

**RESEARCH 2005**  
**ACCIDENTS WAITING TO HAPPEN**

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***A Great Place to Start***

“Consumer insight is a great term”. So begins the guide for market researchers titled ‘Consumer Insight’ published by Kogan Page in 2004.

This enthusiastic embracing of the phrase seems entirely appropriate. The brand values of ‘market research’ were dull and tired. Consumer insight injects some magic and mystery and takes us closer to a focus on the value which we produce. As a re-branding exercise it has been a considerable success. Beyond this it has engendered more debate about exactly what value it is that we *do* produce, and it has, in some cases, led to the re-structuring and re-definition of roles, particularly on the client side.

But what does ‘consumer insight’ actually mean? What are the implications for the structures we have and the jobs that we do? And does it take us far enough?

In an essay which he wrote in 1986 Shiva Naipaul examined the use of the term ‘the third world’ and concluded that it allowed us to package together and effectively dismiss a huge variety of nations in different economic states with different political contexts and social issues. In a contemporary context we use the word terrorism in the same way, lumping together a whole series of events that may have hugely different contexts and motives.

‘Consumer insight’ is a similar term. It is a useful catch all for some of the things that we do, but it is used by different people to mean different things. If it is to lead to a different reality on the ground, then we must pin down what we are hoping to achieve. It is not enough for the brand name to change. The product must change too.

***Digging Deep***

One of the dangers inherent in the term ‘consumer insight’ is that it is often associated with something deep and difficult to get at, that requires innovative techniques, deep mining of data, or investigation of consumers hidden psyches.

Not only is this misleading, but it is also an association which also excludes some of the most valuable “straight forward” work that we do. Product tests, concept tests, pre tests and customer satisfaction projects may be straight forward and quick to execute but they can result in decisions which save millions of pounds for companies in very short periods of time. This is in part because of the levels of insight garnered historically which have been built into the best of these tools. They are powerful syntheses of insight. To sideline them for being clear and structured is to misunderstand their power and value.

### **Getting some Definition**

Putting to one side these caveats, an overview of all the definitions of insight provide some consistent themes. Insight is an understanding that is clear, sudden, and intuitive. Sometimes the word deep is also included as part of a definition.

Perhaps the best definition is “a form of cognitive change that involves recognition of previously unseen relationships”. The word ‘unseen’ could equate to ‘deep’ -although sometimes we are not very good at seeing what is in front of our noses.

Looking at accounts of the great breakthroughs in scientific thinking, it is striking how often they embody the characteristics outlined above.

An excellent example (quoted in Koestler’s Act of Creation) comes from Henri Poincaré, the French mathematician who describes a resolution he arrived at after many months of detailed analysis “one morning out walking, the idea came to me, with the characteristics of brevity, suddenness and immediate certainty that the arithmetic transformations of indeterminate ternary quadratic forms were identical with those of non-Euclidean geometry”.

Forget the maths bit! It is the characteristics of brevity, suddenness and immediate certainty that are really of interest here.

### **A Creative Act**

The idea of cognitive change is at the heart of Arthur Koestler’s analysis of creativity which he expounded in ‘The Act of Creation’.

He coined the term by bisociation “in order to make a distinction between the routine skills of thinking on a single plane and the creative act which always operates on more than one plane”. Koestler saw the intersection of ideas at the heart of great art, of humour, of tragedy and of intellectual breakthroughs. “When two independent matrices of perception or reasoning interact with each other the result is a collision ending in laughter or their fusion in a new intellectual synthesis or their confrontation in aesthetic experience. The bisociative patterns found in any domain of creative activity are trivalent, that is to say that the same pair of matrices can produce comic, tragic or intellectually challenging effects”.

Koestler argues that real insights come from an intersection of ideas, not from a single chain of thought. In our world this would suggest that a single project or piece of work is unlikely in itself to provide a breakthrough insight.

The creative act connects previously un-related dimensions of experience, enabling habits to be overcome by originality.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is the story of Archimedes, which makes several important points.

