

STOP ASKING QUESTIONS

UNDERSTANDING HOW CONSUMERS MAKE SENSE OF IT ALL

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PREFACE

The challenge for MR is to deliver the insight needed to make the right management decisions. The basic MR tool is: asking questions, analysing the answers through statistics and/or interpretation and deriving meaning from this analysis. Excellence is often sought in refining those tools. We would like to suggest that this tool is limited and propose new and complementary ways of deriving meaning from consumers that is more suited to the complex world we are living in. In order to deliver research that is not just 'manageable' and 'thorough', but also 'holistic' and 'inspirational' this approach stops asking direct questions and starts looking at the elicitation of anecdotes or stories within a natural setting. Critically we use visualisation techniques, linked to self-interpreted narrative to allow meaning to emerge, novel insights to be obtained and weak signals/opportunities to be detected early for competitive advantage.

THE CHALLENGE: MARKETING RESEARCH IN AN AMBIGUOUS SOCIETY

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think and act anew. Abraham Lincoln

Marketing reality of 2007 is that there is less time to make decisions than we used to have in the past, whereas the problems to address have become bigger, or at least, different and less known. We have hardly become familiar with what seemed to be 'universal laws of Marketing', like 'the four p's' or 'Aida', and now it looks as though they are becoming obsolete. Not that they have become completely useless, it looks more

as if applying these laws does not deal with the level of social mobility, or the speed of change and evolution in consumer demand. Applying traditional approaches is no longer a guarantee for success. Brand value is eroding in the fast moving sector: private brands are fast climbers; it becomes harder for brands to stand out and to differentiate. This loss in differentiation is translated in an eroding price difference. Lost and sad marketing managers accuse the consumer of 'not being reliable and predictive anymore'. They still talk in terms of supply and demand and fail to realise that both now co-evolve, they are interdependent and they constantly change. You could find truckloads of articles stating that the consumer is over-satisfied, unstable, unpredictable and on top of that: hardly accessible any longer for any message. Better marketing professionals mention the new successes where brand relevance is proven to be huge. Stories of hero brands of today, like the iPod or Easyjet, are told over and over. All of marketing world is eager to learn from these examples, but no success creates a recipe that can be imitated. Each event is unique in the evolution of the brand *landscape*. In the new environment there are no laws or recipes, but there are principles, dynamics and new words: engagement, passion, imagination, beauty, and simplicity; new flowers blossoming on the ruins of the unpredictable consumer yet to be determined. The success brands did not seem to look for a target group in order to fulfil their needs as they were told to: they started rather with a passion to make something extraordinary. They created the conditions in which consumer demand and their own capability would interact to stabilise the market around their evolving proposition. Another key phrase seems to be 'necessary or sufficient ambiguity': the clear

boundaries have ceased to be, the 'or-or'-consumer seems to have evolved into a 'and-and'-consumer.

How does the world of market research manage to be alive in a world where passion takes over from applying simple laws? How does market research survive in a world of growing complexity, where it does not make sense anymore to take a year of trying to find out needs? How does the world of market research help businesses find the insights that will help them build imaginative, holistic and intuitive brands? The true excellence in our view would be to enable research to be 'predictive', 'manageable' and 'thorough', but also 'imaginative' 'holistic', 'inspirational' and 'intuitive'.

Up to now we see a shift from 'facts to values': techniques to help to find the more fundamental emotional drivers to consumer behaviour: values, emotions. This is one of the answers of the marketing research world towards a more complex, more emotional kind of understanding. The basic researcher tools, however, did not really change: we usually find insights through asking questions and analysing the answers. In this paper we would like to propose Snowden's alternative that enables the world of marketing research to find insights that do credits to the growing complexity of marketing. The alternative to questions is the collection of stories, or narratives; a natural way of human beings to evoke more complex and subtle signals. The alternative to analysis is sense making: seeking for patterns as opposed to the finding of laws.

We will start analysing the problems with the current concept of asking questions and analyzing answers, and then dive into the possibilities of the story to derive meaning that helps building the future.

THE PROBLEM WITH ASKING QUESTIONS

Narratives are a natural way for us to share our knowledge and understanding. They are often used to reveal difficult or contentious issues. Sheets accreditation course Cognitive-edge.com

If we look up the word 'Question' in the online thesaurus of Oxford American Dictionary, the first four meanings of the noun are:

- A sentence expressed so as to elicit information;
- A doubt about the truth or validity of something;
- The raising of a doubt about or abjection to something;
- A matter forming the basis of a problem.

The first meaning is what we refer to when we state that asking questions to consumers might lead to wrong answers. Hans Ruelle, the tutor of one of the two authors (Stienstra), made a big issue of stating that the question is a completely wrong attitude in order to get information out of consumers. The only reason, he claimed, that we do ask questions is that we have no alternative: since we can't look directly in the head of the consumers we have to ask them questions about what's on their minds. Doing this, we limit ourselves to looking at their current knowledge. Consumers cannot tell us about their future interaction with our brands or half formed product ideas and the way these interactions will transform them. It is kind of ironic that asking questions is a widespread approach despite the fact that there is no marketing manager in the world who is not aware of problems such as the inclination of respondents to give answers that adept to the social norms. But actually the problem is larger than just that. We feel that it is useful to sum up the problems with asking questions in a more complete way.

