How the book is constructed

him/her of your offer; Handover is the moment at which the customer takes ownership of your product or service.

Each letter in the acronym is dealt with in a separate Part; within each Part is an explanation of the concept, followed typically by Sections on how to achieve or develop this concept, the tools available for the purpose, and some real-life examples of how (or how not) to do it. There is some rather tedious repetition of examples, but on the whole they are welcome. The tone and style of the text is low-key and fairly simplistic; it's not intellectually demanding, and the successive sections are for the most part short and snappy enough to avoid boredom. Seasoned marketers, who have now got beyond the 4Ps stage (and so long as they aren't still teaching it, like the Chartered Institute of Marketing) won't (or shouldn't) learn a great deal from this book, but it should make a not too demanding, sometimes thought-provoking and reasonably comprehensive introduction to marketing for newcomers, or aspirants, to the discipline. It does cover a lot of ground in a mere 250 pages, and contains useful lists of further reading.

A good read for newcomers

Occasionally, the author does get it wrong. And she does exaggerate: you can't know *everything* about your customers (or about *a* customer — the distinction is not always made clearly enough) — nor should you want to. Nor, in distinguishing between 'push' marketing (vendor initiated) and 'pull' marketing (customer initiated) and noting, correctly, that the balance is swinging from the former to the latter, should she dismiss the former as old hat and worthless; not all Emperors are naked, or not all the time. And her attempt, in Part 9, to redefine marketing is a minor disaster.

Shortcomings**Good in parts**

All in all, this is a useful book for this generation. The ground that it covers, and the advice that it gives should assure it of a place on many marketing bookshelves. It would have been just as useful and somewhat easier to read if it had not been lumbered with, and constructed around, another pointless acronym — but we should, like the apocryphal curate, be grateful for the good parts, and not hold our noses too visibly over the rest.

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Consumerology

Philip Graves

Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London, 2010; 216pp;
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A declaration of interest

Let me start with a declaration of interest. I've been in market research for a long time — since 1971. Not just as a client-side practitioner,

commissioning projects covering a wide variety of products and services. I've also been heavily involved in the sector's professional bodies, including policing standards. I'm the current Editor of the only journal in the world devoted to market research, and as I type this review I'm surrounded by market research textbooks as sources of knowledge and inspiration for a module I'm teaching early next year at a leading UK university. So I guess you would be thinking that I'm a firm believer in the value of market research as an aid to understanding consumer behaviour and a tool to help managers make better informed decisions. However, this doesn't mean I don't have a healthy scepticism about the contribution market research methodologies make in helping us unravel the minds of consumers. I can safely say that some projects I've commissioned, using traditional methodologies or leading-edge approaches, have led to very profound, and positive, consequences for both the organization and its customers. But to be brutally honest, some failed to deliver — particularly those attempting to forecast future behaviour, such as the likely demand for some new products, especially those more removed from current consumer experiences. My initial blind faith has been tempered by a growing awareness of why market research can sometimes lead us down blind alleys. First, there's the increasing evidence from neuroscience that the subconscious subtly, and powerfully, influences our behaviour leading to rationalized thinking at the conscious level — emphasizing that we still really know very little about how humans make decisions or form opinions. Many surveys expect respondents to unravel purchasing decisions and brand choices that were not given any real conscious thought at the time. I've already read, and reviewed, 'Blink', in which Malcolm Gladwell touches on the challenges faced by market researchers in deciphering human decision making and why 'don't know' is in many cases the only acceptable answer. Secondly, there's the artificiality of the market research process, usually conducted outside the context of the decision-making process, or experience being researched. Thirdly, simply asking questions leads respondents down a particular path, however objective the researcher tries to be — the agenda is already set, framing the responses. These are all issues that most market research professionals acknowledge and try to account for in their work.

The evolution of market research models

The modern market research industry started to evolve in the 1930s. The questionnaire-based methods, developed by the likes of George Gallop, became the mainstream approach, but an anthropologist and a journalist developed an alternative, ethnography-based methodology, observing behaviour and listening to conversations, as they felt that the questionnaire approach produced superficial data. The company they formed, Mass Observation, provided the British government with vital information on how the population were reacting to the Second World War, especially during the Blitz, and while their work continued to provide valuable insights right through the austerity years of the 1950s, their methods then fell out of fashion.

Market research simply a distraction?