The story is that Hiero the tyrant of Syracuse had been given a beautiful crown, allegedly of pure gold. He suspected that it had been adulterated with silver and he asked Archimedes opinion. Archimedes already knew about the

properties of gold and silver but he struggled to work out a way of applying this to a complex three dimensional object. His "Eureka!" moment came whilst he was in the bath, making a sudden and clear connection between two different experiences that allowed the resolution of a problem. But Koestler also points out that Archimedes' experience of having a bath would hardly have been a new one. This was a routine experience, and of course, he would already have been well aware that in getting into the bath a certain amount of water was displaced and the water level rose.

None of the facts of the case were deeply hidden away and difficult to discover. It was the interconnection of knowledge and experiences which provided the dramatic insight.

He puts it like this "discovery often means simply the uncovering of something that has always been there, but was hidden from the eye by blinkers of habit". A further observation about the Archimedes story is that the particular problem he was trying to resolve was very clearly defined. This was not a random intersection of two ideas and then an exploration of what this could bring. It was the connection that answered a specific problem "Discovery does not create something out of nothing, it uncovers, selects, re-shuffles, combines, synthesises already existing facts, ideas, facilities and skills".

What may appear to the outsider to be a sudden miraculous intuition has actually come about through a process of thinking and experience, where only the beginning and end of the process are visible.

If this is how insights come about then it raises lots of questions for our industry and it doesn't feel very comfortable. Firstly it doesn't feel very comfortable because big companies can't operate around the basis of what may seem to be random intuitive events or accidents. Second, it doesn't fit very well with the text book wisdom. Thomas Kuhn noted in the Structure of Scientific Revolutions "the historical re-construction of previous paradigms in scientific text books make the history of science look linear and cumulative". And much the same has been said about other outputs from our industry such as the IPA Effectiveness Awards case studies. You will have to search long and hard to find a phrase such as "I suddenly thought" in these case studies. This encourages us to believe that a linear and logical approach will get us to the insight destination.

Third, it is in the nature of the job we do that we find it more comfortable to work in a logical and linear way. And many of us don't necessarily feel comfortable to consider other approaches.

Much of Edward de Bono's work is aimed at creating tools to allow us to break out of what he calls the sequence trap. He recognises that it is not just us consumer insight people but "our whole intellectual culture that is based on an esteem of critical intelligence". So in his lateral thinking tools and processes he is trying to introduce discontinuities to create "some method for re-examining and re-structuring existing arrangements of information to give new arrangements".

What all this tells us is the need to open up our minds and processes to connect things that we might not otherwise connect.

They also emphasize the scale of this challenge, particularly for people in our industry, to be more accepting of anomaly, contradiction and novelty. Kuhn suggests that “when the outcome of a research project does not fall into the anticipated result range it is generally considered a failure”.

One of my favourite papers from recent MRS Conferences is that delivered by Greg Rowland in 2003. The semiotic process encourages us to take a step back and deconstruct a brand. Rowland writes “we started thinking about what the product actually was”.

This step back allows the brand to be considered in a way that opens up the possibilities of connections with other ideas or paradigms. But even here there have to be connections that are formed through internal or external dialogue. Taking along the Claims Direct TV ad to the debrief of Pot Noodle (as Rowland did) because “it struck me that...” is the kind of connection that creates insight.

This ‘step back’ is a recurrent theme in both Koestler and de Bono, embodied in the phrase ‘reculer pour mieux sauter’. Having conducted stage 2 of a piece of work how often do we go back to consider stage 1 in the light of what we have learnt, in order to make a more rounded assessment?

### ***From Insight to Action***

A critical concept which is missing from the term ‘consumer insight’, but which is essential for us to consider in the way that we implement it, is the idea of action.

An insight is only worth having in our commercial world if you can do something with it. And it will only convert into genuine value for a business if somebody actually does do something with it.

As well as reviewing how to generate valuable insights we should also be thinking about how to ensure that these insights are acted upon.

### ***The Twin Towers***

In July 2004 the largest ever analysis of an insight process was published. This was the 9/11 Commission Report, tracing the emergence of terrorism and the rise of al Qaeda. In particular it looks at the way in which the agencies charged with counter terrorism activities on behalf of the US government have responded to the threats that have emerged over the course of the last 15 years.