First let us be aware that questions probe for different kinds of information. For the purpose of this article we differentiate between four types of probing:

- Information about (past) actions like buying behaviour, travelling behaviour, reading habits, etc. A typical question might be: how much time did you spend on watching television the last month?
- Information on 'plain knowledge' (for instance about brands, products).
- Information on 'own-system-knowledge' (such as questions about the decision process 'based on what aspects do you decide about buying a car').

- Information on attitude and emotions (which sentence describes your feeling the best? Please fill in on a five point scale for the following whether you feel these statements are applicable to brand A).

All these types of questions consider the respondents as a source of information to their external or internal states. And all these questions suffer from the same problem, namely that human beings are known to be extremely poor as a source of information about their own actions and their own internal states. Often this poor quality of human beings as a source of information about themselves is attributed to the distortion of the conscious mind over the unconscious mind. We tend to 'rebuild' information about our own behaviour, knowledge and feelings so that it better fits the way we like to see ourselves. We mould information into the values we live by, and are not even always aware of what values that might be. This inclination is often (but poorly) referred to as 'social conformity'. We feel though this issue is more fundamental than trying to live to the social norm, because the norm could be individual as well as social determined. This distortion, however, can become larger when a social norm is 'active' and/or if there are important interests at stake.

A problem less often mentioned is that the nature of human knowledge is completely different from the scientific, managerial definition of knowledge. From the latter perspective, knowledge is like a database. The concepts of knowledge are clear defined facts, opinions or relations that are easily accessible. Most of our knowledge, however, is contextual: it is there if you need it *but only if you need it*. When we make a decision we are not objective and rational in other than highly limited circumstances. To understand new situations we use patterns of our past experience as a filter, as well as those laid down by the common stories of the communities we belong to or engage with. Try to describe your daily route to work to a stranger and see if he will get there. He very well may not, for the simple reason that for you, getting to work is simply a routine. The knowledge about your daily route is not actively present and only available when needed.

Apart from this contextual problem, knowledge is not always available in a straightforward way. In many situations, it is not possible to write down all knowledge we have. Whatever we write down: we always can tell more. And whatever we tell about it covers but a part: we know more. Things we can do effortlessly or which we have a great deal of knowledge of can be difficult to describe. Consequently it is not only our distorted view of ourselves that makes us give the wrong answers to a question such as 'how much money do you spend on coffee'. Sometimes we simply do not know the answers. A gap exists between the explicit and the tacit. So people won't know the price of coffee, even if they buy it on a weekly basis. It is wrong to deduce that people are stupid (in the end they did find a value-price balance they are comfortable with), it is right to conclude that our day-to-day view on knowledge is wrong. This applies to straightforward knowledge such as regarding 'brands within the field of cosmetics' (the context in which the questions are being asked is so different from the context in which we buy cosmetics that the answers, no matter how hard we try, do not necessarily match reality). It applies even more to our knowledge about the decisions we make: whatever aspects steer our buying behaviour is information that is often both inaccessible and unclear.

Knowledge about feelings and emotions is probably even more difficult to gather. Whenever your adolescent son comes home after a school party, the only thing he is probably able to tell you is that 'it was alright'. How would he be able to find the words that express his feelings? How could he tell about his experiences? He might not want to tell you, but he also does not (yet) have the vocabulary and the skills to share his emotional life, especially not with someone of your age.

The problems as described above relate to asking questions in general, in any given form, with any given technique. But the reality of marketing research even aggravates these problems. In daily life questions are embedded in a conversation. Even an interview could be seen as a specific form of conversation: journalists and policemen use it all the time. They derive valuable information from it (if they are good in their work). Most

forms of research thought force the researcher to be very rigid in asking questions. Especially quantitative research uses an extremely formalized, rigid and closed sort of conversation: the questions are completely fixed in their verbal form and entirely deprived from the common non-verbal communication associated with it (which is traditionally seen as a pro: reduced bias). Also the order in which the questions are being asked is subject to strict patterns and most of the answers are predefined. This is as far as you can get from a normal, human interaction. There is only one excuse to use such an uncommunicative way of communication: the fact that it enables comparison of large quantities of interviews. It would be quite problematic to analyze 1,000 'real' conversations even if they had the same subject and the same underlying research question. But we do have ways to 'read' the results of 100,000 highly formalized interviews without great difficulties. Apparently we have to do away with the fundamental human laws of conversation in order to derive information.

