

“MARKET RESEARCH GOT IT ABSOLUTELY RIGHT”

Oscar-winning director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck explains how his film *The Lives of Others* would never have been a hit without research.

By Robert Heeg.

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By Robert Heeg.

Believe it or not, there are similarities between market research and making movies. Oscar-winning director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck explains how his film *The Lives of Others* would never have been a hit without research.

Berlin's majestic Brandenburger Tor was once the ominous symbol of a nation divided: a gate not to be passed through. Nowadays tourists are more than welcome to stroll underneath the Tor from West to East. There they can buy souvenirs of the former German Democratic Republic. These tacky communist trinkets are referred to as 'Ostalgie', a wordplay on Ost (East) and nostalgia. But former East German citizens have little time for this kind of sentiment. Oppressed as they were by a totalitarian regime, they are grateful that Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film *The Lives of Others* offers the world a rare glimpse of their dark past. "I think they're glad that I took their concerns seriously, without judging them or turning them into a caricature," he explains.

Henckel von Donnersmarck may have been born and raised in the free West but he did have his own wall to overcome. In an inspiring keynote speech at September's ESOMAR Congress in Berlin, he described his struggle to get his first feature film funded and produced, with some strong messages for the assembled researchers. For instance, never be too modest when it comes to your work. A valuable lesson, as industry leaders have said for years that the sector is losing the war for talent to more outgoing segments like marketing. The director laughs. "To the research industry I would say: tell people concrete and specific success stories, like mine. Then they'll see what an attractive and important field market research is."

Insane

Another insight from Henckel von Donnersmarck was never to take no as a definite 'no' – very relevant for a segment that is struggling with increasing non-response. "If you're trying to interview someone, it's as if you're selling them something. There are people who can sell you anything. So if you get good interviewers, you'll get your answers. Measure the quality of the interviewer by the amount of responses they get. The ultimate example is Alfred Kinsey, who asked people about their sex lives. He did this in the fifties but he found ways of eliminating non-response."

Confidence in his work kept him going, but when his film was finally finished, he had yet to overcome the biggest hurdle: the German distributors. One after another they turned the film down, saying it was too dark and heavy to become a commercial success. But when market research identified the right market segment for the movie and tested it on a select focus group, it was predicted to attract over two million viewers. Henckel von Donnersmarck was sceptical: "They asked seven people their opinions, and came up with this number ... I thought it was insane!" But he was also delighted with the research results as they convinced the distributor to go ahead with the release. And indeed, more than two million Germans saw the movie. Not only that, but *The Lives of Others* became the most successful non-English-language film of the year, winning an Oscar for best foreign film. "So market research got it absolutely right. I knew there was an audience for this film, we just needed to find it."

Stasi research

The central theme of the movie is privacy, or rather the lack of it. In the former DDR, neighbours,

relatives and even lovers spied on each other. But above all, the secret service – the dreaded Stasi – knew everything about everyone. As one character observes in the film, “The state knows that men buy 2.3 pairs of shoes a year.”

In market research, too, the privacy issue is key. And although agencies would love to know exactly how many shoes we buy, Henckel von Donnersmarck jokingly brushes any Stasi comparisons aside. “I sometimes wonder where all the Stasi people have gone. Maybe your industry has absorbed some of them. Here in Germany we now see a counter-effect: apparently people are so protective of their privacy that it’s very difficult to conduct market research, probably because we have seen the terrible consequences of governments that know everything.” In his research for the movie, Henckel von Donnersmarck interviewed many former Stasi agents who were obviously not keen to talk. “It took some persuasion. But their reputation is already so bad that it can’t get any worse. They probably reckoned: let’s at least get the facts right.”

Fear

It wasn’t fear of a new Big Brother society that made him write *The Lives of Others*, but he describes the topic as immensely important. “Invasion of privacy is everywhere, especially with the advent of new technology. And even in our society, people who deviate from the norm – like Islamists – are being monitored. Also, all those companies that swear they will not pass on your personal details are lying. Of course they pass it on, they just think you’re never going to know.”

Despite his own faith in market research, he knows that some of his fellow filmmakers distrust the industry, fearing that Hollywood studios will use it to determine made-to-order movies for guaranteed box office hits. But Henckel von Donnersmarck doesn’t believe that researchers will spell the end of creativity. “Yes, they would do as asked by their clients, but I also believe that the people I met at the ESOMAR congress would convince the studios that a better way to do research is to find an audience for something that is made out of true passion. After all, people often don’t know what they want, so that’s not the right question to ask. As artists we should not fulfil expectations, we should surprise audiences.”

Maybe that’s why he wouldn’t tell *Research World* about his next project. Still, there’s one thing the

director can promise us. “Whatever my next project will be, I will definitely use market research again.” •

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