Editorial

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Sometimes papers appear from left field. They cover some aspect of CRM, relationship marketing — but not quite as we know it. When confronted with a paper of this kind, I am often in two minds. It isn't the 'usual' sort of thing that gets said, so I am wary. But because it is unusual, I am also interested.

Thus it is with Angus Jenkinson's paper that takes up a fair part of this issue on the subject of 'Evolutionary implications for touchpoint planning'. Indeed, you may realise, if you read it in full, that this editorial is actually an illustration of the very principles that he is talking about.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

One of the privileges I enjoy as editor of a Journal is that I get to see thinking as it evolves. Not just the papers that are shared with you, our readers: but also the papers that are not quite right, or not quite ready. It is very clear that thinking about CRM DOES evolve: and that evolution is not always strictly predictable.

Jenkinson's paper draws together a number of straws in the wind, some from papers presented to us: some from a much wider sphere. The first is neuro-linguistic programming — the infamous NLP — about which so much is claimed. It is used, to some effect, by the popular UK illusionist Derren Brown. His act consists of a range of magical 'tricks', misdirection and, most intriguing, setting up audiences to provide the response that he wishes them to provide by using subtle subliminal cues in his conversation with them.

Is a learned journal the place to be discussing a stage conjuror? Yes, when the

centre of his act is a technique that has been much trumpeted throughout sales and marketing as a means to improve rapport and, more importantly, direct selling performance. Jenkinson notes that Brown has demonstrated his technique on a group of Agency Creatives, effectively leading them to 'develop' a creative approach that he had already devised.

That, in itself, is an interesting result: it suggests that we all need to be more careful than we realise. For at any moment in time, we could be setting up suppliers to respond in ways that we have set out for them. Well and good if we know what our brief is. Not so good if we imagine we are paying them for their creative ideas. But that is another issue.

A second straw in the wind floats by in the shape of a book. 'Blink', by Malcolm Gladwell is based on the claim that decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as a decision made cautiously and deliberately. As one review of the book explains: 'What we are actually doing is [...] "thin-slicing"'. When we leap to a decision or have a hunch our unconscious is sifting through the situation in front of us looking for a pattern, throwing out the irrelevant information and zeroing in on what really matters. Our unconscious mind is so good at this that it often delivers a better answer than more deliberate and protracted ways of thinking.'

The message here is that we need to be more prepared to listen to our unconscious. That, when we have experience of a particular area, our first reactions — our

‘intuitions’ — are often as good as, or better than anything more considered.

Not always. The book also contains some salutary lessons about how our first reactions can be skewed: and therefore why we need to be aware of what is going on underneath the intuition. Nonetheless, it is a sharp rebuke to corporate decision-making processes that have evolved and evolved to the point where every decision is so process-driven that it ceases to act as a point of difference between competing organisations.

Basically: allow one expert to take decisions for you and you will end up doing significantly better or significantly worse than average. What you will no longer be is average.

The third and final species of straw that I see floating past is a growing focus on customer experience. This is an interesting one. I have talked, in the past, of how I have been and continue to be involved in audits of CRM programmes. These are powerful assessment tools, based on years of experience across hundreds of companies.

What they do, though, is look at an organisation and measure it against best *practice*. Nothing wrong with that. A part of the audit looks at how far companies make sure they monitor the customer experience and feed back the results of genuine customer experience into their sales and service processes.

Interestingly, this is an area that even the best companies often score poorly in. They are so busy providing what they perceive as excellent customer service, that they quite forget to check that this is how their customers also see it.

That is why direct measurement of customer experience is a growing business. Organisations are finally waking up to the fundamental truth: that it is the impression left with customers that matters; and matters far more than any theoretical measure of what impression you think you have left.

(Perhaps now is a good time to mention, *en passant*, that this issue contains what is now becoming almost an annual event: a review of the Business Intelligence Awards for CRM. Trends are similar to those observed in previous years. One trend in particular remains depressingly the same. That is the tendency for organisations to judge the ‘success’ of crm projects according to internal measures, as opposed to direct measurement of customer reaction.)

So where does this place Jenkinson’s paper. If I summarise a growing trend in marketing, it would appear to be a recognition that experience is what matters. More than that: experience and judgment on an organisation is formed in the twinkling of an eye. It is no good building up in-depth strengths if what one presents the customer with in the first instance is profoundly off-putting.

It is tempting to return here to my accustomed concerns over Call Centres. But I shall resist.

From NLP, one understands that it is possible to select the building blocks that make up that initial encounter in ways that will profoundly influence the customer.

If I have not completely misread Jenkinson’s paper, this is the area in which he is operating. He challenges traditional marketing models of how consumers interact with and interpret marketing messages. In their place, he draws on recent advances in neuroscience to propose that consumers actually respond and react on a range of different levels — cognitive, affective, conative — simultaneously. This has serious implications for marketing, in the sense that marketers need to be far more aware of ‘touchpoints’.

One key implication is that marketers need to get beyond the self-defeating practice of creating two separate divisions to deal with broadband (TV, Press, etc) and narrowband (Direct, Database, etc) communications. This almost guarantees two messages, two different experiences, going

out via different channels. Beyond that, Jenkinson talks of five basic principles that need to run through every single touchpoint. The experience should:

- evoke a specific experience of the brand and its value proposition, recreating its personality, idea and feeling;
- influence and confirm ideas and beliefs;
- stimulate or reawaken positive emotions that establish a specific positive relationship between the consumer and the brand or firm;
- provide help and confirmation;
- stimulate specific desired actions.

At one level, there is little to argue with there. One might imagine that many organisations believe they are — or should be — doing all of the above already. The difference, I believe, with this approach is first the theoretical framework in which it is grounded. It is the starting point for organisations to move beyond their current approach to communications planning.

Second, Jenkinson has also moved beyond theory, putting together a model — the CODAR Planning Tool — that allows organisations to evaluate how well they are doing in this respect.

Underlining the importance of this approach is a paper from Yuksel Ekinici, Peter Gillett and Merlin Stone, which documents a more traditional approach to measuring customer experience. That it follows an established path to understanding the customer in no way devalues it as learning for Marketing and Sales.

In a slightly different way, an industry study from Bruce Perrott outlines lessons that can be learned from one industry but which could as easily be applied to others. Also in this issue, Ram Gopalan returns us to a more bottom line-driven approach to customer management. Sometimes, the bottom line is what really matters.

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