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Is it possible to conduct market research without asking direct questions?

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Research in a world without questions

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Abstract

The paper explores the extent to which researchers can uncover insight and meet client expectations without asking direct questions. It centres on observation, experimentation and behavioural change, and critically explores a number of methods, including mobile ethnography, social media monitoring, behavioural economics and mass observation. The paper first discusses the theoretical need for indirect research, then explores its role in understanding deep consumer context, before describing how to observe consumer behaviour and create actionable hypotheses for behavioural change. The paper is not based on a single project, but includes brief case studies of work conducted in these and other fields. This is an edited version of the paper, which received the ESOMAR Excellence Award for Best Paper at the 2013 ESOMAR Congress. It was eligible for this award having won the 2012 Fernanda Monti Award for Best Paper Overall at ESOMAR Congress 2012.

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Introduction

The idea of conducting market research without asking direct questions may seem fanciful, but there are excellent reasons to take it seriously. This paper will argue that 'research without questions' is not only possible, it is often essential — it is the best way to get at what people actually do, not just what they say they do. This paper focuses on behavioural economics, observational and ethnographic research, and innovative qualitative techniques to show the extraordinary possibilities of a 'world without questions'.

In a research environment characterized by ever-dwindling response rates and concerns over panel quality, there are clear pragmatic reasons to move away from direct questioning and task-setting. By making this move, you also arrive at research that reflects people's real decisions and behaviour far better than direct questions. The paper is a guide and clarion call for a kind of research based on immersion, observation and experiment.

The case for research without questions

Before explaining how to reduce our reliance on direct research, it is worth asking why marketers need to. In addition to the pragmatic case — failing

Systems of thinking

response rates and easier access to automated data — there is also a compelling theoretical case, based on how our brains and decisions work.

According to the Nobel-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, the human mind uses two systems of thinking — System 1 and System 2 — to make its judgements. He explains the systems and explores their implications in his essential book, *‘Thinking, Fast and Slow’*.¹

System 1-led decisions are fast, easy to make, rooted in experience, and often implicit or subconscious. System 2-led decisions are more considered, take more cognitive effort to make and we are more conscious of making them. System 2 is more deliberate, but not always more correct. According to Kahneman, it mostly backs up judgements made quickly and easily by System 1. Most of our decisions are led by System 1, and System 2 can then provide convincing justification for the said decisions, if called upon to do so. As Rory Sutherland, executive creative director and vice chairman, OgilvyOne London and vice chairman, Ogilvy & Mather UK, puts it, ‘System 1 is the Oval Office. System 2 is the Press Office’.

Market research and System 2

Direct response research has a bias towards System 2. It puts respondents into a situation where they are encouraged to think through answers and asked to recall past behaviour, express preferences between artificial choices or give number values to dry, formally written attributes. By doing this, research hopes to accurately capture behaviour, preferences and motivations. But it often does not. One example is a test on Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) packaging carried out by BrainJuicer to explore how the dual systems of thinking affected choices in a real-world context.

Testing visual versus rational appeal

BrainJuicer experiment 1: Packaging with System 1 appeal

We conducted this experiment for a client concerned that the test performance of their packaging did not reflect on-shelf realities. We hypothesized that in test conditions System 2-led decisions took precedence, but that in a store environment faster System 1-led decisions would prevail. We tested two packs: one (Brand B) had a smaller picture and gave more pack space to a set of information, including rational benefits of the product; the other pack (Brand A) was more visually appealing and less cluttered but contained much less information. Our hypothesis was that the visually appealing pack would have more intuitive, ‘System 1’ appeal.

To explore this, we tested the packs in two cells (see Figure 1). The first cell was allowed to take as long as it liked over answering, and the second had a time limit. This was designed to get to the initial System 1 judgement — not giving System 2 time to override it. Sure enough, we found that respondents under time-pressured conditions preferred the visually appealing pack over the information-rich pack. What is more, this matched the experiences of the client and better reflected sales reality.

Decisions taken in real-life contexts can be very different from decisions recalled or simulated in a research environment. The implication is that we need research that can better understand System 1 decision making — more observational and experimental work that minimizes direct response.

