

Web 2.0, social networks and the future of market research

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Market Research is often accused of failing to provide the insights sought by our clients, and in an increasingly complex society we are challenged to embrace a different model of thinking with different principles at its centre. We believe that a Web 2.0 research platform and a social network approach offers marketing research new tools to meet the challenges of the future.

The paper identifies a number of trends that may well provide fertile ground for marketing researchers to develop new approaches. The open source movement will not only affect the way that we think but the very methodologies that we use. The emergence of Web 2.0 offers us an array of collaborative tools with which to develop new research approaches to explore the rapidly changing social and media environment. At the same, the rapid growth of online social networks has fuelled the already rich research literature on the importance of studying humankind in 'tribes' or 'groups'. We argue that the combination of social computing tools and an understanding of social networks will allow us to build new types of research communities, in which respondents interact not only with the researchers but with the clients and most fruitfully with each other. Moreover as we examine these types of networks we will become increasingly better able to handle multiple sources of data, and be as comfortable with these new forms of user generated content as we are with the traditional data collection tools of the last fifty years.

We believe that these social software tools and trends provide the blueprint for researchers to build new types of 'participatory panels' or 'research communities' and we describe our experiences in developing such a community.

The present

The last few years have been marked by an increasing number of articles written by eminent market researchers concerned with the future of our industry. Their concerns are based around an increasing belief that our

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historic models are failing to provide the insights sought by our clients. As Andrew Zollli (2006) noted:

Wander the halls of any of today's ever-multiplying corporate-innovation conferences, and you'll find experts playing to packed houses, evangelizing the power of user-driven design, the importance of ethnographic research, and the value of an internal 'innovation culture.' Corporate managers are eagerly soaking up this 'right-brain religion,' hoping that an injection of creativity and customer input will help them stand out in markets crowded with interchangeable piffle.

Surely this is the domain of marketing research? If clients really are wandering around in hope rather than expectation where does this leave our industry? Is it fit for purpose and, if so, for what purpose? We have had some excellent analyses of the issues recently and these allow us to identify the key challenges that we are facing.

We are being challenged to understand the unconscious as well as the conscious; to identify the 'weak signals' in an increasingly cluttered environment. Our desire to have unconditioned respondents is at odds with the benefits to be derived from respondents co-creating as members of a group. Moreover, the skill sets of our practitioners are said to be derived from the hierarchical behaviourist traditions of the 1960s, in a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected and less linear in nature.

It has been argued that market researchers still feel more comfortable with the conscious, cognitive aspects of behaviour than with the unconscious and emotional. This has led to attacks on the industry for conducting research in non-realistic environments such as hall tests, or in unrealistic consumer situations such as 'blind taste' tests. Moreover, we are accused of using approaches based on outmoded notions of command and control; of seeing ourselves as research Brahmins rather than as partners with our clients and consumers in the creative process.

The challenge

Let us take a few moments to see how these contradictions have contributed to the apparent crisis in market research. Market research is no longer a small decentralised profession. It has become so rationalised that, in David Morrison's (1998) words, 'one can refer to the production of knowledge within market research as the industrialisation of knowledge'. While Morrison compliments us on our ability to reflect our clients' needs, many practitioners are less sanguine.

One consequence of this industrialisation has been the increasing consolidation within the industry. This facilitates the acquisition and the distribution of research solutions via global networks. Emphasis on standardisation offers clients the benefits of normative databases, which allow meaningful inferences to be drawn from individual research projects, and at a very reasonable price. Clients benefit intellectually and financially from these supply-side economies of scale. Yet, despite this, clients appear to believe that we have become limited by the very strengths that David Morrison identified. Namely, that we are not using our standardised products as a basis for creativity, but rather as an easy way of addressing their problems. The ‘any colour you want as long as it is [a] black [box]’ approach to market research would appear to be at odds with the explicit needs of our clients.

Simon Chadwick (2006) has conducted hundreds of interviews with client-side researchers and has concluded that ‘clients’ expectations of their research agencies are changing dramatically. They expect more proactivity in the delivery of insight, more integration of information across a wider variety of platforms, more consulting and senior involvement.’

But, in reading his paper, you get the distinct feeling that, although he is clear as to what the clients want, and how our industry should change, he is far less sure that we are capable of making the transition. He writes:

The clients have spoken and are speaking. What they desire and demand is clear. In one way or another, the industry will need to change to meet their demands. Will it be the industry that currently exists or will it be a new industry that rises up and usurps our existing position? ... Will it go the way of other industries hit by disruptive technology or will it adapt to meet the needs of the new generation?