And that at long last gets me neatly to Graves' new book, as the thrust of the author's thesis relates straight back to the view that led Tom Harrison and Charles Madge to form Mass Observation over 70 years ago — asking people questions is not necessarily an effective way to try and understand human motivations, behaviour, attitudes and opinions. But, surprisingly, Graves makes no mention of Mass Observation in the copious references that provide the evidence to support his argument: *'The goals of market research are laudable: the better an organisation understands its customers, the more likely it is that it will make good decisions and avoid bad ones. It's just that the approach has been misguided'*. In other words, the conceptual goal of market research is great; pity about the execution. In addition, when judging the value added by market research, Graves not only benefits from the improved understanding we now have about human behaviour, but he can also draw on the evidence compiled over the intervening years demonstrating the success, or otherwise, of market research — coming down very firmly on the 'otherwise' perspective: *'In the past 50 years market research has really become an unhelpful distraction to business'*. Going even further, Graves aligns market research with astrology, *'elements of dependable science are blended with wishful thinking to create an alluring cocktail of reality and desirable fantasy'*. It's about a misplaced faith — before making a decision, let's go and consult the oracle, market research. He can be even more forthright about the way research is conducted: *'...factors that expose focus groups as perhaps the single most misguided tool in the researcher's armory (sic)'*. Here Graves points out the artificiality of the modern viewing centre experience and the likely impact on participants. He devotes a chapter to why he believes focus groups provide a very misleading view of people's attitudes and opinions — the impact of the crowd. However, here he neatly ignores the body of knowledge on qualitative research methodologies and the deep insights into human behaviour and motivations these methods have provided. A further chapter explores in detail the reasons why the latest evidence from science undermines any claims that market research provides accurate data for forecasting future behaviour. And of course, Graves is right — forecasting the future is full of pitfalls, and market research can never do more than provide guidance to aid decision making. Project design needs to cover all key variables and likely influences, but in the end futurology remains a gamble.

An unbalanced perspective

Is Graves exaggerating to make a point? I suspect he is not. The foundations of his career were built as a market research manager and consultant. Does he provide a balanced view? While the usual suspects are cited to demonstrate the unreliability of market research (eg the 'new' Coke launch fiasco, Apple's claim never to commission market research, the failure of the 'Dome' to attract the forecasted number of visitors), there are no mentions of success. In fact this is lightly dismissed, *'...many of the initiatives that the research process has informed have gone on to be successful, although I suspect often not*

for the reasons research thought they were', thus neatly ignoring the mass of published case studies providing evidence that market research can, and does, deliver real benefit. In a book littered with references to academic journals, this comment really stands out as Graves produces not a shred of evidence in support, highlighting the difference between the standards required for an academic paper — with credible sources of evidence quoted to support such contentious statements — and a book that is not peer reviewed. This illustrates the main flaw in Graves' argument: there is no attempt to provide a balanced case for and against market research.

Drawing on Gladwell's work and neuroscience, Graves argues that unless we can connect with the unconscious mind, then relying on the conscious to understand behaviour, as we do in most market research, leads to unreliable conclusions: *'... we often don't know what really caused us to behave in the way we did, although our misguided confidence in post-rationalising makes false accounts in research seem compelling'* — or simply taking comfort from the familiar.

So, if Graves believes that the concept of market research is essentially valid, but takes issue with the way it's executed, does he provide a solution? Here, I should point out that Graves' thesis is set primarily within the context of retailing, but the lessons have a wider application. In outlining a more effective way to understand consumer behaviour, Graves takes us through the benefits of conducting, and observing, live tests as a much more effective way to decode behaviour — possibly backed up with a covert interview to disguise the real issue of interest. Much of the book focuses on the factors that influence decisions that can be very difficult to cover in a typical survey, or group discussion. In particular, Graves argues, research is usually conducted remote in time and place from the context of the research topic, such as a product purchase situation or customer experience, increasingly with respondents sitting at home in front of a computer screen. For example, Graves advocates observing service interactions rather than undertaking post-experience customer satisfaction research — but this is not always a viable option (eg researching attitudes to the end-to-end service delivered by the Automobile Association breakdown service). Subsequent recall is subject to rationalization, while future behaviour is influenced by too many unknowns and the pull exerted by the familiar. Graves also advocates listening to add to observing — fine in principle, but as Roy Langmaid argued at a conference last year, we rarely listen objectively.