If the report has a failing, it is that it does not address the causes of terrorism and it makes no recommendations as to how the problem could be tackled at its root, but as a frank and open analysis of the process of gathering information and arriving at insight it provides some very clear parallels to the work we undertake in the commercial world.

The analysis of the role of the FBI is particularly pertinent. FBI agents are trained in the law enforcement process. A key part of their role is the retrospective analysis of data to arrive at a conclusion. In their case this would be a prosecution. What the Commission Report makes clear is that

this sits very uneasily with the “intelligence” part of the FBI’s remit which necessarily involves being forward looking and dealing with ambiguity.

In the case of the World Trade Centre attack in February 1993, the focus was on apprehending and charging the people involved in that attack and in this respect the FBI were deemed to have been very effective. But, the Report notes “the process was meant by its nature to mark for the public the events as finished, case solved, justice done”. It was not designed to ask if the events might be harbingers of worse to come, nor did it allow for aggregating and analysing facts to see if they could provide clues to terrorist tactics more generally.

So the FBI successfully dealt with a single project. What they did not do was to explore the wider aspects of the case, the anecdotes and circumstantial evidence with a view to looking forward to further implications.

This clearly suggests that when we are analysing a specific project we need to think about and the people, environments and structures that we need in order to engage in a different dialogue, drawing not just from the facts of a single case, but exploring a much wider view of the issues. We need to look at the anecdotal and the circumstantial as well as the proven.

The criticism of the FBI was not simply about the skills of the individuals, but about the structure of the organisation and the targets and expectations imposed on it. “Performance in the bureau was generally measured against statistics such as number of arrests, indictments, prosecutions and convictions. Counter terrorism and counter intelligence work often involving lengthy intelligence investigations that might never have positive or quantifiable results was not career enhancing” .

In today’s commercial world the necessity for speed and for hard metrics which can easily be assimilated and discussed at senior levels in a company is not going to diminish. So the question is how can we create parallel processes and structures that will allow the assimilation of information into a wider and longer view of the brands and services we deal with?

In the FBI, the structure of the bureau meant that despite all the terrorist activity which had taken place prior to 9/11, including the bombings in New York and East Africa, the FBI had never completed an assessment of the overall terrorist threat to the United States. The Commission also looked at some of the processes involved and concluded that the FBI’s information systems were woefully inadequate “the FBI lacked the ability to know what it knew. There is no effective mechanism for capturing or sharing its institutional knowledge. FBI agents did create records of interviews, and other investigative efforts but there were no reports officers to condense the information into meaningful intelligence that could be retrieved and disseminated”.

In this respect the FBI has something to learn from the consumer insight departments in some of the major global commercial organisations who perhaps do this job rather better. Again it puts on the table the notion of aggregation, the ability to look across projects, and to connect disparate projects to arrive at a bigger picture view.

Of course the FBI is only one of the agencies involved in counter terrorism and dealing with the threat to the US. And this takes us into the area of co-operation between different departments.

In 1995, the Attorney General put into place procedures for managing information between different departments, but the Commission found that these procedures were mis-understood and mis-applied resulting in far less sharing and co-ordination between the FBI and other divisions than had actually allowed under the procedures.

There was clearly a strong need in retrospect for the FBI to liaise with the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) who control the US borders, and here the flow of information from one to the other was virtually non-existent.

The parallel for us is the silos that we create in businesses which are designed to focus expertise and yet at the same time may militate against the wider sharing of information and the creation of insight through the intersection of ideas.

Clearly big departments have to have some structure. Individuals need to have their own responsibilities. However we have to be capable of creating the links across a wide diversity of information sources.

Historically, structures that used to have continuous research handled by one team and ad hoc by another are an example of where this creates potential limitations. The focus of consumer insight people behind particular brands helps overcome this barrier, but then how do you create the insight opportunities that exist in drawing learning from one brand situation to another?

And then beyond the expertise that exists in a client company, how do you intersect the detailed knowledge you have on your brand with brands in other categories and other companies altogether? How do you harness the knowledge that may reside in agencies in order to provide some further intersections and new insight possibilities?