The client demands that he refers to are driven by the need to understand an increasingly complex society. How do you market to a society that is becoming ever more atomised? Winston Fletcher (2006) calls it the ‘splintered society’. He argues that the consumer’s world is growing more fragmented, and he fears that the market research business has failed to understand and address this phenomenon. He answers the question ‘What does all this mean for market research?’ as follows:

Fundamentally, fragmentation, in any and every sphere of life, means that fewer and fewer people are purchasing or doing any one thing, be it choosing a brand or a lifestyle. Above all fragmentation means rejection. ... But market research is still geared to the language of mass markets and majorities. Well, majorities matter in politics (but less and less so) – and that’s about it. Homogeneity is fast

disappearing; heterogeneity is the name of the game. We live in a splintered society ... minorities are what matter.

Recent years have seen a growing awareness of the importance of the unconscious, of low attention processing and rapid cognition. David Penn (2006) has recently written a good summary of the current state of advertising research. He summarises the debate and shows how the earlier conscious rational models of advertising have been challenged, in the last two decades, by neuroscience. He summarises the neuroscience learning as follows: 'the most important brand response is emotional', 'Most of our decisions are unconscious' and 'ultimately, brand response is more important than ad response'. Or, as David Smith (2006) puts it, 'in a straight choice between emotion and reason, emotion wins'.

Wendy Gordon (2006) challenges the marketing community 'to embrace a different model of thinking with different principles at its centre'. Her ten 'simple (but scientifically proven) principles' should be studied by all researchers. She writes that people don't say what they mean or mean what they say; people dance with brands fleetingly; brands are emotionally anchored; words are poor tools; the unconscious exists; intuition exists; emotions rule; behaviour and attitudes are context-dependent; memory is dynamic and that there is no such thing as absolute truth.

Martin Gladwell's *Blink* (2005) is about rapid cognition, about the things that happen in the blink of an eye. He argues that your mind takes about two seconds to jump to a series of conclusions; he calls this 'rapid cognition' and writes that it is 'perfectly rational. It's thinking – (rather than intuition) it's just thinking that moves a little faster and operates a little more mysteriously than the kind of deliberate, conscious decision-making that we usually associate with thinking'.

This leaves us accused of a failure often to recognise the so called 'weak signals' that are at the periphery of a business. These are the threats and opportunities that Day and Schoemaker (2006) argue can make or break companies. Identifying them is often difficult for traditional market research, because they are not the views of the majority, or even significant minorities. Indeed they may appear to be completely at odds with the prevailing wisdom. Understanding the weak signals from the periphery is less about prediction and more about anticipation and alertness. It requires us to seek new sources of information from multiple and varied sources, and triangulate the inputs to help clarify and interpret these fuzzy signals from the periphery. David Smith has written eloquently on many occasions about the need for market research to handle data in this fashion (for examples, see Smith & Fletcher 2001 and 2004).

Yet, despite this long catalogue of charges against our industry, what is the reality? We see an industry that exhibits real growth. Rather than being left high and dry by disruptive technology, market research has embraced it with alacrity. In less than a decade a third of US revenues have migrated from offline to online research, and a host of novel research opportunities are being realised in the new digital environment.

Chadwick (2006) talks of the threat of disruptive change, but we see the opportunities of adaptive change. The process of adaptive change rather than disruptive change comes from an analysis of the environment and a willingness to modify to meet its demands. We believe that our industry has the intellectual flexibility and capacity for creativity that should be the envy of many other industries. We do not see an industry under threat, rather we observe one that is adapting to the rapidly changing social, economic and technical environment in which we now work. In particular we would like to draw attention to a number of trends that we believe will provide fertile ground for marketing researchers to develop new approaches.

Trends

The first trend is the continued growth of the open source movement. This will affect not only the technical tools available to us but also the way we actually think and work. Second is the emergence of Web 2.0, which offers us an array of collaborative tools with which to develop new research approaches. The social software tools that define Web 2.0 will continue to grow rapidly and will provide us with new and innovative ways to explore the rapidly changing social and media environment. This emerging social media landscape is the third trend, and is most easily recognisable by the phenomenon of user-generated content. This is not just a new phenomenon for us to study but a new opportunity for us to utilise as a research community. Fourth, we observe the rapid growth of online social networks. These are radically changing our media landscape and we already have a rich research literature on the importance of studying humankind in these 'tribes', 'groups' or 'social networks'. The opportunity to observe these social interactions will greatly benefit us in our understanding of the role of advertising and marketing in the dissemination of ideas. Fifth, the combination of social computing tools with an understanding of social networks will allow us to build new types of research community in which respondents interact not only with researchers but with the clients and, most fertile, with each other. Sixth,

as we examine these types of network, be they organic or ones that we create specifically for research purposes, we will become increasingly more able to handle multiple sources of data, and be as comfortable with these new forms of user-generated content as we are with the traditional data collection tools of the last 50 years.