Offline system 1 pack test

Figure 1: Offline pack test results

Research drawing on psychology

The importance of experiment

‘Research without questions’ focuses on what people do, not what they say they do. It particularly focuses on the moments and environments in which choices are made and what triggers these choices, often subconsciously. Research increasingly draws inspiration from a literature of psychological and social experiments that have entered the popular mind, thanks to writers such as Malcolm Gladwell² or Dan Ariely.³ These experiments generally work to reveal the hidden triggers behind people’s decisions, for instance:

- Twice as many train passengers buy pretzels when they see people eating pretzels as they board.⁴
- Israeli judges are more likely to grant parole decisions just after they have had a break for a meal.⁵
- Playing German music in a wine shop makes German wine outsell French by two to one: playing French music makes French wine outsell German by five to one.⁶

Experimenting with decision-making context

All of these examples involve interventions that change the context of the decisions. Moreover, in no case are the decision makers likely, or even able, to admit the influence of those interventions. To understand people’s decisions, it is necessary to both explore and experiment with the decision-making context, rather than assuming direct questioning can get you there.

The problem is that the scientific literature on behaviour change involves multiple experiments stretching back decades. The typical insight manager has weeks to understand and solve their problems. Therefore, it is only worth experimenting on factors that are actually within a brand owner’s power to change.

If marketers are to explore the role of context, they desperately need a framework within which to operate — to help them understand quickly which kind of context to change and to build hypotheses around what might happen. They need a structure for understanding the context of people's decisions: both the immediate context (which they are often able to influence) and the deeper, background context (which they should understand, rather than hope to change).

Using an insight framework

Allstate insurance case study 1: Insights on mayhem

Allstate uses a simple ABC model for insights — attitude, behaviour and context. Consumers behave the way they do because of a specific attitude in a specified context. If you change the context, you can change the behaviour. Allstate used this consumer insight framework to help develop the successful 'Mayhem' campaign, in which a 'roguish character' personifies the bad things that can happen to your car or home anywhere or anytime. Will your lower cost insurance firm pay for the damages? The advert puts the focus on the near context — how you feel when the unthinkable actually happens — as a way of appealing emotionally, as well as simply competing on price. 'Mayhem' has allowed Allstate to engage with a much broader group than its traditional target and has even generated substantial 'talk value' for the brand, as seen by the more than a million fans the campaign has gained on Facebook.

How deep to go into the customer's world?

Deeper context

Understanding deeper context begins with desk research, surveying industry data sources and market conditions, and understanding the basic information to be gained from existing customer databases and survey data. In terms of conducting observational and experimental research, the idea is to cover off anything that might shape or limit people's choices — demographics, income statistics, the regulatory environment and so on. This clarifies the existing situation and the gaps you need to fill. However, it does not always provide much explanatory or emotional richness. How do you go deeper into your customers' world?

The last 20 years have seen increasing interest from researchers in structural approaches: broad theoretical lenses for understanding people and behaviour. Semiotics, for example, explains consumer behaviour through the lens of signs in culture and the meaning created by their interaction. Evolutionary psychology, meanwhile, explains behaviour by looking at how it might have adapted to maximize reproductive fitness and survival.

Understanding social norms

Full discussion of these disciplines lies outside the scope of this paper. We mention them because they concern themselves with the deep background context of people's behaviour, and those disciplines analyse behaviour via applying their theories to observation, rather than through direct questioning. Semioticians tend to work through the analysis of cultural artefacts; evolutionary psychologists look for the evolutionary imperatives behind observed behaviour. Each might prove useful for filling

out the context of a brand's customers, particularly the social and cultural norms they operate under.

However, understanding cultural norms or evolutionary drives can create an abstract picture of the consumer world: it does not 'bring the consumer to life' — shorthand for acquiring the gut, emotional understanding of what your customers typically do and why.

Bringing customers to life

Giving decision makers a vivid, insightful image of customers is among research's most important roles. This vital job has often been done by segmentation. Not all segmentations try to 'bring customers to life' — some segment the customer base by transactional data (value, frequency etc). However, segmentations that use direct research tend to involve aggregating data and then anthropomorphizing it, turning it into a set of typical customers or potentials.

Because they are intended to create a broad impression, these segments often lead to stereotypical 'pen portraits', which say almost nothing about consumers' feelings or everyday experiences. If market research is the voice of the customer, segmentations are autotune.

How else can research bring the customer to life? In the world of direct questioning, Market Research Online Communities (MROCs) have become a mainstream solution. However, while MROCs are certainly inspiring and create a real emotional connection to consumers, they still rely on direct questions and therefore often fall into the same traps of System 2-led post-rationalization as other direct techniques.

