two weeks enjoyable sunbathing holiday (too dangerous) suddenly converted them into rabid ICI critics (especially younger women).

Three takes on Undersea Landscapes: Qualitative research for Natural England showed that Prospectors, Pioneers and Settlers had radically different ideas of what might lie below the sea, whether it was worth saving and whether or not they wanted to experience it, and if so how. None of the groups had any real knowledge - responses were all based on values. Some of the things that conservation groups had been saying also alienated all three groups. Second round research identified one way to reach all three segments (dramatic topography), whereas beauty and intrigue only worked for Pioneers and ‘communities’ only worked for Settlers and Pioneers. (See previous *Campaign Strategy Newsletter 43* [1])

Atomic Bombs: Research for a nuclear weapons group showed that younger people saw nuclear weapons as an issue of the past, in part because the images of nuclear explosions were in black and white.

Engaging Younger People in Nuclear Issues: When researchers got young Transcenders (Pioneers) to generate ideas that they thought might motivate other young people (at a music festival) to engage with the nuclear weapons issue, they came up with 10 they thought would work, but when these were tested on Now People (Prospectors), only one ‘worked’. (As most campaigners are Pioneers this often applies to ‘good campaign ideas’ which are good for the ‘base’ only).

Astronomers like Birders (not): Both UK astronomy and UK bird study are notable for attracting enthusiastic older male amateurs who share scientific findings with professionals, and in many ways look similar. However, values research for the BTO showed a strong bias of the birders to being inner directed and the astronomers to being outer directed (*Golden Dreamer Values Mode*) - they were mainly ‘trophy hunting’, competing for the best discoveries and using the biggest telescopes.

Wildflower Growing and Gardeners: When a new plant conservation charity was being set up (Plantlife), the founders assumed that plant-loving gardeners were a natural constituency to interest in rescuing rare wild plants and growing them in their gardens. Research found that most gardeners saw nature as something to be kept outside, beyond the garden fence, and the garden was all about achieving control over nature.

Getting Out in Nature: A government agency, which wanted to engage new audiences in nature, identified people who exercise in green spaces as an easy-to-reach target to extol the virtues of natural open spaces. However, research showed that the people scoring high on ‘Active Health’ and most committed to outdoor exercise were diametrically opposed to the idea “we should all care for nature” (because their desire to exercise was driven by the need for showing visible ability and looking good, and they saw “care for nature” as in competition with furthering their own interests eg for material wealth). This shows that you can’t read motivation from behaviour.

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Lawbreakers: Researchers talked to people in business that had at some point broken laws such as on employment. Some felt that they'd tried on behalf of their employees to get citizenship etc and failed to do so but only for reasons to do with bureaucracy. They therefore felt justified in taking matters into their own hands. Others felt that the law was wrong (and therefore breakable), others that it wasn't possible to be competitive employing official UK citizen workers so that they had to break the law to compete, and that competing was important to the country. Similarly, operators of non-roadworthy vehicles often claimed that foreign operators 'got away with it so we should too'. When the researchers then ran workshops with government officials on the same subject and asked them to list times (using sealed envelopes) they'd broken laws or rules and then to write reasons why, they found the excuses, arguments and rationalisations were the same as the 'law breaking' respondents. (So 'lawbreakers' did not think differently - they had just got caught).

Skin and Heroin: One of the side effects of taking heroin is often poor skin, which had been dismissed as a trivial issue by advocates of drug abstinence (in favour of risk of death etc). Research amongst contemplators (users of other illegal drugs) showed they discounted the risk of serious consequences as improbable (unlikely to apply to them) whereas skin damage was seen as high probability and therefore applied to them, so it was to be avoided (especially younger women).

Time to talk about smoking: Smoking cessation campaigners had been trying to reach people about to visit pubs or clubs where smoking was allowed, with messages about health effects but research showed this was rejected, ignored or avoided because it threatened to interfere with an activity already underway (committed to go out and have a good time). It was much more effective if delivered the next morning, once smokers regretted their night out hangover.

Too many arguments: Participants in focus groups are often seen to start off agreeing with a proposition for one reason but if they then hear a lot more arguments in favour of it, which they disagree with it, they may end up changing their mind to rejection.