The open source movement

The past ten years have seen the emergence of the open source movement, which believes that progress in the digital world is best achieved by sharing intellectual property and seeing it developed by a much wider community than that which exists within the traditional hierarchical company. Originating in the computing world we have seen the rapid growth of open source software, whose source code is available under a copyright licence that permits users to use, change and improve the original software, and to redistribute it in modified or unmodified form. But the open source movement is as much about a philosophy of innovation as it is about developing specific products. It is about making methodologies transparent and utilising the intellectual power of the audience to develop and perfect the product. Creativity and product development flow from the openness of the system.

Eric Raymond (1999) famously referred to this as the contrast between the cathedral and the bazaar. To build cathedrals you need strict central command structures, with rules and agreed approaches, but bazaars grow like Topsy, from the free flow of ideas, as suppliers seek to meet the changing needs of their customers. There is no great plan to which the developers are working. Market research has traditionally had a cathedral mentality. In a stimulating recent paper, Graeme Trayner (2005) accused our industry of a failure to change and adapt with the times. He referred to the growing importance of the open source movement everywhere except in the market research sphere, and ‘was struck by how far removed aspects of market research are from this exciting area of innovation and change’. He wrote:

... smart organisations across different sectors are seeing the benefits of giving up control and benefiting from people’s creativity – but the market research industry has largely yet to make the leap into the world of open source.

The issue for the industry is that closed source thinking is hard-wired into how we think and operate. Our approaches are often based on out-moded notions of command and control, which afflict other parts of the marketing and communications industry. Too often we like to see ourselves as a noble elite of

Brahmins who are there to help the simple and uncertain consumer understand what he wants and needs ... Rather than seeing people as potential partners in creativity, we treat them as passive 'respondents'.

As we read Trayner's observations we were reminded of the work of David Smith (Smith 2006; Smith & Fletcher 2001, 2004) who, in many articles and two excellent books, has argued for a much fuzzier market research methodology than that traditionally adopted. Smith's approach is that of the bazaar rather than the cathedral. He argues that, over the past 50 years, most of what we do has shifted from the more classical social science paradigm to a much more pragmatic approach that has been labelled 'informed eclecticism'.

To provide the insights required by our clients, he argues that we need to be comfortable operating with both our left and our right brains, as we seek to understand multiple imperfect data sets. We need to see emergent shapes and patterns, trust our intuition and be comfortable with inductive as well as deductive thinking. In short, his is a 'holistic' approach that includes informal sources of evidence, as well as the more traditional data sources. In his words, this is a 'fuzzy logic approach to interpreting our evidence'. The competitive advantage for research agencies in the future will come from our ability to model this fuzzy data for the benefit of our clients. The benefit for our clients will come from the increased flow of innovative knowledge from multiple sources. Eric Raymond (1999) summarised the potential beautifully when he wrote 'Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow.' Put simply, we researchers need to be more willing to open up the research process to allow lots of people to address our clients' problems, in their own way, unlimited by our preconceptions of the issues.

The emergence of social media

We are currently undergoing a new media revolution. It is based around social computing. As Web 2.0 technologies have become available they have been rapidly embraced, especially by young people. This can be evidenced by the recent report from the UK Telecommunications Regulator, Ofcom (Office of Communications n.d.), which identified the emergence of 'a whole new generation of consumers for whom online is becoming the lead medium and convergence is increasingly the norm'.

The key to understanding this media revolution is fourfold. First, there is the emergence of user-generated content that is blurring the distinction between professional and amateur content. The role of traditional

broadcasters will need to be defined in a world where Richard Sambrook, head of BBC global news, told a recent conference that ‘the avalanche of high-quality video, photos and emailed news material from citizens following the July 7 bombings in London marked a turning point’ and the BBC was evolving ‘from being a broadcaster to a facilitator of news’ (Charron *et al.* 2006). He also said, ‘We don’t own the news anymore.’