Can we be more observational? When exploring the deep context for decision making, you will often not know exactly what you are looking for, which makes social media monitoring attractive. It is observational and it gives us access to apparently spontaneous behaviour. But, like segmentation, it tends to be used in aggregate, which is better for understanding than empathy.

Therefore, another part of dealing with deeper context ought to be getting into consumer lives by *disaggregating* data, restoring its specific qualities without removing big-picture usefulness.

The Weavrs tool from Berlin firm, Philter Phactory, does this. It uses keyword-based search algorithms to create 'bots' or digital personae that can exist independently online and manifest interests and experiences deriving from the moods, locations or other data they were originally programmed with. BrainJuicer is not the only research firm to have used Weavrs, but its DigiViduals tool, developed in conjunction with Philter Phactory, uses them for precisely the purpose described above: restoring emotional richness to consumer understanding. There are several ESOMAR papers that explain the DigiViduals concept (eg, ap Hallstrom and Shaw⁷) — here we explore it via a case study from Allstate Insurance.

Allstate insurance case study 2: Bringing segments to life

Work conducted with Allstate Insurance shows the power of an approach that looks to disaggregate social media data in this way. Allstate had

Segmentations are autotune

Attractions of social media monitoring

Philter Phactory's Weavrs tool

Using virtual representations

clearly identified several distinct segments. It had detailed descriptions of each, providing vivid personas along with their attitudes and insurance preferences. However, the firm wanted something more meaningful — a wider context it could not simply get from direct questioning.

To get this, Allstate used DigiViduals — digital personae designed as a virtual representation of a customer or consumer segment. The methodology begins with creating a persona: programming the software with demographic information — age, location, profession — and a set of keywords representing interests and emotions. These keywords are used to trawl social media sources, such as YouTube, Twitter, Flickr and other platforms, to create a stream of content including videos, photos, music, places visited and so on.

More insightful and emotionally compelling

This content forms the material for qualitative analysis of the DigiVidual's life, worldview and behaviour, creating a picture of the consumer that is more insightful and emotionally compelling than one built out of aggregate data.

Allstate's experience with DigiViduals was a positive one. The DigiViduals added another layer of meaning on top of the segmentation profiles, providing a visceral picture using audio and visuals that gave a sense of who segment members were as people. DigiViduals delivered understanding about the emotional motivators in their life; Were they looking back on their life or forward into the future? How were they responding to changes and risks? It provided a sense of what was important in their lives. Adding this layer of understanding has helped enhance communication efforts and improve the 'intuitive' knowledge levels among senior managers.

Can this vivid emotional context be accessed without using a proprietary technique? Yes, at the heart of the DigiVidual is qualitative analysis of found online material, which is a skill any good social media researcher will possess from the analysis of brand conversations, for example. DigiViduals allow for more serendipitous surfacing of this material, though.

Immediate context

Understanding immediate context

Research has sought to understand consumers: marketers want to change their behaviour. This requires an understanding of immediate decision contexts. However, it can be extremely hard to work out which behavioural influences to focus on. It is tempting to focus on traditional marketing triggers — pack, pricing, promotions and so on — which lie under the brand's direct control. But as case studies across psychology and behavioural economics show, there are a vast number of other elements that might influence choices.

The behavioural model

What is needed is a way of structuring these contextual factors, creating a framework to understand them better. Once this structure is in place, marketers and insight managers can more easily focus on moments of decision and what might influence them. BrainJuicer developed a behavioural model to create this structure. This is not the only way of structuring the findings from behavioural science and psychology.

Figure 2: BrainJuicer's behavioural model

Three factors affecting decisions

Other research firms have models of behaviour that differ in their emphases, but not strongly in overall content. It is generally agreed that a model makes the sea of important behavioural findings more practically useful to research buyers.

The behavioural model (see Figure 2) breaks down the factors that affect decisions into three areas: environmental, personal and social.

Environmental factors include the decision-making environment: anything from a store, through a website, to a meeting room. But they also include the *choice architecture* — how choices are presented to the decision maker: for instance, default choices, opt-in versus opt-out choices and so on.

Social factors are more self-explanatory. Humans have evolved to copy other people, and therefore social factors in decision making include any evidence of other people's behaviour, both actual and anticipated.