Graves devotes a whole chapter to 'Questioning questions', and the 13 points made here contain a lot of validity. I know that many market researchers believe that poor questionnaire design is an increasing problem — good questionnaires should create a dialogue rather than seem an interrogation — but Graves takes a step back to argue how the questioning process itself influences how people respond, and despite attempts to ensure objectivity, this is not always how the process works in practice. The subsequent chapter provides his blueprint for when questioning can provide an effective method — *'It is essential to start*

Getting closer to consumer decision making

The problem with questionnaires

with the principle that consumers can't tell you what they think, not that they will' — for example, by exploring context and related past behaviour; not inviting post rationalization; interviewing at the time of the experience; and trying to recreate in people's minds how they felt on the occasion of interest.

The AFFECT framework

The final chapter contains his five-point recipe to help those considering commissioning market research judge the likely effectiveness of a project — the AFFECT checklist:

- Analysis of behavioural data — believe more in data about what people do, or have done (eg sales or from observation), and have little confidence in opinions or claims about likely behaviour.
- Frame of mind — ensure that research is anchored in actual behaviour.
- Environment — Is the research conducted in context? Not just in terms of the experience environment, but taking into account all other relevant factors about the product, competitive offers, etc.
- Covert study — not heightening awareness by focusing on the topic too closely.
- Timeframe — not turning a decision made in a few seconds, probably made by the unconscious mind, into a 90-minute interview that only engages the conscious mind.

Five examples are provided to demonstrate how this framework can be used in different scenarios. I can't really disagree with this approach — it provides a useful commonsense basis for judging the likely effectiveness of research projects, quantitative or qualitative, and also helps manage expectations in terms of how the results might be applied. But is this what clients always think they need?

Clients are not blameless

In summary, I think Graves makes some important observations about the market research process and does it in an engaging and persuasive way. However, I think in doing so, he has ignored three key points. First, that despite their deficiencies, 'traditional' market research methodologies offer the only practical way to explore human behaviour in many situations. Secondly, professional market researchers do think about the points raised in this book when designing research projects. But there are also many bad examples out there of poorly designed projects — and clients must take their share of the blame for allowing this to happen, for example, by not being prepared to pay what it costs to undertake 'fit for purpose' research, or reaching for the 'comfort blanket' before making a decision. Thirdly, there are many success stories, where market research can rightly claim to have made a significant impact in the commercial and public sectors. Finally, researchers are well aware of the new evidence from neuroscience, behavioural economics, ethnography, etc and are applying the findings in their work. And, while ethnography-based methods are enjoying a new lease of life, aided by technology, researchers claim that often clients are unwilling to accept these methods, preferring the 'tried and tested' approaches they are used to. In addition, a new wave of

Debating the future direction of market research

‘observation’-based research is emerging through social networks, blogs and community groups accessing and analysing the huge wealth of data created in the world of web 2.0 technologies.

A testimonial from Alan Giles (Saïd Business School) on the cover recommends that it should be essential reading for clients. In the main, I agree with this, but probably not for the reason that the author has in mind. I think that it might encourage clients to think through what they can expect from the research they have in mind — is it likely to be fit for purpose? — and become more responsible commissioners of research by thinking more about what is possible, rather than having blind faith in the value of conducting a survey. I also think that students will find this an interesting counter to market research textbooks, and will also find the extensive references to other published sources very useful. However, Giles also says Graves’ book should be *‘carefully hidden from anyone whose livelihood depends on market research’*. I would totally disagree with this latter recommendation — in fact I think it is essential reading for researchers as it provides a valuable reality check on what can, and cannot, be achieved from standard methodologies. In fact the book has already created quite a stir within the market research sector. Researchers may disagree with some of what Graves has to say, but the underlying premise needs to be seriously debated more widely, particularly in an era where so much quantitative research has moved online and focus groups have become a production process. It is not just about poor questionnaire design; it’s about the whole research process, what it’s become and where it should go in future. As such, Graves makes an interesting and useful, if somewhat one-sided, contribution to this debate.

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Creative B2B branding (no, really): Building a creative brand in a business world

Scot McKee

Goodfellow Publishers Limited, 2010; Hardback; £29.99; 225pp;
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If you’re looking for another hardback marketing book that will sit neatly together with the others on your shelf, you’ll be happy to know that this one won’t stick out, although with a glossy printed cover and no outer sleeve it feels cheaper than its £29.99 price (unfortunately Amazon only discounts this one by £1.50). The text inside is easy to