In this section we made a point of sketching out the problems with asking questions in order to spotlight the limitations of current practice. This is marketing research as it is, these are the weaknesses of the very basic techniques we work with. That does not mean that research fails in the basis or that it is useless, but it does imply that we should acknowledge the shortcomings in what we do. These very limitations highly relate to our opening statement: within the 'old laws' we could very well live with these shortcomings. It is as in physics: Newtonian laws of motion worked within limits, they were based on assumptions of necessary simplicity. However as physicists explored the cosmos, they discovered the boundaries of those laws. Now that we live in an era that requires businesses to not only relate to consumer's minds but also to their very souls, we feel the need to push the boundaries of marketing research or at least: we should.

THE PROBLEM WITH INTERPRETATION

Traditional scientific method has always been at the very best 20-20 hindsight. It's good for seeing where you've

been. It's good for testing the truth of what you think you know, but it can't tell you where you ought to go.
Robert M. Pirsig.

The basic instrument of Market Research is not only asking questions but deriving information by analyzing the answers. This, as all study books will tell the students, is not a trivial matter. There is the 'minor' statistic problem of reliability of the results. Apart from that, we have the more fundamental problem of validity. The set of questions is supposed to reveal an important measure that stands for attributes of the human mind or human behaviour. Mostly there is an explicit or implicit model of reality that helps us relate the answers to reality, for instance the old AIDA- law. When 40% of the respondents claim to have seen an ad (attention), and 80% of this fraction claims they 'liked it' (interest), then we have a measure for what we feel is underlying the success of a campaign. How could advertising work if it were not remembered? And how could it work if it did not inflict interest and desire? The outcome of this should most certainly be action (buying behaviour). Or a simpler model: if 60% of the respondents claim to vote for candidate X, this relates highly to the actual voting procedure.

Basically this poses the very philosophic question of order. How can we be sure that the order of our models applies to reality? Snowden (2002) divides the field of relation between cause and effects into four domains representing growing levels of uncertainty:

The domain of the Known

In this domain we have working models we can rely upon, allowing us to predict behaviours reliably. This is the part of reality that managers love: a needed output is realized by a given input. We only need the figures that are well defined in our plans. The rigid way of getting information from consumers is no problem at all: we know the factors we are looking for.

The domain of the Knowable

In this domain we do not yet have clear relationships between our models of reality and reality, but we could be able to assess them. This is the field of scenario

planning, expert interviews. In this field qualitative research could most certainly play a role. Both expert interviewing and consumer interviewing is a method that can be helpful in formulating the possible relationships. It is the domain of discovery through analysis.

The domain of the Complex

Some domains of reality do not conform to any repeatable laws. In this domain it is not even possible to create a model that could be of use for future occasions. The best we can try is finding patterns. This is true for knowledge about wars, for instance: the next world war (if any) will not follow the same rules as the second world war, as the second had a quite different dynamic, different causes and different effects from the first one. In this domain qualitative research can be of limited use as one of the instruments that help trying to find patterns.

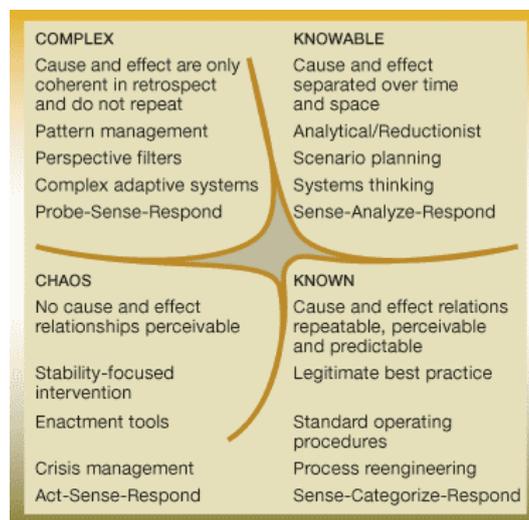
The domain of Chaos

At times of extreme turbulence not even pattern recognition is possible anymore. We are speaking of a crisis or the fertile domains of innovation when all the old patterns no longer work (think of the pace of innovation in war). Whenever this occurs in a business we have a severe problem, marketing research has become completely irrelevant: in the best case a new strong problem solving interim CEO can get an organization through or a new force emerges in the market.

To summarize: quantitative marketing research is applicable only in the field of the known and the knowable. Such techniques can only detect information that is contained within the hypotheses of our models. The other signals are ignored. And what if the laws underlying the model have slowly changed, and the subject of our research slowly drifted away from the field of the known to the field of the knowable, or the complex? What if the laws that we formulated were not universal as we suppose the laws of physics are, but were only temporary? It would not be a wild guess that AIDA worked fairly well within the 1960s and 1970s of the previous century, when there were relatively few products, a few TV-stations and everything was still new. But does it still apply in a world as commercially saturated as we have now? Asking the question is answering it. The problem with our models is that we would not know it very soon: the predictability would slowly decline. We could still be very satisfied with the figures from the research but ignore a reality that could be very relevant to future sales.