And finally, personal factors include an individual's emotional state — happy, sad, angry and so on — and their visceral state — hunger, thirst and so on — both of which might affect a decision. But it also includes cognitive biases common to everybody in some degree that skew their decision-making abilities, such as loss aversion and confirmation bias.

These areas are interlinked, but thinking of them separately makes it easier to focus on what a brand owner can experiment with. Most of these factors simply could not be measured through direct questioning. They are the building blocks of effortless, unconscious System 1-led decisions, and thus people, who like to see themselves as autonomous, are less able to assign these factors much importance in decision making, whereas in fact they are crucial.

Environmental factors

You can summarize the way environmental factors work on System 1-led decisions by saying that people *sense*, *choose* and *act*.

System 1-led decisions are highly influenced by the multi-sensory physical environment they are taken in. Consumers absorb sensory information rapidly, and therefore marketers need to prime decisions by appealing to those senses. Think of the way food smells prime consumers to buy more food in a market, or the way mobile app designers use textured images to evoke tactility.

Within these environments, people make their choices. How choices are framed matters a great deal. For instance, when *The Economist* offered people a straight choice of a web-only subscription or a more expensive print subscription, the majority picked the cheaper (web-only) option. But when they added a third choice, web and print, at the same high price as print-only, a majority picked the web and print bundle. The magazine had successfully traded subscribers up, simply by framing the choice as getting something for free rather than paying more.³

And finally, people have to act on these choices, and the environment plays a huge role in determining whether they do. Queue length in stores, unwieldy log-in pages on websites, daunting terms and conditions for services, all these can place barriers in the way of converting a choice into an action. Hence, the final role for marketers is to trigger that action.

Social factors

The prominence of social media has put renewed focus on how important the social transmission of behaviour is. As Mark Earls puts it, moving the focus from the individual to the social is a kind of Copernican revolution for marketing, and thus used is the discipline of thinking in terms of individuals making autonomous choices.⁸ However, most individual choices are made unconsciously and, as the pretzel-eaters on the train show, many are made in response to other people.

See–share–copy

Our three-word mantra for describing social behaviour is *see–share–copy*. People see other people doing things, they broadcast their own decisions and they copy those made by others. The word ‘share’ has become familiar as a social media concept, but you do not need Facebook or Twitter to share your decisions; it happens as soon as you leave the house. ‘Social proof’ — the factor that guides a lot of people’s choices, whereby a popular decision is a safer and easier one to make — is simply easier to spot online. A site such as Amazon bakes it into its interface at almost every turn, constantly telling visitors what is popular, what people making similar choices also did and signalling via star ratings whether other users feel a choice is the right one.

Getting the benefits of social proof

Thus, from a marketer’s perspective, the crucial thing is that your brand and the decision to use it are seen, shared and copied, to get the benefits of social proof. This ties in with what we already know about advertising and brand share, as detailed by Byron Sharp where he talks about ‘fame’ and ‘availability’ as the dynamics behind brand growth: empirical evidence suggests that attracting new users is always more important than trying to create brand loyalty.⁹ If we are a species of copiers, the decision to use a brand needs to be as visible and copyable as possible.

Personal factors

Our summary of the personal influence on the decision-making process is that people *feel*, *do* and *think* — and the order is very important!

As the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio puts it: ‘We are not thinking machines that feel. We are feeling machines that think’.¹⁰ Feeling tends to

come before doing: a lot of System 1 decisions are guided by emotional reactions, and in general understanding the emotional response to something (such as a piece of communication or a brand in general) is a better way to predict behaviour around it than asking about that behaviour directly. Of course, thinking still plays a role, when decisions are genuinely difficult, for instance. But even then, there is usually a default decision that people will find easier to take.

Therefore, BrainJuicer's advice to marketers on personal factors is to work to make the decisions you expect from people fun (emotionally appealing), fast and, perhaps most importantly, easy to make.

Data without questions

This model of behaviour gives you a framework for identifying behavioural interventions. To flesh it out, though, you still need reliable information on what decisions people are making at the moment. But since people are poor witnesses to their own behaviour, how do you get behavioural data without asking questions? This is where newer research techniques, such as social media monitoring and mobile ethnography, have an opportunity to shine.

However, the value of insight to the client lies in the new information that it provides. If social media monitoring, for instance, reflects opinions around a brand that a research buyer is already aware of, it offers little extra value beyond novelty.

