

Don't let media's rigour allow you to pass up opportunities

INNOVATION INSIGHT STRATEGY

SUE UNERMAN, CHIEF TRANSFORMATION OFFICER 05 MAY 2017

There needs to be a balance between following the rules, justifying actions on the basis of data, and taking a leap into the unknown.

It's always a pleasure to watch Rory Sutherland of Ogilvy in full flow. If you haven't heard him speak, here's a collection of his [bon mots](#).

Last time I saw him speak he was [holding the ad industry to account for a lack of risk taking](#). He said: "Is the industry programmed to think too small? Is too much effort directed at arse-covering under the guise of rigour?"

The belief in the importance of rigour is a good thing. Media practitioners are involved in spending money on behalf of clients and to do so on a whim and without evidence is clearly both inappropriate and inexcusable.

Without a good base of evidence you cannot expect to drive better efficiency and effectiveness. If, however, you only ever spend money on stuff that has been proven to work in the past how on earth are you able to innovate?

In 2012 Chelsea played Barcelona in the semi-final of the Champions League. It's probably fair to say that most people who watched the game on the TV in the UK, excluding Chelsea fans, were rooting for Barcelona, home of some of the most beautiful football in the world at that point. It also probably goes without saying that if you're not an active Chelsea fan in the UK you'd prefer to see them lose.

I watched my partner watch the game. At the end of it he was yelling "Just stick it in the mixer".

I had to ask him what that meant. He said that Barcelona were renowned for their passing game and maintaining possession of the ball. They knew what worked, and what didn't work, and played to a system that made them extraordinarily successful, and conquered all before them. A system that they refined all the time, but that they didn't like to deviate from.

Unfortunately for Barcelona fans (or anyway non-supporters of Chelsea) the only people who understood Barcelona's system better than Barcelona were Chelsea.

Their fans were desperate for Barcelona to deviate from their system of keeping the ball in possession and take some chances. To stick it in the mixer (goal area) and not worry about the chance of giving the ball away.

As one commentator wrote: "No-one would have been hailing a defensive masterclass from Chelsea if Barcelona had taken just one of their glaring opportunities.

"Then the talk would have been about how Barcelona had unscrewed the wheels on Chelsea's parked bus and left a load of cardboard boxes in their place, how they'd paid for being so defensive and so anti-football. But they didn't, so Chelsea's plan can be judged to have worked to perfection."

How many glaring opportunities are passing by because the rigour of media means that they can't be proved to work in advance of trying?

Managing innovative thinking is crucial. If everything is changing so fast, and we're spending all our time looking at what just happened how on earth can we have the ideas or the impetus, let alone the time to plan the different?

There needs to be a balance between following the rules and justifying actions on the basis of data, and taking a leap into the unknown. Sometimes, most of the time, sticking to the tried system is good and proper. Sometimes you need to stick it in the mixer for any chance of a win.

INNOVATION INSIGHT STRATEGY