The Commission made a number of recommendations as a result of their two years hard work that we could learn from. One of their key recommendations was to make significant changes in the organisation of government. They placed a great emphasis on the structures and the processes "we know that the quality of people is more important than the quality of the wiring diagrams, but some of the saddest aspects of the 9/11 story are the outstanding efforts of so many individual officials straining, often without success, against the boundaries of the possible. Good people can over-come bad structures. They should not have to".

Four of the five major structural recommendations the commission makes start with the idea of unity.

- Unifying structures
- Unifying reporting lines
- Unifying the individuals
- Unifying the central government effort with the individual agencies

They emphasised the need for someone to be firmly in charge and have the capability of drawing upon and directing the different resources that are available to tackle the issue.

They observed “no-one was firmly in charge of managing the case and able to draw relevant intelligence from anywhere, assign responsibilities across the agencies, track progress and quickly bring up obstacles to the level that they could be resolved. Responsibility and accountability were diffuse”.

The Commission talked about co-operation, and suggested strongly that co-operation was not the same thing as joint action. In this it makes a very powerful case for teamwork “when agencies co-operate one defines the problem and seeks help with it. When they act jointly the problem and options for action are defined differently from the start. Individuals from different backgrounds come together in analysing a case and planning how to manage it”.

The Report identifies two final things that are focussed on the individuals and their roles. They identified a shortage of experts with sufficient skills in some key areas. They also discuss the danger of staff being consumed in day to day tasks and having less capacity and time to advise on larger policy issues. These are pressures that we are very familiar with. The pressures on achieving things in the short term can often get in the way of the more important long term vision.

The executive summary of the 597 page report crystallises its findings into a single line “The most important failure was one of imagination”.

Our challenge is also how we create the time, space, structures and inclination in order to create the opportunity for imagination.

### ***Reconstruction***

We talked earlier about building a different reality on the ground. This is going to take different forms in different organisations. However, there are 5 key areas that we should focus on in order to develop approaches and best practices.

#### ***People***

The arguments in this paper have a number of implications for the people in our business. It goes without saying that the foundations of our industry are in the detailed and logical analysis of the consumer information we collect. To be the best at the generation of the consumer insight requires three additional capabilities. Open-mindedness, team working skills and experience.

Without people who are open minded enough to consider other options, to absorb new ideas, to be interested in anomalies and novelties, their ability to generate insights is going to be limited. Team working skills are crucial because more insight is likely to be generated from a group of individuals than it is from a single individual. And experience is important, not so much length of experience as diversity of experience. The author Louis L'Amour once said “we can't learn anything from experiences we are not having” (quoted by Vance in Think Out of the Box). The ability to draw

upon our diverse work and life experience is only likely to enhance the ability of an individual to contribute to this process.

### **Places**

"There are very few inferior people in the world, there are only inferior environments". In "Think Out of the Box" Mike Vance spends a lot of his time discussing the environments which allow people to open up to new ideas and look for new possibilities. He stresses the need for places that are different from the everyday work mode, that have more fun and provide more stimulation. We have much to learn from our brethren in the creative agencies where detailed attention is often paid to the environment for pitches, the environment for briefing creatives and the environment for strategic thinking. We need to recognise that great connections and associations of ideas are more likely to happen away from the desk, walking, or shopping or indeed in the bath.

### **Structures**

Whilst individuals can create connections and insight for themselves it seems much more likely that insight will come from the sharing ideas and the cross pollination with the experiences and knowledge of others. Team working has to be at the heart of our ability to provide insight in a timely manner to businesses. It is not an accident that creative teams in agencies typically work in pairs.

In his 2002 paper Leddie. from Leading Edge in Australia focussed on what they had done to encourage this in his organisation "consultants work in pairs on each account from who they can learn and also help give and receive report rather than working in an isolated hierarchy. As such highly experienced brains trusts have formed which is necessary for turning knowledge into insight".

At Millward Brown we have changed our structure and processes so that the senior people in our organisation can more readily bring their diverse experiences, backgrounds and client context to help one another develop responses to briefs, generate ideas and insights from data, exploring solutions to the business issues of clients.