The dominant metaphor for social media among researchers is as the 'ultimate focus group', an endless source of free insight and information on how customers relate to a brand. There are various ways of accessing and analysing this information — be it sampling or scraping, text analysis or sentiment analysis. What they have in common is an emphasis on social media *content*, aggregated to reveal overall sentiment or buzz, or drilled into in order to understand specific issues.

In parallel to this, there is an area of social media research that focuses on the context of messages, who sends them, who copies them, how they spread across which networks and so on. This is often framed in terms of 'influence', and non-research start-ups, such as Klout or PeerIndex, have attracted a lot of attention by looking to score individuals' influence on social media. However, a network is an object that can be studied independently of the individuals within it.

In his recent book, Earls talks about the different ways people copy one another or choose independently.¹¹ Because people usually think of themselves as choosing independently rather than copying, it is incredibly difficult to understand the uptake of products or choices without looking at the market at a network level. Earls has shown that by doing this — for instance, by looking at the diffusion curves of successful products in a market — you can work out how people copy one another (whether they tend to copy experts or simply imitate peers, for instance). This knowledge would be very difficult, if not impossible, to get via direct questions.

From a behavioural perspective, social media monitoring can have definite advantages over direct questioning. While tweets, blog posts,

Looking for new information

Meaning from social media

Diffusion curves of successful products

comments and so on are self-reporting, and hence suffer from our inability to witness our own behaviour accurately, they can also offer better access to emotional reactions to brands and communications.

However, while comments about brands and behaviour relating to them may be common, it is a lot harder to tease out information on the near context of that behaviour. Someone tweeting that they are buying a can of Coke, for instance, is not likely to offer much information about the environmental or social factors around that choice. They will either be unconscious of them or not consider them relevant. For behavioural purposes, social media runs into the problem of what goes unsaid and unseen.

Mobile tools

Mobile is the only research tool that accompanies the consumer in the decision-making moment. Moreover, the most successful mobile approaches have empowered participants to create research data that is shaped by their lives and experiences, not by the artificial structure of a questionnaire. Two examples of these task-based, question-free approaches are mobile ethnography and a touchpoint-based diary approach.

Mobile ethnography allows participants to define and capture context themselves. Typically participants are set tasks. Unlike in traditional ethnography where perceptions of behaviour are filtered through the ethnographer, mobile ethnography asks participants to curate their own behaviour by filming it. This can lead to particularly rich analysis, as the camera captures elements of the context that participants do not describe or even notice.

Attitudes to pets and treating

BrainJuicer experiment 2: Mobile dog ethnography

This study is an example of how mobile ethnography, while self-reported, can still capture the richer context of consumer behaviour.

BrainJuicer co-funded an experiment with Del Monte on dog owners' attitudes to their pets and treating — we asked people to film themselves feeding and walking their dogs. This captured a lot of very vibrant and interesting behaviour, from both owners and dogs. One pet was filmed splashing its dry food with water from another bowl to make it wetter, for instance. As is common with mobile ethnography work, what is not described was as important as what is. For instance, a participant stressing the high level of discipline she imposed on her pet was seen in reality being inconsistent, and rewarding the dog even though it was misbehaving.

Our methodology in this study was the EthOS ethnography app for iPhone, which is publicly available. It was developed by Siamack Salari of Virtual Lives and allows researchers to easily put together task-based ethnographic projects. From the research perspective, the most difficult part of the methodology remains the analysis stage, which can be time-consuming. From Del Monte's perspective, the experiment was a qualified success and it learned more from it than from standard ethnographic or observational methods.

Capturing real behavioural context

Mobile diaries can also capture real behavioural context. Pioneered by MESH Planning in the United Kingdom,¹² they tend to involve

participants using mobile devices to record every encounter they have with a brand — TV ads, billboards, word-of-mouth, social media experiences and so on. They provide details on the context of the encounter and the consumer's reaction, which can include photo or video evidence, letting researchers uncover details that might have had an impact on behaviour.

Surveying before and after shopping

BrainJuicer experiment 3: The visceral shopper

In a self-funded experiment, BrainJuicer used mobiles to better understand the influence of behavioural factors — personal, social and environmental — on shopping habits.

BrainJuicer recruited participants who were happy to share shopping receipts and used mobile devices to deliver a short survey immediately before their shopping experience, to capture their emotional and visceral states and some basic environmental information. After the shopping experience, BrainJuicer collected the shoppers' receipts, noted the time taken in-store and delivered a second survey asking about emotional and visceral states.