This feeds directly into the second point, namely that new media is increasingly being pulled by consumers, rather than being pushed at them. The success of sites such as YouTube and Flickr is based on consumers who decide what videos or pictures they wish to look at, rather than on broadcasters who dictate their viewing. Third, today’s media is micro-chunked, rather than monolithic. At blogs, consumers read posts; at YouTube, consumers watch micro-chunked videos; they can watch as little or as much as they want rather than have the media experience pre-defined by the publisher. Fourth, the social interactions that develop around the content are the key to understanding the importance of this bite-sized user-generated content. It is the facility to rate, rank, comment on, review and respond to the new world of media that is driving the success of these new media properties.

In short, we are witnessing the emergence of a population that is ever more willing to record, and share, their experiences: mash them up and submit them to their friends and other community members for evaluation, and allow their ‘reputations’ to be built via these assessments. This is an open, democratic and liberal use of media unlike anything we have seen before. It is a truly new phenomenon that offers market researchers new and exciting opportunities, and the world of Web 2.0 provides us with the tools to exploit these opportunities. It is most evident in the rapid growth of social computing that is facilitating the emergence of social networks. As Sergey Brin, Google’s co-founder, said of websites that specialise in social networking and user-generated content: they represent a ‘whole new ecosystem’ on the internet (*Washington Post* 2006).

The importance of social networks

Mark Earls (2003), in his award-winning paper, noted that ‘The dominant view of the consumer as an individual should be replaced with the more accurate model of the consumer as acting as part of a herd.’ He makes a strong case for thinking about the individual as part of a group, and notes what he calls the ‘Latin School of Marketing’, which emphasises the

consuming individual as a member of a tribe. This view holds that tribes are fluid; people can be members of many tribes and play different roles within each. As they are not under the control of any outside force, tribe members can join and leave at any time. He notes that, until recently, this important area of human behaviour remained 'unconsidered and unexamined'.

Lately we have seen increased importance being given to the role of word of mouth in decision making and to the people who influence the dissemination of ideas. Indeed, Keller and Berry (2003) have argued that there is a group of people who are responsible for driving trends, influencing mass opinion and selling a great many products. These are the 'Influentials' and Keller and Berry estimate that 10% of Americans determine how the rest consume and live by chatting about their likes and dislikes. They use survey data to argue that the most influential people in America are often everyday people. They are people in one's own neighbourhood who are active in civics, charities and religious institutions. The premise is that marketers who understand these dynamics can focus their resources on these individuals in order to influence everyone else.

Similarly Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2002) described the social context within which ideas spread. He categorises three important groups of people, within social networks, who affect the rapid spread of messages through the network. The 'connectors' are the people with a large number of social contacts. They can spread a message to a large number of people quickly, and so are central to understanding how social epidemics spread. The 'mavens' are the information gatherers of the social network. They evaluate the messages that come through the network and pass these evaluations on. They are trusted and we would argue that different people are mavens in their own areas of expertise. Finally, Gladwell identifies the 'salesmen', who are the persuaders who are capable of spreading the message through their force of character, regardless of their expertise in the area. Sociologists, among other academics such as communications experts, are using social network analysis to study the flow of information within networks and examine the pivotal role played by some individuals in spreading ideas.

This is potentially a rich domain for market research specialists. If we study social networks we have a real chance of picking up weak signals. For Gladwell argues that social epidemics have two other characteristics. First, they can be set in motion by seemingly tiny causes – that is, the spread of the epidemics can often be triggered by causes that seem reasonably inconsequential compared to the magnitude of their effects.

This makes them difficult to identify by traditional research methodologies with their emphasis on 'significant findings'. Second, there is a particular moment in time when these epidemics break loose from within a small population and begin to spread. This is what Gladwell calls the tipping point.

Understanding the social context in which individuals operate becomes a crucial element in understanding how marketing messages spread, and consequently how advertising, word of mouth and PR work. Each of us is part of many different networks that connect us to the world around us. These networks are primarily self-selected and that is what makes them strong. For the most part they are not imposed on us; we choose to belong to them.

Moreover, as these social networks become ever more embedded in our media world they offer strikingly new ways of undertaking marketing research. Take, for example, Second Life, the fast-growing virtual world where users can create alternative realities from scratch. Its creator, Philip Rosedale, in a recent interview in *New Media Age*, explained the rationale behind brands marketing in Second Life:

So, for a marketer, if someone walks around with a certain type of beer in their hand, then in real life they'll want to buy the same beer. Toyota is doing this with its Scion brand. Would someone who buys a Scion in Second Life be more likely to buy one in real life? There's no question in my mind. If their virtual identity involves driving a Scion, you'd better believe that they're going to do the same in real life.

