

MEDIACOM

MAGAZINE

Data that speaks volumes

BRANDS OF THE FUTURE

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Nowadays, automated data is plentiful and accessible to all. But what's the best way of using it? Mick Mernagh explains how brands of the future will combine big data with human insight to find a competitive edge.

Twenty years ago, before joining MediaCom, I worked for the UK Government. I worked on a long-running study called The British Crime Survey, helping to research the volume and the causes of crime.

Each year this study would count and classify the amount of reported and solved crimes across the UK, to allow the government of the day to make decisions on criminal justice policy. The research not only identified those crimes that were on the increase and the crimes that were not being solved, but also the crimes people were most worried about.

It was good training for identifying the best way to treat data in all its forms and taught me three lessons that are as relevant today in the media world as they were back then for the government.

First, cultural behaviours can be hard to record.

Crime statistics need to be representative but, back then, they often weren't. Some communities, for example, never spoke to the police – so crimes were never recorded. At the same time, some police forces were incentivised to focus on certain crimes, which made their statistics biased. Getting the full story, I realised, meant understanding communities and cultures, and crucially, people.

Second, new technology can skew the results.

Crime statistics need to be consistent over time – but you need to account for how new technology changes behaviours. When online banking became popular, for instance, bank robberies went down. Crime wasn't dropping, but it was easier to clone a credit card than physically rob a bank. Understanding the impact of tech is just as important in the media world today.

Third, stats can't tell us anything about emotions.

Importantly, the government policy on crime needed to be empathetic. The hard data was important but not the whole story. Our research also highlighted that certain groups of people had a heightened fear of certain crimes (like older people and mugging). Such fears needed to be addressed directly and frequently, even if the data said other crimes were more prevalent.

From crime to media

In the late 1990s at MediaCom, we spent 98% of our research budget counting eyeballs and ears; generating data on who was watching and listening to what. This was important

for media trading. But this data alone couldn't identify cultural behaviours, only reactions to changes in technology. It never got close to the emotions of the viewers.

Back in 2002, we added empathy and a greater level of understanding to our research. That meant talking to people quantitatively and qualitatively about *why* they watched and read things and how it made them feel.

This has even more relevance today. With so much data available, brands need to understand the narrative behind various data points, as well as be assured that all sources are representative. Otherwise, the story becomes skewed and leads to poor communication.

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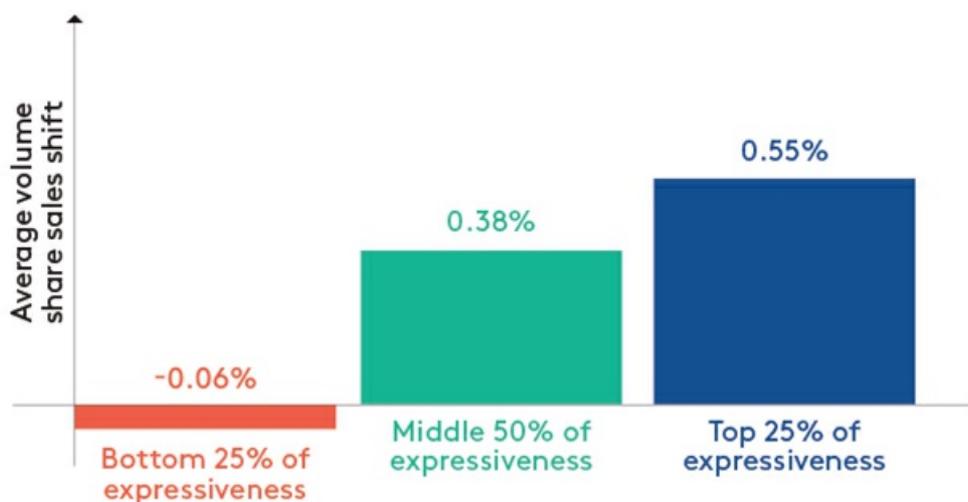
For example, we were recently working with an entertainment client. The client produced video content centrally and used it globally, with varying degrees of success. One data source said video content in this category was more influential than any other. A second source said our client's content was underperforming against its competitors.

We used our Content Assessment Tool (CAT) as a third source of insight. CAT combines the claimed metrics of content performance with measured behavioural responses. This is done through a standard online quantitative study and facial coding designed to capture specific reactions – like smiling – that correspond to emotions such as happiness and surprise.

CAT allowed us, on a global level, to compare and determine how well the content scored on a rational level, and in terms of generating more unconscious, emotional reactions. We

were able to advise the client how to improve its content using local, regional and cultural insights.

This is important because several studies (Realeyes, Affectiva, Kantar Millward Brown) show that generating a positive emotional reaction to a piece of content has a subsequent sales uplift.



Above: There is an underlying relationship between 'Expressiveness' and subsequent sales growth. (Source: Kantar Millward Brown — 312 cases)

Such a multi-spoke approach can appear obvious, but unfortunately – whether it is blamed on small budgets, tight timelines, or both – we have too many examples of brands who try to attract specific audiences without getting to know them. As a researcher, my rule of thumb is that if you don't engage with your target audience before you communicate with them, you can't expect them to engage with you afterwards.

Human data at scale

At MediaCom, we are trying to apply the same lessons I learned at the British Crime Survey to ensure we are globally representative and consistent. We do this using Live Panel, our global consumer research panel.

We speak to more than 500,000 people in 40 countries, initially using the same

questionnaire, so our facts are consistent. The respondents remain on our panels so we can re-contact them to find out more; whether this is about one of our client's brands or their adoption of a new technology.

We work with our sister company, Kantar Research, to fuse other data sets with what we already know about our panellists, and talk to them individually to ask "Why?". Our task is not just to quantify behaviour, but qualify it and bring it to life.

Recording behavioural data and researching human motivations must be studied together, which we can do by connecting Live Panel responses with classical types of media data. What we are trying to do is replicate the human social experience, because the more you know someone, the easier it is to communicate with them.

Marketing is a very subjective business, full of opinion (and increasingly, algorithms), but what matters is that we don't lose touch with real people. As we become more immersed in a data-driven digital world, the smartest brands will be those which maintain that human connection.

This article was first published by Research Live [here](#).

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