Qualitative research can be used within the less organized, more complex fields. Although qualitative research may have some power to detect signals that do not follow the rules of the model, there is still the problem of 'biased thinking', and a tendency to

**FIGURE 1
THE FIVE 'I'S OF INSPIRATION'**



guide the respondents. It is extremely difficult to ask any question without a model of the world underlying it; it is impossible to interpret data without one. The very act of asking a question is inflicting a view of the world to the person whom the question is asked. This problem is known as: begging the question, with as a well known example 'when did you stop beating your wife?' But basically any question is subject to it. If we ask a consumer the very open question such as 'what did you think about our product?' we still assume that the consumer spends some valuable thinking time to our product, or that thinking about a product has any relevance to our problem. Humans also like to "gift", what they tell us may be a gift and not truth. Take buying behaviour, for instance. In a qualitative research we could ask in a very open way for a list of all of the factors the respondents claim to take into account when buying a house. But then the focus group is over. And the very respondent claiming to want to live in the city only and to despise people living in the suburbs is confronted with advertising about a house in a small village – and he buys it. (This is not an invented story. It is how the Dutch author of this article bought a house 17 years ago. And he was only aware of his mind shift after a friend told him: 'hey, that's funny. A month ago you told me you would rather die than live in a suburb like this').

So basically we need to face the reality that all forms of marketing research are relatively blind to changing realities, and this in a time where we are confronted with an ever-increasing pace of changes.

SOLUTIONS WITHIN THE PARADIGM

The world of marketing research has always been aware of the problems we have stated, and has always sought solutions within the paradigm that prescribes that information about human behaviour and human attitude or emotions should be sought by means of asking questions. The solutions can be described in four types:

1. Living with the problem as *the best we can get* since no alternative is there;
2. Measuring instead of asking;

3. Trying to 'trick the consumer into being objective';
4. Finding better, more elaborate methods of asking questions and interpreting data in order to alleviate the problem.

Living with the problem

The first strategy is 'living with the problem'; we do the best we can with the tools available to us at the time. Obviously there is some connection between answers given and the reality. The art is to find the connection. This relies heavily on consistency. Maybe the answers in themselves are not completely valid, but we can deduce something from the difference between the answers if the study is repeated in a comparable way. We don't look at the value but at the value change. This is best seen in opinion polls. The polls usually describe the political reality rather well, especially when the voters behave in the way they used to do in the past. But every now and then, the political laws change without being noticed. Especially under those circumstances this strategy fails, as the Dutch noticed in the days of Pim Fortuijn.

Measuring instead of asking

The second strategy is direct measurement. This is, in our point of view, always better than indirect measurement through asking. It is applied for instance in media consumption (direct registration of the television). However it is possible only of more simple behaviour questions, not to attitude or brand perception. As all scientists know, measurement is not as straightforward as it looks. This goes for physics as well as for human behaviour. When the box registers the channel to which the TV-set is tuned, it still must be asked if anyone is watching. And then, what does watching mean? Does simultaneous watching and discussing, kissing, surfing the Internet count? If the respondents answer questions such as 'did you watch with attention' what do they mean if they say 'Yes'. An experiment in Holland with camera's pointed at the viewers seat was quite revealing in stating the problem with direct measuring: people did all kind of things while watching TV.

Trying to trick the consumer into being objective

The third is trying to trap the consumer. This is done in several ways, none of them being completely successful. One of the most used 'tricking strategies' is the pretence of completeness. All of the supposed relevant factors have been taken into account. This leads to very complete and long questionnaires, asking questions on all factors ('how would you rate the *politeness* of the staff? How accessible was the hotel? How do you rate the cleanliness of the rooms? How would you describe the way your room was furnished? Etc.). This strategy fails because of the fundamental 'fuzzy' character of consumer knowledge. The consumer doesn't walk through all of the mental stages he is supposed to. In real life the consumer takes a holistic approach, he doesn't take all of the factors into account. Answering to all of these questions gives a false model of the consumers' view.

Another way of 'tricking the consumer is to find a pattern in a lot of answers to a set of questions that is designed to do so. This is done in psychological tests, but also in Marketing Research studies: we try to find patterns that describe consumers on a level that they could not possibly describe themselves. This is not false in itself. If there is a problem with this approach it is that the pattern finding is rooted in a theory on the consumer's mind that might and might not be true. Even a heavily tested pattern is not necessarily valid. And if it is valid, it is most certainly not valid in all circumstances or for all kind of problems.

Improving questioning techniques

The last way of trying to cope with the problem is finding alternative ways to ask questions. The art of asking questions and the problems arising with the problem of asking has been often debated. We find more and more quantitative techniques using images and other techniques to make questions a richer sort of source.

The art of improving question technique is probably developed best within the regions of qualitative research. All literature on qualitative research that we know of prescribes a 'funnel'-shaped communication design: start

as broad as you can, leaving it to the consumer to bring up the subjects he feels relevant. The interview is then starting to become more of a natural discourse, where as few questions will be asked as possible.