(*New Media Age* 2006)

Talking about a study of a group of Asperger's disorder sufferers who used Second Life to develop their real-life activities and have social contact with other people, he summarised their virtual behaviour as 'practising'. We like the idea of brands 'practising' in social networks such as Second Life. Launching brands, building affiliate sales networks and shops in these virtual worlds will all seem quite normal activity in a very short time. The opportunity for market researchers is that we can utilise these new social networks, and the open source social computing tools from which they are built, to extend the boundaries of our research offerings. These social communities open up new arenas for us to assist our clients in idea generation, concept testing, product development, brand launches, marketing communications and customer experiences.

At the 2006 Association of National Advertisers Conference in the US, Alan Lafley, CEO of Procter & Gamble, said that we now live in a 'let-go

world'. He said that, thanks to 30 or so years of media fragmentation and the more recent rise of user-generated content, marketers were most likely to succeed and be 'in touch' when they let consumers be in control: 'Consumers are more participative and selective and the trend from push to pull is accelerating' (Customer Listening 2006).

These developments have the potential to go a long way to meet the criticism levelled at us by Mark Earls (2003) that market researchers have:

overlooked an important – the most important – part of what it is to be human: we are herd animals. It has been argued that this omission seriously undermines the value of our discipline, that for whatever reason we have persisted in holding on to our individualist-based view of humanity, we are failing to live up to the standards we aspire to in providing business with the means for informed decisions about the future.

He wonders whether and how we can study the interaction between individuals, as the conclusions from his argument are uncomfortable for researchers who spend their lives talking to individuals or forcing individuals into temporary group situations. But increasingly with the growth of social media and social computing we have both the medium and the tools to address this shortcoming.

Web 2.0 and social software

Web 2.0 refers to the new generation of tools and services that allow private individuals to publish and collaborate in ways previously available only to corporations with serious budgets, or to dedicated enthusiasts and semi-professional web builders. The key characteristic of Web 2.0 is that it lets people collaborate and share information online. It has been described as an 'architecture of participation' by O'Reilly (O'Reilly n.d.). You might recognise elements of this architecture in the form of blogs, wikis, podcasts, P2P file sharing, virtual worlds and social networks.

In a nutshell, Web 2.0 is about making computing and media social. It is built around 'social software' that enables people to connect or collaborate through computer-mediated communication and, most powerfully for our research purposes and for panel companies, to form online communities.

It does not refer to a single type of software, but rather to the use of multiple modes of computer-mediated communication that can result in community formation. In the Web 2.0 world, people will form online

communities by combining one-to-one (e.g. email and instant messaging), one-to-many (web pages and blogs) and many-to-many (wikis) communication modes.

Moreover, in many online communities, real-life meetings are a valued part of the communication repertoire, and this is one of the reasons that they have helped to transform the distribution of music through social network sites such as MySpace. Going to the actual gig can become an integral part of the Web 2.0 experience as it might be recorded, shared and then relived via various Web 2.0 services. Indeed it might even be the subject of a 'mash-up' in which the information is mixed with other information from a disparate source to create yet more new content.

Indeed, one of our key findings in a range of market research projects that have utilised social software and/or open source thinking, is that mixing research approaches (qualitative and quantitative) and the research modalities (offline and online) has resulted in a much more creative data set. Respondents find a multi-modal approach far more engaging. They enjoy co-creating data with us especially if they have the opportunity to 'speak' with us in different research spaces and via different modalities. Our only failure to engage respondents in a research project based on social software occurred in a financial market. We were researching a general insurance product and we attempted to do the whole project online rather than via a multi-modal approach.

This capability to 'mash up' data and applications from multiple sources into one dynamic entity is considered by many to represent the true promise of the Web 2.0 through its key characteristics of user participation and interaction. It offers market researchers opportunities, as yet untapped, to co-create new goods and services with our respondents and to have them react to our concepts in an increasingly less directed way. The Lego website is doing just this as it turns its army of online users into a massive design team by simply allowing them to build models from over 500 Lego pieces. Dell is using Second Life to allow people to build their own computer, and even to buy the finished product if they wish.

The key to understanding the importance of Web 2.0 is this ease of sharing, cooperating and co-creating, including 'mash-ups'. The important point for market researchers is that Web 2.0 software can be defined as software that 'supports group interaction'. Clay Shirky (2003) observed that the social computing phenomenon only took off when people were able to actually talk to each other on the web. That was facilitated by the emergence of weblog platforms in the late 1990s and has really taken off in the past five years as blogs have become a mainstream communication medium.

