
The Power of Empathy

CONSUMER INSIGHT OPINION

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At MediaCom we put consumers at the heart of our planning. And to really understand them you have to walk in the shoes of the end-consumer. We call it Method Insight. This is a personal story of how Method Insight began in the UK and has become part of our work around the world.

There is lots and lots of data available to analyse path to purchase and give us a microscopic look at digital media behaviour. We now know more than ever about the consumer's decision-making process from studies by marketing research companies and Google Analytics. But none of the information that we can get from any of these sources can replace the power of empathy.

At MediaCom London we have been encouraging every planner to put down the data and walk a mile or two in the target market's shoes. Funnily enough for some of us who have been working at MediaCom for a while, or in my case at the company MediaCom acquired at the turn of the last century, The Media Business, this is real back-to-our-roots stuff.

Before we had the resource and budgets to buy all the exciting research that we do now, we had no alternative but to go out and find out about real consumer behaviour for ourselves. In fact, one of the first things Nick Lawson – now our EMEA CEO – did when he first joined the company a couple of decades ago was go out to Euston Station in London and ask rush-hour commuters about early evening drinking (I should point out that this was for a pitch for a wine company not because he was looking for someone to go to the pub with!)

However, as the UK office grew in size, acquired more data and, dare I say, more professional expertise, we noticed that our planners were turning to our brilliant Real World Insight team for consumer understanding. It worked very well but it also tended to mean that the planners were outsourcing insight rather than trying to empathise with what their target audiences were feeling.

Back in 2008 we were discussing how to cope with this situation – both the frequent bottleneck caused by resources and the sense that there was sometimes lack of emotional insight from some of the planning teams – when our strategy head Steve Gladdis came up with a brilliant solution: Method Insight.

He suggested that we free the planners from their desks and the tyranny of too much data and send them out to experience the consumer journey in person. So with a bit of guidance from Pauline Robson, head of Real World Insight, the planners set off to find out what really made the consumer tick. This is now mandatory on every client brief. We believe passionately that no great strategy comes without great consumer insight, and for truly great consumer insight Method Insight is a must.

And it's incredibly simple to do. Our planners for Müller have spent time lurking in the chilled food sections of supermarkets, our planners for Met Police have been to hairdressers in

Brixton and our planners for holiday firm TUI spent a day meeting holidaymakers at Gatwick.

One outstanding example was when Nicola Jopling spent an evening with her sister's National Childcare Trust group to understand how to sell baby monitors to pregnant mums. Nicola, who is single and has no plans to become personally involved in pregnancy, nevertheless immersed herself in the group and picked up lots of great insights. Those insights helped her persuade the client to ditch the existing strategy, which involved daytime TV and parenting magazines.

She was convinced that the true target market for Tomy's new baby monitor, which had a very premium price and substantial technical superiority over its competition, was not the broad mum audience that standard research measured. Instead, she wanted to go for upmarket pregnant opinion forming mums to be... not an audience easily measured by standard industry research.

This upmarket target audience worked and therefore didn't watch daytime TV. On top of that they found mother and baby magazines patronising. Instead they were hugely swayed by what a few years ago was still a newish trend... blogs by mums online. The new strategy involved winning over these bloggers by publishing their top tips for new mums in a leaflet that was then distributed via exhibitions, in-store and promoted by the bloggers themselves. And, of course, it promoted the Tomy monitor.

It was an unusual solution that proved to be a huge success. And it was all because of Method Insight.

Sue Unerman's new book, Tell The Truth, which includes a fuller case study of the Tomy baby monitor, is now available for pre-order at Amazon.

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