On top of that, within qualitative research we have the opportunity to use 'enabling' techniques that help the consumer 'find' knowledge. Examples of such techniques include: collage, role-playing, fantasy games, guided dreaming. Most of these techniques share the fact that they stimulate the consumer to leave the trodden path of rational thoughts and enter in the more holistic, intuitive world of feelings. Braithwaite (2001) offers an overview of techniques. The use of these kinds of techniques opens the possibility of getting through signals that do not match the implicit or explicit model of the researcher (and his client). This still asks for a researcher who is perceptive to hear those signals and translate them into an insight. The more 'open' an interviewer or moderator is, the less he or she is compelled by an implicit or explicit concept of the world, the greater the chance of finding signals of 'new laws'.

If we look at all four 'escape routes', we'll find that none of them really represents the jump to higher complexity, they are not paradigm shifts. The best attempt would be the use of qualitative research, only if executed by a highly sensitive researcher. Our best effort to use research within the more complex regions is not scalable in the way quantitative research is. The scalable methods available (quantitative as we know it) are applicable only within the region of the lower complexity. And we don't even know exactly whether or not our research problems are within this region or not.

LEAVING THE OLD FAMILIAR GROUNDS: STOP ASKING QUESTIONS.

So we are looking for techniques that do credit to the spontaneous, ambiguous, flexible and emotional way the human mind works. A method that is 'prehypothetical', enabling the researcher to play as 'facilitating' a role as possible and to 'lead' or 'interpret' as little as possible. Snowden proposes to use the basic human

phenomenon of narrative (not to be confused with organizational story telling). An anecdote (defined as a natural occurring story, mostly fragmented rather than a fully composed story), or 'a sense-making item' (pictures, web sites, paintings, all create narrative) basically is a little piece of text or visual that people use to give meaning to the world around them. The 'sense-making item' is an anecdote or a story. According to Snowden, narrative is an essential vehicle of meaning for various reasons. First of all, telling stories is a deeply rooted human nature. The story is the vehicle *par excellence* for conveying meaning and for learning. We create stories about ourselves and our lives and weave those with the stories of our families and societies. But stories are also central to every religion. Stories form a crucial role in our adolescence: stories are exchanged intensively in puberty: stories about girls (for boys), stories about teachers (these generally involve heroic stories about mischief, sometimes the teacher is also the hero), stories about music, about sports. Endless numbers of stories are exchanged at all stages of our lives.

Role model stories are essential for shaping behaviour. Stories about pop stars are extremely important, especially for girls in primary school; they imitate their idols down to the last dance steps in order to be able to play out the story themselves. Problematic behaviour is steered using this method as well; stories are shared and imitated on anorexia victims' web sites. People have the universal tendency to tell stories, but also to try to understand them not as static objects, but by living and retelling them in context; stories engage. Somehow, the story has the potential to touch both our rational and emotional selves. Stories must 'tally' and be 'coherent'. But there is also a strong emotional component in stories: we identify with characters, imagine ourselves in situations. In addition, stories have a strong 'ethical' component. From time immemorial, stories have had an important educational aspect, but the story is blamed for causing moral decay as well (in the eighteenth century there was strong opposition to the perverse influence of the novel. And today violent films are said to have a disruptive character). The story is simultaneously

'analytical' and 'evocative'. The nice thing about all this is that telling stories is a completely natural situation, certainly when you are in a group setting. Even more so – the only natural form of a group conversation with more than three people is the situation in which a group exchanges stories (frequently in the form of 'cock-and-bull stories' or 'jokes').

This aspect of stories is not superfluous. Any brand can be made or broken by stories. Often brands rely heavily on stories, such as Apple benefits from the cult status of its CEO and his new product announcements. This story is so powerful because it relates to an archetype of the giant-killer (the giant being Microsoft that suffers heavily from the archetype of the inefficient, uncommunicative and monopolist nerd). Reputations can be destroyed by stories that cannot always be countered by fact. Wrong stories can be extremely potent and difficult to counter if people want to believe them or find them credible. For instance the story about an ostrich putting its head in the sand if danger arrives leads a persistent life but is not actually true (see Wikipedia for the source of the misinterpretation). McDonald's had to start a PR campaign in order to counter a very strong story about their hamburgers (vast amounts of rain forest that would have been torn down in order to make vast meadows for cows in order to have enough meat available).

In short: stories do match our needs with respect to the 'spontaneous, ambiguous, flexible and emotional way the human mind works'. Finding stories about the subjects we want to have more information about is therefore a potentially powerful method of receiving information that teaches us something. The story is extremely communicative, and it communicates in a human way: meaning is available on several levels. It is not by hazard that qualitative research is very keen on the 'direct quote' as an important means of reporting: one quote can be more convincing to a boardroom than a thorough analysis. In fact qualitative research can be seen as a method of collecting stories.

