


A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

Four glowing incandescent light bulbs hang from black cords against a solid blue background. The bulbs are arranged in a horizontal row, and their light creates a warm, yellowish glow. The text 'Creativity is made by data, imagination and empathy' is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font across the middle of the image.

Creativity is made by data, imagination and empathy

DATA OPINION TRANSFORMATION

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The best answers for brand growth will come from a combination of imagination, speculation and focus on data.

There's a reason that organisations that have real diversity thrive. It is not just a tick-box exercise. It's the synthesis of people with differences in opinion, personality and thinking. It's the ultimate "Avengers Assemble" team (as WPP UK country manager Karen Blackett puts it).

These teams are not groups of people who love hanging out together (they may do, they may not). They are teams whose natural inclination is to go in different directions, to go at different paces and with different motivations. Whose behaviours don't fit one nicely orchestrated corporate values box. But who come together with a single goal. In our case,

it's to grow our clients' business.

It's a rare person who combines the best of what used to be described as left-brain and right-brain thinking. The geographical concept of the brain may be out of date, but you all know what I mean. Imagination and speculation, combined with forensic concentration on data. The best answers for brand growth will come from such a combination. And such a combination requires a diverse team working together.

Data understanding alone gets you only to the halfway mark of great thinking. Imagination and empathy take you the rest of the way to brilliance.

When people bemoan the split of creative and media, they're probably talking about this. And whatever building people sit in, there is a need to combine good concrete data analysis – including a robust understanding of the difference between correlation and causation – with the ability to dream, to confabulate, to tell stories. In the end, imagination is what the planner must use to fill in the gaps between data points.

Let me give you one example of a food brand whose data team found that discount offers performed significantly better (and against expectations) if served to potential customers the night before rather than immediately before use. They of course immediately doubled down on serving messages at this time, and there was a great hike in the short-term response.

This is interesting, but not as interesting as the “why”. Why is this the case? And what is its impact? The discount in question wasn't a large one and the food brand was in the mass-market category. Let's use that one data point to imagine the customer. As is so often the case, there was no budget for more research.

The coupon was being predominantly taken up by people who were properly budgeting for their lunches and who were planning ahead. So far, so interesting. There's so much more, though. For any great team, the nugget of data could be used to not just drive the creative execution of that offer, but to feed into broader creative development, strategic positioning of the brand, menus and service values of the organisation. Maybe a new type of offer

would suit this customer segment's lifestyle – for example, five lunches for the price of three to ensure careful budgeters commit to one food outlet, thus breaking category norms to drive loyalty and repeat business.

What else can we imagine from this one data point? How can we empathise with this audience? (And for the true meaning of empathy, see Dave Trott's blog, ["Sympathy v empathy"](#)). If buyers are planning meals carefully during the week, are they budgeting for a blowout at the weekend? Would a partnership with a glossy magazine be a great move, so that the frugality has an upside, with some affordable luxury? Or the chance to win tickets to an ITV Saturday night show?

It's one tiny bit of data that could so easily be siloed in a direct marketing team. One tiny bit of data that could lead to a brand growth transformation. In tough, competitive times, no nugget of data should go unexamined, because true creativity means data analytics combined with imagination and empathy.

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