

Strategic Planning in a Re-set World



Bell Pottinger Group

Communiqué

Issue 4: 2009



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We live in a world that has been re-set. There can be no return to business as usual. The recession, the technology explosion, the social revolution – all have combined to create a perfect storm of change. Good and bad news travels at blinding speed across a vast network of connected people, more prepared to listen to each other than governments, companies or brands.

In this world, our communications planning and thinking needs to be re-set too. We need insight faster, cheaper and we need it to be truly authentic. But how do we get it?

The answer? Learn to tap in to the world's largest, most honest and unselfconscious focus group.

In this article, Nicholine Hayward, Bell Pottinger's planning director, looks at fast ways to get fresh, free and authentic insights.

The problem, which has vexed market researchers, advertising agencies and PR companies since time immemorial, is that now, more than ever, we need to know what people want. This means asking them questions, which immediately creates a dilemma. Every group, every, omnibus, survey or depth interview, however carefully planned and objectively moderated, engenders a sense of self-consciousness in the respondents that can skew the results. We've all been to Groups where someone was afraid to speak while another liked the sound of his own voice a bit too much.

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to see what was in people's heads without having to ask? Wouldn't it be good to have data from a larger proportion of the population than the base sizes we normally have? With the research methodology I'm about to describe, we can.

The largest, most honest and unselfconscious focus group in the world.

The Internet, from search engines to social media, offers a vast and easily accessible repository of fresh, free and authentic insight and intelligence. The insights come, not from people sitting in a focus group, filling out a questionnaire or standing on a street corner talking to a researcher with a clipboard, but from unguarded conversations on forums, social networks and blogs and searches on Google. I call it the 'largest, most honest and unselfconscious focus group in the world' and it can be consulted using tools such as Google Insights for Search, Google Trends for Websites and the Google Keyword tool, Q & A sites such as Yahoo! Answers, social media and sharing sites and by the simple technique of using "exact searches" on Google to find consumers with a particular attribute or attitude.

The wisdom of crowds

By looking at what millions of people are asking for and talking about online, we can see what the online public is asking for, in their own time, in their own words and sitting at their own PC, and we can put this intelligence to work at every stage of a business and marketing strategy.

For example, because we can gain insights into what consumers are looking for from products and the issues and challenges they have, we can develop R & D strategies that can not only meet, but anticipate market needs. Because we can listen to them as they browse and chat and go about their daily online lives we can talk to them in their own language, with resonant and relevant creative campaigns that really strike a chord. We can create rounded and realistic pen portraits, map out social dynamics and spot emerging trends. In short, what this methodology gives us is both a snapshot of the collective psyche of millions of people and the personal thoughts of one person at a time. It's a goldmine of insight, it's simple and easy to do and is free of charge.



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Of course, there are some caveats. You don't get a 360 degree view of one consumer, and you can't dig deeper to ask more questions to clarify a point, as you can do with focus groups or depth interviews. Sometimes the data can be quite hard to read, so you often need to look at it from several perspectives in order to make sense of it. Sometimes there's no data at all on a particular topic, so you need to find something else to look for. Rather than relying wholly on the insights, it's best to use them as a way of setting the agenda for further exploration and validation via the usual research channels, a catalyst for ideas or a sounding board for existing strategies.

But it's fresh, free and fast. The Internet is a living repository of data, you can watch what's happening right now. It's also freely available. There are paid online research tools and services and many of them are excellent, but these are best kept for special occasions or for a deeper analysis of the initial territories and directions that the free tools give you. And lastly, it's fast. If you need a quick point of view, or want to test a theory or an idea, this methodology will give you instant results, making it ideal for chemistry meetings and pitches as well as longer term planning and strategy.

If we take a typical strategy flow, we can apply the online research methodology at every stage, to give us insights that will help us understand the market, the category and the consumer, the problems that the brand is facing, and how communications might be best deployed, and later, evaluated, to meet the brief and measure the results.

Where are we now and how did we get here? Where do we want to be? How will we get there? How will we know when we have succeeded?



1. Where are we now and how did we get here?

We can uncover insights into current and historic market and category drivers and segmentations, competitors and consumer perceptions. We can identify, anticipate and address market and societal trends and create rounded and realistic pen portraits and typologies.

As the objective of this stage of the strategy development process is to understand the problem to be solved, we can gain greater insights into the challenges and barriers we're facing and the events and issues behind them, such as:

- A depressed, declining or unstable market
- Low brand awareness or consumer demand
- Negative publicity or perceptions
- Competitive threats

2. Where do we want to be?

We can scope out the opportunities for a brand in terms of market and mindshare, to postulate what success might look like by benchmarking how it has looked in the past. We can also identify potential emotional, attitudinal or occasion-based territories that a brand or company might stand for, by looking at how consumers describe, perceive and engage with it.

3. How will we get there?

We can identify how, when and where to best engage and inspire our audience, from resonant and relevant messaging and proposition to targeting and tone of voice. Using the online research, we can look at the three core elements of this stage of the strategy to look at ways we can own the territory we want the brand to occupy:

- Positioning** – to decide the role that the brand or company might play in consumers' lives and what would motivate and encourage consumers as prospective brand storytellers or advocates, might be.
- Personality** – to map out brand values, behaviours and tone of voice and also to assess potential spokespeople, mascots or persona.
- Proposition** – to define how, when and where we can talk to our audience and the programmes and promotions that will deliver the best response and what the means and opportunities would be for consumers to be the most effective brand storytellers, in terms of content, channels and platforms.

So, what we now have, is a more rounded insight into the consumers and their conflicting desires and pressures, through real data. It's this honesty and authenticity that makes the methodology so powerful and so useful.

4. How will we know when we have succeeded?

We can evaluate the impact and effectiveness of communications campaigns, both in terms of reach and engagement but also attitudinal and behavioural change, competitor activity and overall category dynamics. For example, we can carry out Social currency analysis to look at the effect a campaign has in terms of a brand's role in a category and the wider world. Likewise, we can measure the extent to which a campaign has driven engagement and advocacy, but to find out what people think of the campaign itself. We can identify whether the stories consumers are telling are not only the right ones, but see how they have changed with the campaign and which elements have been adopted and adapted, in order to optimise for the future.

To summarise

In short, if you need a snapshot of whether a market is growing or declining *in consumers' minds*, an instant point of view on a brand positioning, an outline agenda for a focus group, or an idea of how a creative campaign has been received, this methodology is the perfect catalyst, sounding board and complement to traditional, conventional research.

So, what we now have, which we didn't have before we looked at the online data, is a more rounded insight into the consumers and their conflicting desires and pressures, through real data. It hasn't been filtered through a complex web of social anxieties. It's this honesty and authenticity that makes the methodology so powerful and so useful.



Bell Pottinger Group

The Bell Pottinger Group is a division of Chime Communications, the UK's leading independent PR, advertising and market research company. We help clients create, manage, monitor and market their businesses, brands and reputations in the UK and internationally.

The Bell Pottinger Group comprises leading brands in the industry, including, of course, several Bell Pottinger-branded companies, as well as Good Relations, Harvard, Insight and Resonate.

The Bell Pottinger Group is No.1 in both PR Week and Marketing public relations consultancy league tables for the UK.

Can we help you?

Find out by visiting: www.bell-pottinger.co.uk

Or call Kevin Murray on 0207 861 2427