

CAN RESEARCHERS CEDE CONTROL?

WHAT WEB 2.0 MEANS FOR MARKET RESEARCH

As Web 2.0 becomes an ever greater reality in our lives, the relationship between researcher and respondent is being fundamentally redefined. Ray Pointer explores how the buzz around co-creativity and consumer generated content challenge how we practice research today.

By: Ray Poynter.

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CONTACT US

ESOMAR

Vondelstraat 172

1054 GV Amsterdam

The Netherlands

Tel.: +31 20 589 7800

Email: customerservice@esomar.org

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By Ray Poynter.

Respondents take the driving seat: Research 1.0 was something we did to people; Research 2.0 is something we do with people.

Web 1.0 was a one-way street; the few generated the content, created the rules, and controlled the systems. The many were relegated into the roles of browser, reader, and consumer of what was provided for them. Web 2.0 has democratised the web, creating a two-way street, based on activities such as user-generated content, co-creation, and the power of WOM (Word of Mouth).

Brands are increasingly recognising that the shift from 1.0 to 2.0 is creating changes in the relationship between the brand and the customer, a fact acknowledged last year when Procter & Gamble CEO A.G. Laffey said that brands had to 'cede control' to customers. One important consequence of this change is that market researchers need to realise that customers are no longer simply, potential respondents; they are stakeholders in the brand.

Customers create their own playlists on their iPods and design their own holidays online. People are increasingly taking control over different parts of their lives. Pete Comley described the change from 1.0 to 2.0 in transactional analysis terms, with 1.0 being represented by Parent<>Child relationships, and 2.0 by Adult<>Adult (see the October 2006 issue of Research World).

Time warp

Traditional market research has adopted what Brunswick's Graeme Trayner has termed a 'command and control mindset'. Market research is very 1.0, and has been reluctant to move out of its comfortable time warp.

Hitherto, researchers have selected the timing of surveys and the research agenda has been defined by the research process, not by the buyers of the product or service. Researchers have determined the questions and the answers. If we said that a particular question had only four possible answers, then we accepted only those four. If we said select only one answer, we insisted on only one answer. If we said make your answers add up to 100, we meant 100, not approximately 100.

Traditional research has been based on the assumption that respondents have been selected at random and are unaware of the research process. A typical project comprises matched cells, questions to disguise the true objectives of the research, checks and incentives – a process that has been described as being more reminiscent of tests with lab rats than of a constructive dialogue with customers.

Indeed, in these days of increased interest in semiotics, the very word 'respondent' warrants attention, as does the statistician's reference to subjects and cases. Instead of saying 'customers',

'consumers', or perhaps 'stakeholders', the term 'respondent' establishes the view that the stimuli are generated by the researcher, whilst the respondent merely responds.

Decline

Market research has seen a catastrophic decline in response rates, along with a growth in demand for controls over the ability to contact respondents, eg, restrictions on instreet intercepts, phone calls and emails. Is this partly a result of the 'command and control' mindset of market researchers becoming increasingly irrelevant and uninviting to customers and consumers? The problem may be that although customers and stakeholders might be looking for an Adult<>Adult relationship, researchers are trying to persist with a crossed relationship, namely Parent<>Adult.

For once it is true to say that we need a paradigm shift. We need to move from Research 1.0 with its perceived statistical robustness, created from the control generated by the lab rat approach, to the much less scientific, more collaborative, two-way environment of Research 2.0. Research 1.0 was something we did to people; Research 2.0 is something we do with people.

Cede control

The first change we need to grasp is that if brands are increasingly ceding control to their customers, then researchers can't treat these stakeholders as subjects to be set tests to complete and to be used at the whim of the researcher. We will need to see all customers as stakeholders and realise that our relationship with them needs to be a discourse of respect, based on collaboration rather than coercion.

One key element of both Web 2.0 and Research 2.0 is online communities, which companies are increasingly creating to help them develop their brands. P&G is a key player in this area, with

initiatives such as their Tremor Panels and their collaboration with Yahoo to create Capessa (which proclaims itself 'the collective wisdom of women'). Online communities tend to be used for WOM marketing, brand building and research. If market researchers are to play an active role in this environment, we will need to move away from our traditional shibboleths, such as anonymity and the separation of marketing and research.

Although online panels may at first appear to be part of the traditional Research 1.0 approach, they are actually in the vanguard of Research 2.0. They have an Adult<>Adult relationship with their members, based on a mutually advantageous relationship. Panel members take part in many surveys (in some cases more than 50 a year) which means they see more questionnaires than the typical researcher – which in turn means that they are becoming more research-savvy. Online panels are increasingly becoming communities, something which will expand in the near future.

Implications of Web 2.0 and Research 2.0

- Power is shared, co-creation replaces central planning;
- We are researching 'with' stakeholders, not 'on' respondents;
- It will be harder to apply traditional statistical models;
- More research will be qualitative in style, but quantitative in volume;
- Clients will need to resource the research discourse, or risk alienating customers.

If online panels work, it is not because they are an approximation of a random probability model, where we assume that the sample is drawn from the population. When we use online panels we

have dispensed with the historical model and embraced a results-based paradigm, rather than one based on constructs.

Discourse

Researchers who have been the quickest to embrace Research 2.0 have been mining blogs, creating forums, capturing user-generated content, incorporating mobile phones as part of the discourse, and creating customer blogs as an asynchronous qualitative tool. However, it is likely that this is just the tip of the iceberg; we should expect to see many new techniques appearing on the scene over the next few years. US futurist Ray Kurzweil has talked about the power of IT doubling every 12 months. We should be prepared for changes in the research world to be on this sort of scale.

Web 2.0 and Research 2.0 have major implications for brands in how they respond to insight from customers. When a customer joins a brand forum or online community they expect to be listened to and responded to. We are already seeing emails such as, "I sent in a suggestion yesterday, but I haven't heard anything back yet. Do you take us seriously or not?" In the past brands could commission an agency to conduct a piece of research and pretty much forget about it from when the questionnaire was designed until the presentation was being prepared – an approach sometimes called the 'commission and forget' model. With a Research 2.0 project, the discussion is continuous, and the stakeholders joining in the co-creation expect to be involved and their expectations are demanding. The client needs to be available, involved, and responsive.

Brands used to try to differentiate themselves in terms of product differences and then later in terms of their image. But now brands need to develop themselves in terms of their relationships with their customers. Brands that co-create with

customers will be increasingly differentiated in ways that create and reinforce brand affinity, innovation, and advocacy. •

Ray Poynter is Director at Virtual Surveys.

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CONTACT US

ESOMAR
Vondelstraat 172
1054 GV Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Tel.: +31 20 589 7800

Email: customerservice@esomar.org