Biodiversity: Research in England found 32% of north east England respondents claimed to have definitely heard of biodiversity, which is similar to many other polls. However when asked an open question, only 9% got a 'correct' meaning unprompted. Similarly, when given four possible meanings of biodiversity and asked which was correct [these were 'waste that breaks down naturally', 'the variety of living things', 'rubbish that can be burnt for fuel' and, 'the use of trees to off-set carbon emissions'] the most popular option was wrong. That was "waste that breaks down naturally" at 33% (37% amongst women). These people were guessing, using cues like "bio" and "d-something". "Biodegradable" is an easy gut option, and the most likely source of reference is probably adverts for "biodegradable" products such as washing up liquid. 31% 'got the right answer' in the four way test but that is a result similar to simple guesswork. A purely random result would give 1 in 4 chance of selecting each option, or 25%. In reality only 9% knew it. (See *Campaign Strategy Newsletter 48* [2])

Depth from group discussions: A product to protect you against loss of business data was tested with quantitative polling questions and in 'focus groups'. This showed that the feeling of 'how disastrous it would be' if data was lost only really came home when people discussed it in a group. It was not an established thought and therefore didn't emerge from quantitative polling at all but was drawn out through the 'conversation' of a group.

What we think of you: A major credit card company was having trouble with its incentives scheme (points, rewards) and repeated research projects into what their customers thought of them and the product shed no light. This changed when the research was reoriented to ask about what customers felt *the company* thought of *them*. This showed that the customers felt they were being judged as not good enough - that was how they interpreted the messages about gaining points. The company then changed the way the product was described and communicated. (This is a good example of how researchers are likely to come up with ideas that a client will not - in this case, a different way to look at the problem).

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Fitting communications to engagement: By the way it talked about knowledge of its subject and ways to take part in its work, an NGO we worked with gave the distinct impression that people might not be good enough to join. It then also treated those who thought they had joined (because they paid for activities) as prospects to be recruited as members.

Creative development research: Studies done across Europe for a brand that wanted to show its workers in advertisements produced great test results in Germany (with an active engineering culture) and in France (where workers were popular) but was much less meaningful in UK (where the workforce signified the past).

'Educational' materials: Research for a conservation group which wanted to produce materials to engage children on visiting nature reserves found that the formats favoured by the client (problem-solution information rich), and favoured by parents (guide to facilities) and by grandparents (materials that looked like school educational aids) were not popular with kids, the ostensible target audience. They most favoured things that were 'nice to have' as possessions - which was more to do with what it was like as an object rather than the content.

Internet tv: Several offers have been created for the UK market for tv delivered over the internet. Some have included content way beyond what is currently available on satellite or cable tv (the range of movies, programmes, and integration with online services such as YouTube), with the scope to rent or buy films and replay and stop/start old tv programmes as well as watching live ones, all on a large tv screen instead of a small laptop or PC. The media companies producing these 'bundles' and platforms have focussed on enhancing the content and functionality of the interface. So far none have succeeded and qualitative research with prospective customers has shown that it is largely the internet which is the problem. Whereas people are used to a limited functionality with their tv, it is highly reliable. They are also used to a more intermittent service on the internet (and eg lost emails, video stopping and starting) but they are not used to intermittent service for tv.

New handheld: A much trailed new media product combining the scope to read e-books, watch films, make phone calls, surf the web and do emails was tested as a dummy with prospective customers. Initially they were all entranced with its design and functionality and wanted one as a thing. But the more they thought about how they might use it, the less they could see what they'd need it for. It was too big to put in a pocket and therefore could not replace the phone. It had no G3 capacity and so internet connection was limited. Many didn't want other people to be able to read their emails or see what films they were watching in a public space. As a result it would become another gadget rather than a product which replaced others. They also feared that someone might steal it

My Book is Being Updated

A new extended and updated edition of How to Win Campaigns is being published - hopefully later this year. Please put in some advance orders at

<http://www.earthscan.co.uk/?tabid=102418>

[1] http://campaignstrategy.org/newsletters/campaignstrategy_newsletter_43.pdf

[2] http://campaignstrategy.org/newsletters/campaignstrategy_newsletter_48.pdf

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