This nature of stories can be used in our quest to find methods that leave behind the realms of the 'known'

character of research, by leaving out the 'question' as much as possible: away with the questionnaire, away even with the guidance in qualitative research, but in with objectivity based on the fundamental patterning device of human attitude: stories. In order to do that we both need to find a way to collect stories and a way to derive meaning from them.

Collecting stories

The first source of stories could be the 'natural stories', the stories as they flourish within the natural 'story ecology' of daily society: the stories people tell each other, the stories in the newspapers, books and movies.

But we need not confine to that. We can also intentionally construct stories, or have them constructed by consumers: brand stories, product stories. The importance is that the 'natural story' characteristics stay alive. A story has to appeal to the mind, for this reason it has to have very concrete aspects. A story is never abstract but always concrete: *We were shopping yesterday in Harrods. I was browsing for a book. There was this pile of new books, and you know what? I saw Harry over there, looking in the diet section. Can you imagine? Harry looking for diet books? Can you imagine?* A story has characters. As a response to the story, natural questions may arrive: what was Harry doing? How did he look like? What on earth could have brought him of all persons over there? These questions follow the more natural flow of human knowledge; they imply some sort of engagement. This is what we are looking for if we want to better understand the consumer. Therefore, if you are interested in finding out subtle changes in the consumer satisfaction of a service like 'filling the patrol tank' it might be a more fruitful pursuit to completely change the context of the research. We could have clients starting with a question not intended to ask for information but with the intention to have him evoke stories: if you were in a pub with a few friends. And suddenly the subject came to gasoline stations. What story could you tell about this? You could help the consumer trying to stick to the story laws, invite them to be more precise, encourage them to refine the stories,

explore the paths of the story:

- It is your own experience, or the experience of someone you have heard about.
- It is always very lively; it always has a specific place, person, and atmosphere. The respondents can be probed for these very concrete aspects.
- There is always some sort of action.
- The characters have (as is indicated in the word) characteristics: good and bad characteristics as can be derived from their looks, the way they talk and the things they do.
- Stories are never completely fixed, you can always tell more. The story always goes on .
- Stories can have alternative endings. It is very natural within the human story ecology to find 'turning points' (*'If he would have backed away then [turning point], I could have left it as it was.[alternative ending] But he didn't, he kept on hammering on the fact that I shouldn't have parked my car over there. It made me furious.'* The course of actions could have been different.

One way to find stories is the 'anecdote circle': a few consumers (or if you are searching for job satisfaction employees) gathered together, lead by a facilitator, creating stories together, stimulated by each other. This method requires a very well trained moderator who will stand aside from the process and not privilege particular types of story. Even qualitative researchers need to practice this, since they are often trained in 'finding truths behind the words' and thus interfere or *lead the witness*. Whereas for this method it is crucial never to look for truths, be they psychological, social or whatever. We are looking for stories: as much as we can get them, as vivid as they can be told, with as much turning points, characters, characteristics, as possible. We are postponing any interpretation, since we are not looking for the known, but for the new. All endeavors should be directed to get this done. There are several techniques to do this; the most striking possibly is using an illustrator to make cartoons that represent typical characters or themes, according to the prescription of the group. But other techniques are very important as well: the group

will be asked to tag attributes to the story, cluster the attributes to themes, view main characters, attribute characteristics to these.

The first reaction of a qualitative researcher could be: we already do this. To highlight the difference, we would like to give some experience from one of the authors (Jochum Stienstra) who adopted the method a few years ago, and has been using it many times. Two interesting points arose:

1. It is extremely difficult for a qualitative researcher to restrain from trying to get answers to questions. All of our researchers experienced this as difficult, didn't feel completely comfortable with it right away.
2. It is also difficult for clients to watch this process. They are trained to hear instant solutions to their problems, or instant proofs or counter facts of their ideas.

However, both the researchers and the clients have, up to now, always been very (/extremely) content with the process afterwards. We quote a marketing manager responsible for creating new tea concepts: *I was disappointed in the first stage. I thought I heard stories I already knew too well. But afterwards, I found I derived ideas that I couldn't possibly have conceived without this process.*

We are not writing this as an 'advertising statement' but to prove that the method really means a shift of thinking, it means a change in paradigm; a leap that is not easily made but can be very enriching.

Deriving meaning from stories: making sense

Collecting stories is one thing, but it makes no sense if you can't derive meaning from it. We deliberately say

'deriving meaning from stories' instead of 'interpreting stories'. The first is more like a expedition, exploring sense making. The latter is more like trying to match the story to what we already know and understand about the world. To grasp the difference we would like to compare the two. This comparison is by no means complete, but it can give you a grasp of the quality of both (see table 1).

The two methods do not compete; they merely apply to different kinds of problems or rather, to different levels of complexity. Interpretation is very apt in an ordered world (where a lot of our problems can be reduced to), but in a more complex reality sense making is a better-suited strategy.

Because we are looking for a method that helps us in finding weak signals and explore complex situations, we are not looking for an interpretation such as 'oh, I see there are a lot of interesting stories about this subject. That represents this and that emotion within the consumer'. This would be the classical qualitative approach with a strong role for the researcher's intelligence and vision. But also: with a great chance to detect mainly the preconceived ideas that we already understand.