The results were fascinating. People really do spend more when they are hungry, both in terms of number of items and average price. When people are anxious they buy less on impulse, but when people are happy they take less notice of promotions. And environmental factors play a huge role. If participants took a trolley rather than a basket — even when only planning a small shop — they spent more time in the store, while the sight of long queues cut the number of items bought down. Aside from helping us understand the context of shopping, this experiment proved how important collecting data in the moment can be.

Both mobile ethnography and diary-based research do involve direct interaction with participants, although not via traditional surveys. They are an excellent example of hybrid methodologies emerging where pure surveys and pure observation individually would not meet business needs.

Passive data collection

Mobiles also fit into another growing trend — the automated collection of so-called 'passive' data. In some areas of research this is nothing new — web audience measurement, for instance, has been 'passive' for over a decade. Two developments have moved passive collection further into the research mainstream.

One is mobile — the ability of mobile devices to track not just in-device activity (apps used, internet usage etc), but also location, temperature, even physical activity via accelerometers. Using and analysing this data is not easy, but the range of data mobile devices will be able to capture is only likely to increase.

Neuroscience and biometrics

The second aspect of passive data collection is neuroscience and biometrics — measurement of body or brain response to stimulus. In its more complex forms (fMRI scanning, for instance), this procedure is considerably more intrusive than most surveys. But we are also seeing a generation of 'light' versions of biometric techniques emerge — eye-tracking is becoming an important part of communications and web

testing, and devices to measure pulse rate, galvanic skin response and other physical reactions are becoming more common too.

For researchers interested in behavioural triggers, the appeal of these techniques is clear: they promise an unmediated understanding of stimulus and reaction, which makes them very useful for anyone planning behavioural interventions to test particular stimuli which direct research could probably not assess.

While we are poor predictors of our own behaviour, we are better at assessing that of others, and spotting possible behavioural triggers. Observational techniques are invaluable for the researcher of behaviour who wants to avoid direct questions.

Ethnography and observation

BrainJuicer experiment 4: Behavioural detectives

Investigating binge drinking

In 2011, BrainJuicer conducted an experiment in qualitative observational research, recruiting a number of ‘behavioural detectives’ to investigate behaviour around excessive ‘binge drinking’ in British pubs. Using the behavioural model as a guide, they asked one group to investigate the choice architecture of a pub or club environment and another to comment more generally on the environment and the cues it offered drinkers. A third team observed social interaction around drinks-buying, and a fourth team looked at individual biases and behavioural factors. Each team of ‘detectives’ debriefed the researchers on their findings.

Synthesizing the findings lets BrainJuicer create a complete picture of the pressures and triggers drinkers faced on a night out and formulate recommendations for behavioural interventions and innovations, which might combat the social problems around excessive drinking in the United Kingdom. Ideas such as beer menus and table service, to introduce breaks in consumption, are already common in ‘craft beer’ pubs. Others such as signalling the amount consumed by leaving glasses on the table longer, or removing the ‘last orders’ bell are less common. However, the range and variety of ideas was very high — proof that a behavioural focus can lead to innovative thinking. Observational techniques can be a wonderful way of capturing very hard-to-reach information on the immediate context of decisions.

Big data

Finally, we should mention what may yet become the ultimate ‘research without questions’ tool — the large-scale customer databases known colloquially as ‘big data’. Exploiting big data successfully requires sophisticated data mining skills, powerful software and great analysts. With those in place, remarkable results can be obtained. Big data analysis is used to drive improvements in cross-selling or customer service, and to predict customer behaviour from deep analysis of data sets.

The skillsets needed to work with and analyse big data are very different from market research skills. The integration of big data is a huge challenge even for experts, let alone researchers, which places the topic outside the scope of this paper. In theory, big data ought to work well in conjunction with the observational techniques we have discussed here, as a source of both insight and hypotheses to test.

Agents of change

Launch, then test

Understanding the context of decision making and discovering how your customers make decisions will lead to hypotheses on how you might influence the decisions they take. Therefore, the endpoint of the research without questions approach is running experiments that test these hypotheses.

