



# Tear down the wall between you and your consumers

I was recently part of a discussion surrounding innovation in qualitative research. Some participants immediately began talking about how the Internet will reshape the way qualitative research is conducted. They pointed to the rising popularity of blogging and social networking and argued that since we can tap into the “honest” opinions provided through these outlets, the face of qualitative research will be changed forever.

In my view, however, their impact will be evolutionary, not revolutionary. Having lived through the introduction of other killer apps in the qualitative space (online focus groups, bulletin-board discussion groups) I felt that while these emerging tools have the potential to be valuable, they will simply become additional tools to be used at our disposal. Therefore, I expressed a different point of view: Innovation in qualitative research will have less to do with technology and more to do with Pink Floyd.

Being accustomed to the blank stares I almost always receive when trying to be a bit provocative, I asked all in the discussion if they were familiar with Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*. Most agreed that they were familiar with at least the more popular songs on the album (“Another Brick in the Wall,” “Hey You,” “Comfortably Numb,” etc.) but I was surprised by how many had never listened to the entire album and did not know what it was really about.

I explained that the album deals with a central character whose depression, fueled by a traumatic childhood resulting from the death of his father at an early age coupled with an overbearing mother, leads him to chemical dependency and anti-social behavior. This behavior helps him to build a metaphorical wall around himself, shutting him in from the outside world.

As researchers, over time, we have all added bricks to the walls separating our clients from their

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consumers. This wall is embodied by the one-way mirror of every focus group facility as well as by computer monitors when online techniques are being used.

## **For good reason**

Participants and clients have traditionally been separated for good reason. In many cases, it is best to have a trained moderator leading a discussion with groups of people. Such cases typically involve research in which a discussion is being led to evaluate something (i.e., an advertisement, product, concept, positioning, etc). In these instances it is best to have a skilled moderator leading the discussion and probing into various areas.

However, consumer insights are also used to spark creativity, not just evaluate creative output. In

such cases, researchers should take a sledgehammer to the walls dividing those in the back room from would-be group participants and encourage approaches that provide direct consumer contact. Having direct contact with consumers helps marketers:

- develop instincts for the consumer groups that they are marketing to;
- take an active part in the insight process; and
- create a collaborative environment where superior ideas can emerge.

### **Regular interaction**

Imagine for a moment how well you could craft or evaluate ideas for your target market if you actually spent a significant amount of time with them – not by observing them in the context of a focus group but through regular personal interaction with them. You could observe how they use your product in a natural setting, you could see the impact their children have on shopping occasions, you could see them turning the channel when the commercials come on while simultaneously searching the Web or finishing up their latest blog entry.

After spending a lot of time with people in your target market, you might find that you start reacting to creative ideas more efficiently and with greater certainty. Eventually you will be able to look at an idea and evaluate how well you think it will fly based on your own personal experiences vs. what others have told you about the target.

### **Taking an active part**

Most marketers' idea of taking an active part in the insight process involves coming to a focus group facility (late), checking e-mail, inhaling M&Ms and wondering why we always order chicken at these groups! Oftentimes, marketers rely on the researchers in

the back room to summarize findings and this reduces the burden on them to stay focused during focus group discussions.

Imagine, though, that you did not have the researcher (or moderator) as a crutch to lean on and that it was up to you to understand consumer wants and needs. You would have to pay more attention and let your curiosity guide you throughout your consumer interactions. By doing so, you become more cognitively involved in the insight process and your experiences will serve as the foundation for idea generation. This will lead to more efficient ideation since you won't need to question whether ideas are valid; if they are based on the direct interaction you have had with consumers then they are by definition valid. As such, your concerns should not surround understanding which ideas are valid, but which of the valid ideas you have generated are most worthy of further development.

### **Don't go it alone**

While personal interaction with consumers is recommended, marketers are not advised to go it alone. Rather, such experiences should be had in teams. For example, a cross-functional brand team of 12 people looking to understand the shopping habits of aging Boomers may want to divide into four smaller groups of three members each. Each team then may want to have three immersion experiences with members of the target market. Such a design allows one person to ask questions while the others either take notes or video the session. Having multiple immersion experiences lets each team member interview a consumer and ensures that a reasonable number of consumers are interviewed.

Collaboration comes in when the teams debrief about their

experiences. The debrief should be facilitated by a trained moderator using a structured process in which team members talk about their observations and work as a team to capture areas of opportunity from those observations. Once established, the areas of opportunity can serve as the springboard for idea generation.

Following this approach, all team members feel that they have an active role in the idea generation process and develop ownership of and enthusiasm for the ideas generated – both of which are important in keeping momentum going throughout the development process.

When considering direct consumer contact, you might wonder whether the role of the researcher is diminished. This is definitely not the case. While the researcher no longer needs to be the ears and eyes of the marketer, the researcher is vital to the success of the process. The researcher must craft appropriate market immersion experiences as well as draft a discussion guide that interviewers can follow when going through the process. In addition, researchers should be part of the process as they are part of a brand team.

### **Start building**

Focus groups will remain a powerful tool in our qualitative toolbox to help understand how consumers react to ideas, creative, concepts, etc. In fact, facilitated discussion with participants in a central location will likely enjoy the majority of all dollars earmarked for qualitative research. However, in situations where consumer insights will be used to spark ideas, marketers are advised to tear down the walls dividing themselves from their target market and start building a firsthand understanding of their consumers. | Q