Sense making is a different kind of game, with a less important role for the researcher's intellect. Sense making in the context of stories is that we are looking for patterns within and between the complex and ambiguous (in a positive sense) data that stories form. That is: we are looking for themes and archetypes that arise from the stories; patterns that seem to evolve in a natural way from the data. This is not done as an act

TABLE 1

| Interpretation | Sense making |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding causal relationships • Reducing complexity to a model, or scheme • Attributing events or thoughts to laws that underlies them • Cerebral | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking emergent patterns • Trial and error • Retaining complexity • Both cerebral and emotional |

of interpretation by the researcher; it is done in a process with the consumer, enabled by the researcher. Part of this process is embedded in the collection phase: the story is called a 'Sense Making Unit'. The respondents are exploring their own stories, finding natural turning points, adding characteristics to them and discovering attributes. They cluster these to find themes and archetypes. The whole process is directed to 'making sense'.

As an example we show a cartoon that was made by a story circle in a research about 'the role of qualitative research in decision making' (Stienstra, 2007). The cartoon signifies the 'fear for research' as perceived by advertising agencies: their brilliant ideas (baby's) are put in a dark procedure called research and handled by researchers who don't even understand them: (see figure 2).

This cartoon gives you direct insight in the feelings that creatives have if they are listening to the consumer on the one side of the mirror. It gives you the possibility to understand them better and enables you to think about how to handle it. Where interpretation can be easily stored away somewhere in the bottom of our nerve

system, sense making tends to jump directly into our limbic system and calls for action. This is very important in an age of growing speed and call for action.

THE FINAL CHALLENGE: UP SCALING THE METHOD

The former paragraph was devoted to collecting stories in small groups, deriving sense from them on a 'small' or 'qualitative' level. But in order to meet the challenges we are looking for, we would also be interested in up scaling this process; beyond the workshop setting. What if you could sample a massive amount of stories? What if those stories were tagged or indexed from the perspective of the consumer? What if all of this was in a database? Then you could be looking for emerging patterns in a more quantitative way. You could use visualization techniques to sense or see opportunities that are normally only discovered experimentally by an entrepreneur. You could detect small changes (weak signals) in the stories being told in your markets. If you have a database of – say – 10,000 stories, you could easily discover subtle changes in a new batch of stories, or you could discover subtle differences in subgroups. This would be a completely new way of combining the

FIGURE 2



Translation of 'angst for onderzoek' is 'fear for research', and translation for the text on the suitcase ('ideen'), is 'ideas'.

'soft', 'ecological', and 'organic' with the 'hard' 'computable'. A survey of a sample of your customers, or 10,000 stories from the checkouts about their shopping experience which you could interpret quantitatively, but where you could trace the figures back to the narrative material to provide context and explanation?

Such an approach would be an escape route from the methodological problem of current quantitative research, which requires the creation of a series of hypotheses or a model before you can start collecting data. It would be a way of collecting data without an underlying model and even without the necessity of finding such a model. It could be a way of exploring patterns and the change of patterns. The patterns would of course have a 'data-character': figures, trends in figures, landscape of themes. But it would be possible to navigate between the 'abstract' and the 'concrete'. You could, for instance, find a cluster of stories that represents the very extreme in terms of 'showing respect' and could see directly the examples that are rated by employees as highly respectful: not the philosophic, abstract or ethical form you might find in the textbook, but the real stuff: examples from daily life as they occur on the work floor.

Such tools require the following elements:

- An approach to tagging or indexing the stories that can be understood intuitively by the story teller (after all we want their interpretation, not that of an expert working from a different context);
- Methods and tools to capture large volumes of stories;
- A means to interpret those stories in ways that minimise bias;
- An ability to monitor changes in what we will call the sense-scape (using a landscape metaphor) of our markets.

We will now proceed to summarise how this is achieved, with the context of the SenseMaker™ software suite developed by Cognitive Edge.

Tagging/indexing

The use of language tags has developed within social computing environments over the last decade. Let's

look at Flickr as an example. A registered user can store all of their family photographs by linking each photograph to keywords and determining access rights. This represents a more flexible approach than the traditional family album. Blogs, increasingly used in marketing both as a source of information and as a means of influence also use a similar approach. Placing a photograph (or a blog) into a folder restricts its use, tagging it makes it available in many different contexts. The issue here is that words may or may not be used in the same way. One person's pleasure may be another person's pain. HSBC have adverts in airports around the world which show two pictures, repeated the labels reverses. For example a picture of the moon associated with *madness* and *romance*. Different words and images can mean different things to different people.

The approach adopted within SenseMaker™ is to take a semi-structured approach to tagging narrative. Once a story has been told, the person who tells the story, not an expert or a computer, interprets that story through a semi-structured tagging approach. Five types of tag are used.