Collaborative working environments both within agencies and clients (as well as between agencies and clients) will have to become the norm if we are to achieve our goals.

### **Processes**

Each organisation will have to evolve its own processes, but perhaps the most fruitful area of investigation is to how to create processes which connect different pieces of research. Let me outline one particular process which has worked incredibly well for us but has obvious transferability to other pieces of research and other situations.

Where research is being conducted for creative development and evaluation there are usually qualitative and quantitative stages to that research programme. There are very often differences, sometimes in nuance, sometimes in substance, between the findings from a qualitative project conducted on an execution and a subsequent quantitative stage of research.



In the spirit of the ideas in this paper it makes sense that although the quantitative stage has come after the qual, that both pieces of research are considered in the round.

Whilst there are many difficulties associated with this, it has become easier for us as a company with integrated qualitative and quantitative research to harness the relationships which have been built between qualitative practitioners and quantitative practitioners. They understand the roles, strengths and limitations of the respective techniques. And because we are part of the same commercial organisation we can look at the relationship in the round as well (i.e. we don't have people sitting in meetings thinking "I'm not being paid for this").

The coming together of the client and the qual and the quant researchers and, bringing their experience, ideas and direct involvement in the projects to the table has invariably resulted in a better outcome with more insight. Anomalies become opportunities and discussion leads to insights which go beyond the single project in hand.

So a process by which different agencies come together is also one of the challenges and opportunities for our business.

## **Data**

Early in the Kogan Page book on consumer insight they suggest that "insight is not just about having some pieces of the jigsaw, but all the pieces". Of course if you are going to have a good picture you need to have most of the bits of the puzzle, but the puzzle is of absolutely no worth to you unless you can inter-lock the pieces in a meaningful way, and you almost certainly do not need all the pieces to appreciate the final outcome.

The accident of insight can be made more likely to happen if we routinely find ways of intersecting the data sets that we do have. These data sets may be large or small. They may be primary bespoke research or publicly available syndicated data. They may be customer databases or research projects. Our task is to understand the broadest landscape of data which is available and draw upon this appropriately.

It is the financial data that is most important of all to be relating to other data. How does the profile of product test results stack up with brand share? How does the relative performance of advertising in the category stack up with brand share? We need to line up consumer loyalty (and the emotions or affinity that people have with brands) against the share in the market place. We can learn from the anomalies and spark new avenues of enquiry.

Our data sets will not all line up neatly and this is an opportunity not a problem. Assuming that the data has been appropriately collected and analysed in the first place, it is likely that differences in data sets are explicable and will lead to greater understanding and more opportunities to take action which will help brand success.

And finally, the jigsaw analogy falls down in another place too. It implies that there are only a finite number of pieces which we can collect whereas there are undoubtedly times when a different innovative piece of research may conjure up something which a more obvious approach might not. This is not about inventing new techniques. I am not a hoarder of information, but I still keep a qualitative report which was commissioned in 1983 which was part of the process towards getting a new Oxo advertising campaign. The research was hardly revolutionary in its structure in that it consisted of four group discussions (albeit extended groups of three to four hours). What made it unusual was that it deliberately attempted to take a step back. The groups were not focussed on Oxo or gravy making, nor were they focussed on advertising. They were designed to understand how women felt about their lives as mothers, providers, income earners and how they experienced the pressures of family life in a rapidly changing society. A project was commissioned with a very specific end game in mind - to develop a new campaign for Oxo - and yet it did that by taking a step back and re-examining the broad context in which the brand existed. This was a key stage in the development of one of our most famous UK advertising campaigns which ran for 15 years.

## Conclusion

I have tried to define both the meaning and process of creating consumer insight. In re-branding our industry we must recognise that the product needs to evolve too and we have taken some steps towards this. However if we are to fully grasp the opportunity which presents itself we need to evolve our structures and processes. We need to think about the people we recruit and the environments we place them in. And finally we have to change our approach to the outputs and the forums in which those outputs are debated. Whilst insight may come about through the happy accidents of connections which people make, there is much we can do to make these accidents more likely to occur within the timeframes that are demanded by those who need to act upon them.

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