

Ad-tests can be the creative's friend

Jane Caro has a point, say Debra Hall & Jonathan Dodd. But there's a big 'but' ...

Jane Caro's article in December's *AdMedia* no doubt annoyed a lot of market researchers. Many will have bristled at Caro's contention that much concept research "is little more than expensive snake oil".

But there are some who agree with much that she wrote. We recognize that Caro's opinion has not come out of thin air, but rather reflects her bad experiences at the hands of insensitive researchers (hopefully Australian, not New Zealand).

Every piece of research that fails to treat the idea with respect, that throws an already conceived concept to the vultures (otherwise known as focus groups) and that pretends researchers can measure advertising effect just like measuring temperature or distance is further damaging the relationship between advertising and research agencies – the very people who should be working together for the good of their clients' brands.

So while defending research, we agree with Caro's contention that nobody knows exactly how to make the ultimate, guaranteed advertisement, and so of course it follows that no market researcher should ever claim that their research will result in sure-fire winning advertisements. Good researchers know this – and understand where their abilities end.

They're honest about what they can (and can't) measure. They look at advertising research as an honest diagnostic collaboration to help develop and refine ideas – never, never a 'pass-fail' test!

Good research helps us all understand which elements of a concept are working best, for whom, and why, whilst resisting the temptation to extrapolate too much from the research findings or to take over the creative's role.

So whilst we agree with much that Caro wrote, we do note a flaw in her argument – she says that one simply has to "know what you want to say and who you want to say it to. Say it clearly and engagingly in a way that your audience is able to hear it".

Now most of you will be professional communicators, yet can you say, for sure, that what you said this morning to your spouse, your partner or your kids – the people you

know better than anyone else in the world – is always clearly heard, fully understood, and effectively interpreted according to your intentions?

If effective and clear communication with them can't be guaranteed, how can it be as simple as Caro contends?

We also believe that Caro's claimed connection between increasing concept research and decreasing effectiveness is a spurious claim at best. Yes, some great ideas will have been killed by poor research. But the increased pressure on marketers to be accountable has also no doubt bred conservatism and a tighter leash for creatives – whether the concepts are researched or not.

Ironically, this is where ad testing can be the creative's friend. At our company we've used it to help risk-averse companies feel confident in going with an agency's recommended creative – a clear example of advertising research fostering and encouraging the ideas of the creative, not the opposite.

Simply put, the more pressure for marketers' accountability, the more likely they are to immediately question groundbreaking or unusual creative. If research can give them the con-



Jonathan Dodd.



Debra Hall.

fidence to progress with a more effective communication, everyone wins.

We've been lucky to work with great clients and their great advertising agencies – to prove that the 'ideas abattoir' of research doesn't have to be so, not if researchers (or research-commissioning clients) make sure the research follows a few simple rules. These rules aren't part of any proprietary products or black-box research techniques – they're all about attitude and respect for the creative process.

Really, it's just about honesty, and common sense. So here they are – our rules for conducting effective advertising research:

1. Consumers can't design ads – and nor can researchers – but we can tell you what your ad communicates to the consumer, and how they interpret its messages.
2. Research is not real life. No research can replicate the viewer sitting at home watching TV – research is always an artificial situation.
3. It therefore follows that research can't (really) measure cut-through – that depends on which programme, which ad break, the frame of mind of the viewer, the surrounding ads, and so on. Like you, we know that cut-through is aided by naked women, kids and furry animals – as well as loud music, things that annoy or upset, bigger budgets, better media placement ... the list is long.
4. Advertising research does not have a 'magic number' above or below which the ad passes or fails – and normative databases are there for building researcher knowledge, not for setting the standard. Many of the ads in the 'norms' have never made it to air, and many others were tested specifically because the client was worried about them. In NZ, very few companies have a policy of researching every ad.
5. Advertising research is most valuable *before* the ad is made – people are good at filling in the gaps with unfinished material, and once it's made, it's too late. Get real – what are you actually going to do once you've spent a gazillion dollars shooting the ads, whatever the research shows?

6. The brief for the research is the brief for the ad – since advertising research is only really good at telling us whether the consumer (in the target market) gets the desired messages, all we need to know is who it's aimed at, and what we want them to think/feel/understand. And that should be in the creative brief.

7. The ad agency gets any 'bad news' first – the research debrief should be a constructive discussion about what the consumers got out of the ad, and whether that was what was intended or not. The outcome of the debrief should be decisions about what to do next – and those decisions need to be made in a 'no surprises' environment. Discussing any concerns with the ad agency improves the researcher's ability to interpret the results, and gives the agency time to think about 'where to next' with the concept.

8. The final debrief must include both the client and the agency – that way, there's no chance for the research to be misinterpreted by one party, and 'them and us' situations are averted. There's nothing worse than a client using research to beat their agency around the head – which we hear still happens in some countries not too distant!

So yes, it is simple – and it's just about respect!

Most NZ creatives tell us they've had bad ad-testing experiences in the past, and quite understandably are averse to ever doing more of it.

One once memorably told us advertising research is like watching "a bunch of moronic housewives ripping the arms and legs off my newborn baby". We understand this – but not all research is like that!

Next time your client wants advertising research, try recommending a researcher you can work with (and who will work with you), so together you deliver a great (and effective) results.

Debra Hall (debra@resolutions.co.nz) and Jonathan Dodd (jon@resolutions.co.nz) are based at Auckland market research company Research Solutions Ltd. ■

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