1. The story teller is asked to name their story which provides an additional layer of meaning to the story itself.
2. Abstract values are handled by scales between opposing negatives, for example in respect of customer care, *Suffocating attention* and *They completely ignored me* provide end labels with the story teller positioning their story on the scale. These are called filters and form a primary analysis tool.
3. Multi-choice questions deal with limited range options and traditional market categories.
4. The storyteller determines keywords, not the software. Experience has shown that keywords created by the storyteller do not correspond with those derived by entity extraction tools.
5. A secondary story, which allows the storyteller to provide additional explanation or context. We have found this is also useful when the story is not text, but a picture, a photograph or a web site reference.

The goal here is to balance a need for tagging to take less than 90 seconds, while providing meaning to the interpreter. Critical is the self tagging; the addition of meaning through a translation mechanism, a Rosetta stone standing between the subject and the researcher.

Large volume narrative capture

In addition to the anecdote circle technique discussed above we use other methods for anecdote capture, which allow us to scale the technique. These include the following:

- *Sampling.* Getting the respondents at work: we distribute open prompting questions, indexing sheets and recording devices to a sample, asking them to find people who satisfy certain conditions, and gather the stories. This technique has been scaled up, combined with web capture tools, to gather tens of thousands of anecdotes in short timescales at low cost.
- *Participant observation.* In this case students are sent into apprentice roles within the field of study to gather stories in situ. This is a form of distributed ethnography and works well where a high trust element is required for anecdotes to be provided.
- *Situational gathering of material.* Finding stories where they are told. We have used sports events, Christmas parties, games (including metaphor) to create environments where people will be stimulated to tell stories, to recall knowledge.
- *Kiosk based capture.* Inviting respondents to tell their story at a set kiosk. We have experimented with this firstly in Liverpool, to determine the impact of the museum on visiting parties of school children and now extended to measure the impact of the new slavery museum on its visits. Here with an additional twist, the stories told in response to witnessing the nature of slavery themselves become a part of the museum; a living oral history.

Critical on all capture is the prompting question or environment used. In distributed ethnography or situational capture the context alone is enough. However as with other methods care has to be given to design of the questions. To take one example which has proved its

worth in employee satisfaction surveys, instead of asking *Is this company a good place to work? Please answer on a scale from 1 to 5, the narrative prompt is Imagine you are having a drink on a Friday night after work and your best friend joins you and says they have been offered a job with your company. What stories from your, or your friend's experience would you tell them if they wanted to join, and what stories would you tell if you didn't?*

The latter contains an essential ambiguity, it does not reveal a hypothesis or suggest a right answer, it allows the elicitation of deep narrative material in context. With the quantitative data provided by the tagging we have statistically valid numbers, linked back to deep context. Then again, it is important that the respondents 'analyse' the stories themselves. They are provided with indexing sheets, and are asked to judge the stories on filters specified on these sheets.

Interpretation

Once we have mass quantities of stories, tagged by the consumers, there is the question of exploring these data. The tagged stories represent an extremely rich database. The interesting thing about it is that we need not interpret the material in the classical sense. Rather than trying to 'analyse data' the software can be used to explore patterns. This can be done on the base of the filters and tags that have been attributed by the respondents. These filters are used to create a capacity for the human sense-maker to seek out patterns in the metadata. For instance: say the stories have been judged by the respondents on a filter that represent the value 'openness' (very open as opposed to not open at all). An analyst 'could discover a pattern, for instance a cluster of stories that represent 'extreme openness'. Or, a cluster of stories that represent 'extreme openness' to a certain target group, or in combination with a different filter. Having seen that pattern he could then look directly at the stories which created it, getting their data (to use a British expression) from the horse's mouth, the front line, rather than seeing it disinter-mediated and interpreted by multiple layers of experts. And he would know these stories represent a certain meaning to consumers.

CONCLUSIONS

Most people have been aware of the power of narrative for years, but also of the danger of misinterpretation or bias when such material is used. Survey techniques, focus groups overcome some of those but lack the richness of narrative. By allowing people to self index their own stories, by creating context rich situations in which they tell them, we create the opportunity to combine the power of both qualitative and quantitative techniques, providing the objectivity of statistical valid data with the support of narrative to provide explanation. Combined with visualization and recognition of the real nature of human cognition we allow direct contact for senior executives with their customer and employees stories within a statistically valid and objective framework.

Within the new marketing domain in which 'old laws' lose their value, storytelling represents a tool for a complete new domain of 'analyzing'. It is strongly adapted to the evolved human way to make decisions: by sensing patterns in data as opposed to making rational, logical and analytical decisions. We believe it can provide guidance in a world in which consumer needs are fulfilled in materialistic ways and in which we seek higher-level values as passion, beauty, spirit, faith and joy. It can, therefore, be an answer to the quest we started with: finding true excellence in research methods not only 'predictive', 'manageable' and 'thorough' but also 'imaginative', 'holistic', 'inspirational' and 'intuitive'.

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