Shirky strikingly wrote that:

Prior to the Internet, the last technology that had any real effect on the way people sat down and talked together was the table. [Prior to the internet] There was no technological mediation for group conversations.

We love the idea that the table was the last technology that had a similar impact to the internet. The idea captures the very essence of social software, and illustrates the potential for replacing the group discussion table or interviewer's clipboard with an internet-enabled table. Tim O'Reilly (n.d.) has correctly explained that:

Web 2.0 doesn't have a hard boundary, but rather, a gravitational core. You can visualise Web 2.0 as a set of principles and practices that tie together a veritable solar system of sites that demonstrate some or all of those principles, at a varying distance from that core.

The key thing for market researchers to grasp is the notion that social software facilitates 'bottom-up' community development, in which membership is voluntary, reputations are earned by winning the trust of other members, and the community's mission and governance is defined by the community's members themselves. Communities formed by 'bottom-up' processes can be contrasted to the less vibrant collectives formed by 'top-down' software, in which users' roles are determined by an external (research agency) authority and circumscribed by rigidly conceived software mechanisms (such as access and authoring rights). The latter is the domain of traditional market research, especially our panel research, while the former is the domain in which the new market research opportunities lie.

The opportunity for market research: the defining characteristics of social software and research communities

These trends, when taken together, are creating exciting new opportunities for marketing research. The open source movement has liberated our thinking; it has democratised production and the distribution of information; it has created Web 2.0 software that we can utilise, while the changing social media landscape has educated an increasing proportion of the population in the skills required to use social networks, and millions of them are creating content and establishing relationships on these sites.

This content, and the relationships that are established in its production and distribution, has resulted in a new domain for researchers – a domain

that is not bounded by the traditional research model in which the respondent's relationship with the research team is a dependent one, and in which there are no relationships between respondents. As to the client, it often seems that they barely enter the traditional research arena, other than at briefings and debriefings.

But how would one take advantage of these trends and operationalise this new research domain? What we found striking was that the more we examined the characteristics of the open source movement, and successful Web 2.0 software, the more we came back to the notion of it being 'social'. It is the world of the interactive bazaar rather than the pre-planned cathedral. This led us to a realisation that we could apply both open source thinking and social software in the market research domain by using the defining characteristics of social software to create a road map for building a new type of 'participatory panel' or 'research community'.

The resulting panels are very different from the traditional market research panels, and the data that flow from them are not restricted to the 'respondent reported' data that are derived from formal questionnaires. Rather, they are multi-sourced, with the respondents, researchers and clients all having active co-creation roles, such that the data are as likely to be derived from their interactions as they are from any traditional formal questioning. The agenda is also, in large part, created and driven by the participants rather than the pre-defined interests of the project team. The use of these social software tools results in the creation of a research platform of participation in which both the agenda and the data are truly open source, and this requires our thinking also to be open.

In the new world of Web 2.0 the key characteristics of social software have been identified by Matt Webb (2004) and we summarise them as follows.

- Identity: your identity is shown by a screen name, which remains persistent through time.
- Presence: an awareness of being in the same space in which you can hold ...
- Conversations: and through them build ...
- Relationships: by ...
- Sharing: experiences and so building your ...
- Reputation: within the ...
- Group.

These characteristics will vary from software application to application, but if they are taken together, the whole can also be viewed as the defining characteristics of a ‘community’. It is a short step to thinking about using these very characteristics to build a ‘research community’ or ‘participatory panel’. In such a research community the *identity* of the participants would remain consistent over time and would be known to the other participants due to the use of user names and the building of reputations. All the participants would be aware of is sharing the same research community space. This in turn creates a shared *presence* in which *relationships* can be established between any of the participants. The participants might be respondents, researchers or clients, and *conversations* can take place among the *group* as they *share* experiences and build *reputations*.

Indeed, they can create their own sub-groups within the panel – creating local spaces in which to establish their own relationships and hold conversations, thus creating their own agendas and multiple data streams.

To discover how far we could develop these ideas and the issues we would encounter if we built such a research community, we partnered with a syndicate of public-sector agencies in a sub-region of south-east England. Pardon the pun, but we call this type of panel an ‘NOP’ – that is, a Web 2.0 facilitated ‘networked online panel’.

