

A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

The future of strategy is synthesis

INNOVATION OPINION STRATEGY

SUE UNERMAN, CHIEF TRANSFORMATION OFFICER 29 JUN 2017

We can expect more breakthroughs as we synthesise more data sources and disciplines.

Cannes week sees the unveiling of the latest [Warc survey on the future of strategy](#). Of course strategy itself doesn't change in function. [Richard Rumelt usefully defines](#) it as discovering the crucial factors and designing a way to deal with them.

Does 2017 change how you do that?

If it hasn't yet it should do. We're moving fast from planning assumptions to planning conclusions. The arrival of real-time data describing patterns of actual behaviour to replace claimed behaviour and intent means we can stop saying "I think" and instead say "I know".

Many experts believe that all true breakthroughs come from synthesis.

That data is going to come from plenty of different sources. This is especially relevant for some categories. For example the many markets where house moving and interest in house moving predicts purchase (utilities, furniture purchase, insurance etc).

Learning to source home searches data and properly interpret it is different from having a bit of a deep dive into TGI. Strategists need to synthesise different data and its interpretation. This is very exciting. Synthesis is very exciting.

Many experts believe that all true breakthroughs come from synthesis. For instance, Rocket scientists and doctors. There's been significant advances in healthcare because of the developments of Nasa scientists – voice controlled wheelchairs, laser angioplasty, MRI.

Sir John Bell, Regius professor of medicine at Oxford University thinks that the only time there's real innovation in any discipline it's at the interface of one expertise with another. He says "multi-disciplinary clusters are a huge cauldron for innovation".

It's not just in science that this is true.

Detective fiction is huge for book sales, on TV and drove a step change in the popularity of Podcasts. Who invented the genre in literature?

In long-term brand communications strategy, the analysis of new data sources is giving us new routes to market and new insights into buying patterns and motivations.

The earliest use of forensic detection came about because the first proper detective writer Edgar Allan Poe learnt evidence based deduction methods when he wrote an obscure book about molluscs. Oliver Tearle writes in *The Secret Library* that *The Conchologist's First Book* (hugely popular in its day, and adapted by Poe from the original to pay his bills when his own writing wasn't selling) was a "brilliant synthesis of various influences to form something original and new".

The biggest innovations in popular music can be tracked to the same sources. Rock and roll came about as a synthesis of country music and R&B (previously, very separate genres – effectively poor white people's music and poor black people's music), the inter-racial hybrid hastened by the increasing broadcasting range of local radio stations so that different styles of music reached new audiences.

In planning strategy the same rules apply. We're discovering new data sources to create efficiencies – in some categories spend can be halved (at least) to reach more precisely the true short term market.

In long-term brand communications strategy, the analysis of new data sources is giving us new routes to market and new insights into buying patterns and motivations.

In a way there's nothing new in this. Steve Gladdis, joint CSO at MediaCom, revolutionised Rennie's media strategy over a decade ago when, as planner on the account, he analysed TNS Food Panel data to reach consumers just when they'd eaten – at "the point of suffering". The work was fairly time consuming and analogue. This year, fast and in real-time, we're able to reach people personally and at scale, with the right message and at the right time by using their specific geolocation and their fast food ordering behaviour.

Gladdis in his original work synthesised two data sources – TV viewing and food consumption. From this came a breakthrough that drove effective ROI by double digits.

We can expect more breakthroughs as we synthesise more data sources and more disciplines.

The future of strategy lies in effective synthesis.

This blog was originally published in Campaign on 29 June 2017. To view blog post, click [here](#)

INNOVATION OPINION STRATEGY