In doing this, we can take inspiration from online firms, who have created cultures of agile decision making in which their user experience is constantly assessed and alternatives evaluated. ‘Launch, then test’ has become a common model: release a feature, and then quickly correct any problems via incremental changes and upgrades. This is how Facebook, Amazon, Twitter and Google have evolved — not through discrete version launches tested ahead of schedule, but through continuous change based on rock-solid effectiveness data. Methods such as split testing — where users of a site are funnelled randomly to slightly different versions of a page, letting sites test minor changes for effectiveness ‘live’ — have had a huge impact on online brands’ approaches to user research.

Rapid prototyping

A related source of inspiration is rapid prototyping. Many high-tech firms show the value of developing rough prototypes early in the new product development process and then iteratively expose and refine them to get closer to what consumers really want. This is a world where few questions are asked, but responses are highly useful. Consumers are not very good at telling you what they want, but they certainly know it when they see it.

But how practical is such agility in an offline or service-based setting? ‘Launch, then test’ cannot easily be applied to physical products. Although the principle behind it remains vital, data is only valid when it applies to a real-world context. You must test hypotheses and behavioural interventions in a context as close to reality as possible. For some brands, test sites and real-world interventions are one way of doing this. Retail brands, for instance, might use a particular store to test a series of alterations to the decision-making context.

Hunkemoller case study: In-store behavioural interventions

Priming shoppers’ mood

BrainJuicer ran a series of observation- and intervention-based experiments for Belgian lingerie retailer, Hunkemoller. Each of the interventions was based on a hypothesis generated using the behavioural model framework, including giving shoppers chocolates to improve their mood and priming them by using pleasant scent in the store. Each intervention lasted 2 weeks — one without the intervention, and one with intervention — allowing for day-to-day and week-to-week comparisons.

By dealing with real consumer decisions and actual sales, BrainJuicer aimed to create a clear path to demonstrating the Return On Investment (ROI) of particular interventions. Several of the interventions were clear successes. The scent prime raised average basket value by as much as 20 per cent, for instance, and shoppers who took the chocolates spent on average 6 per cent more than those who did not.¹³

Avoiding System 2 nudges

A world with better questions

Clearly, though, for many brands direct research is still necessary. But where it is used, it is crucial to recreate the context as closely as possible, to avoid nudging people into taking ‘System 2’-considered decisions where, in the real world, they might follow their System 1 instincts. Ways of doing this include putting questions into real contexts, using visual stimuli, testing alternate wordings for framing effects and creating ‘games’ that can shift participants’ emotional or visceral states.

Drawing on psychology studies

Rigour and validity

Finally, it is worth briefly exploring rigour and validity in a world of indirect research. Researchers generally ask searching questions of new techniques — Are they representative? Is their data robust? This will continue to be the case.

The closer a technique comes to direct intervention, the more pertinent we believe these questions are. Neuroscientific methods, for instance, are routinely criticized for their small sample sizes. But there is another research tradition many of these new methodologies draw on — the psychology study, where samples are often highly unrepresentative and may not be statistically robust.

Robustness of context

This, we would argue, is because such studies concern themselves with a different kind of robustness that market research has paid less attention to. ‘Validity’ in market research generally relates to sample. But critical in observational research is *robustness of context*. Is the context representative of a real-life situation? Can you isolate particular factors that might be causing a change in behaviour, and hence can you generate useful and testable hypotheses? For research based on observation, these are the critical questions of validity. Observation is meaningless without intervention, but unless your data comes from a representative context you will not be sure which interventions to make.

Of course, a researcher should not have to choose between a valid sample and a valid context. But indirect research means a shift from understanding behaviour to changing it. This shift brings with it a shift in ideas of validity. Traditional research rigour is still important. Rigour in contextual understanding is even more so. To put it another way, in survey conditions — where you are relying on recalled or predicted behaviour asked in a highly analytical context — all the sampling rigour in the world will not help you if you have not taken the real decision context into account. Robustly wrong is still wrong.

Need to reinvent research tools

Conclusion

Everything we know about how the human mind works points to the need to minimize direct research as much as possible. As we learn more about how people really behave, our trusted tools for direct research — from ratings scales to MROCs — will need reinvention.

Research without questions is not a novelty — it is essential if we are to truly understand consumer decisions. It is also more exciting, innovative, faster in many cases and more actionable than direct research has been.

A world entirely without questions is not on the horizon, but the reign of the question in research has ended and we should celebrate that. Our industry is finally aligning itself around what consumers do, not what they say.

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