These agencies wanted to consult with businesses in their area. Specifically they wanted to engage with them on their ‘community strategy’. This is a set of primarily social and environmental initiatives with which it has been notoriously difficult to get businesses to engage in the past. Other principal topics were concerned with the regeneration activity in the area, with emphasis on education and training, and on the capital projects needed to create business start-up facilities. As the project launched, there were changes to how the syndicate of agencies was managed, and the net result was that we had a single client, a local economic development agency, with a loose remit to reflect the interests of the other governmental bodies.

In practical terms we had a pool of almost 400 local businesses that we would seek to engage with, and an online community software application that supported threaded discussions, surveys, email communication and bulletins, Q&A sessions, content publishing and member profiling.

This software facilitated communication and interaction between participants, asynchronously and over an extended period; the ability of panel members not only to create content; but also to influence subsequent discussions or surveys, and the capacity for conversations, not only among

panel members but between panel members and the client ‘owner’ of the online community.

We will now explore how these new networked online panels fundamentally change the relationship between researcher and panel member, as well as that between respondents, and examine some of the issues we think are important, including the different nature of the relationships in this type of panel: the loss of control over the research process; the role of the client; the panel members’ familiarity with social networking software. Finally, we will offer advice on how to operate effective networked online panels.

Relationships

Along with the idea that Web 2.0 or social networking can turn research into a collaborative activity comes the possibility of creating relationships that have not previously been present in research panels. The *relationship between researcher and panel member* has typically been distant. Communication from the panel manager has most often been a top-down request to complete a determinate survey, in return for whatever mix of intrinsic and extrinsic incentive was embodied in the initial contract. While some communications may have been selective – say, follow-ups based on profile or past responses – most contact would have been broadcast to the whole panel or to a sample, typically as an email invitation. At the heart of these social software panels is the belief that all types of communication are important and that, since we are interested in the individual within their social network, researchers are as likely to have regular one-to-all, one-to-some or one-to-one communication with members.

In our business panel we used all the multiple communication channels available to us including emails, messages, content and forum posts, and we developed an encouraging, but unintrusive, researcher persona that was consistent with all of them. The availability of all these channels greatly increases the content of the researcher’s toolbox. The researcher moves from being a measurer of attitudes and behaviours to being a partner in a voyage of discovery with the panel members and the client. The researcher is an active part of the conversation in this Web 2.0 world as he or she develops their relationships with the panel members by interactive tools that include:

- summarising or drawing attention to members’ postings
- follow-up stimuli to sustain a particular discussion

- news and background information
- feedback from completed/closed surveys
- prompting attention to newly posted surveys, or
- seeking members' input on the choice of future topics and mode of response.

This type of research offers market researchers an interesting range of engagement options. The researcher can play a very active role, as we did, introducing new topics and generating new waves of member activity, as well as probing ongoing discussions. Alternatively, they may choose to be less active and decide to monitor activity and participate by more traditional means such as surveys. This flexibility was very beneficial and allowed us easily to make stealthy shifts, without having to change the underlying machinery, between quantitative and qualitative research methods, and degrees of researcher interaction.

The *relationship between panel member and panel member* changes in this environment. The most novel aspect is the fact that panel members can converse with each other at any time. Again, this conversation between members can be the very 'stuff' of the study, putting discussions centre stage and relying on member-to-member interaction to generate much of the stimulus and continuity of the panel. Or it could be an incidental social breakout activity for panel members, veering into off-topic exchanges and offering an additional draw and sense of belonging. In our panel, members quickly began to communicate laterally. This might be a direct response to another individual or a statement to their peers in general. One form this took was to draw attention to events. Another, tolerated by us as a species of incentive and added value, was to allude to their own business in such a way as to invite commercial proposals.

In this new panel world once a critical mass of multi-way conversation takes hold it can take on a life of its own, morphing in uncontrolled ways. We are sure that this will become more marked as other Web 2.0 tools are introduced to the panel environment; for example, the ability of members to author and organise their own publishing areas. We envisage these areas in the mode of a blog or, going forward, members of the panel might come together in sub-groups to co-author and create new connections 'wiki style'. We have used these tools separately to study the long-term process by which various segments of the British population have made financial purchases over extended time periods. We have found them particularly useful in facilitating the building of models in the mortgage market and as a way of getting a contemporaneous window into the world of youth.

Such fluidity and ease of member access brings great benefits but also challenges the researcher's ability to steer the activity of the panel. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for us as market researchers is to become comfortable with this 'fuzzy' environment. The benefits are great indeed for from this fuzzy environment comes a new analytical domain of *member–member relationships* for us to analyse, understand and exploit.

We will touch on panel/community identity separately, but if the panel environment explicitly broadcasts the identity of the client then *there is no practical reason why panel members cannot seek a direct relationship with the client*. As more panels are recruited, on a proprietary basis for specific clients, the client will have to decide whether, under what circumstances and to what degree, they will engage directly with members via the panel. If the client wishes to utilise the type of networked online panel we are describing then they will have to agree from the start their own rules of engagement. Some, for example, may find it very hard to leave negative comments 'uncorrected' over the long timescales a networked online panel can sustain.

They, like the researcher, need to consider the persona in which the client organisation will make appearances – a single recognised spokesperson, several individuals representing their respective internal functions, or an anonymous 'voice of the company' adopted by an indeterminate number of interlocutors?

In the public-sector panel, the client was clearly identified in the statements of purpose on the site, and its logo was clearly displayed. However, it did not have the resources to maintain a regular presence on the site and so was unable to respond instantly to the debate. Members, on the other hand, interpreted the panel as a direct line, for real-time dialogue with the agency, as opposed to a series of consultative stages or 'research projects'. This was a key learning, as the asymmetry between the expectations of client and members had a significant negative impact on the life of the panel.

What probably ties these considerations together is the notion that once a panel becomes a community it potentially constitutes a bigger resource *for itself* than the client can deploy to face it. Any perceived breach of trust on the part of the client is likely to be sniffed out and niggled away at by a communal effort, undermining the work of the panel. Conversely, real trust is infectious and drives participation, spreading all the quicker for being online. This may sound a little worthy, but what we are describing is what communities do, albeit via a motivated subset. These are new considerations and they are very different from the old access panel

relationships. Put another way, this is what conversations do: they have a life of their own and supply their own agenda and energy.

Amid these *member–researcher*, *member–member* and *member–client relationships*, it would be surprising if the *client–researcher relationship* remained untouched. As with the conversations themselves, it will be harder to plan on this relationship remaining unchanged for the life of the panel – as may have been possible with a more episodic research process.

Panel conversations and continuous feedback, the communal life of the panel, combine value with an ability to surprise and confuse. In response, and to gather all the different forms that value may take, we may need a relationship between client and agency that allows for much more adjustment during the study, and for roles to shift as a result. Researchers may see a need to change tack quite radically, as a result of emerging themes, and a good framework for the assignment would need to tolerate this.

These panels allow us to use the feedback channel to show panel members examples (‘quick wins’) of their contributions leading to a clearly visible consequence, or at least to an explicit consideration by a senior client. In Mark Oldridge’s (2003) terminology, we are able to increase the flow of energy into the system and consequently increase the importance that is attached to it. As the information is passed from the panel to the client, and then back to the respondents and into the system it becomes part of the ongoing discussion. This in turn strengthens the system (or panel) as it acts to attract still more information around these discussion areas.

If one thinks of these discussions as new, orderly arrangements of information, ‘strange attractors’ in the jargon, then it is easy to visualise how ‘emergent’ issues can surface and how we can create platforms by which to identify ‘weak signals’. For these are often the self-defined products of the interactions between the participants, including clients and researchers as well as respondents, and their interactions with the wider environment in which the panel operates. The openness of our approach facilitates this co-creation and provides us with a means to study it. Through it we can identify emergent issues if we use our right as well as the researcher’s traditional left brain.

Control

Using a social network as a platform to run a panel poses real questions for our traditional marketing research command and control procedures.

One of the great benefits of an open adaptive system is that, in sucking in information and generating ‘strange attractors’, it is by definition outside the control of any single entity, including the client and the research team. In short, while we can stimulate conversations within the system we can’t control them. The members can choose whether or not to respond to our stimulus, but crucially they can take the subject matter wherever they wish, whether the plan for the study regards this as timely or relevant or not. What all this means is that networked online panels will usually require researchers to give up the degree of control that they are used to exercising in the traditional panel environment. In some respects this is no different from dealing with a group of people in a room, except that this group could be very large, with everyone capable of talking at once and still being heard, and the discussion can be spread over days, weeks or, in one of our cases, over a year – shifting back and forth between topics other than the one that the client would like to consider ‘current’.

We have argued strongly that this loss of control is part of the very process of utilising a social network approach to panels and that it creates many research opportunities, especially in identifying emergent trends, memes or issues. Our view is that these benefits far outweigh any issues that we might have in terms of our loss of control – indeed the benefits flow from the system being adaptive.

Concluding thoughts

In conclusion, we would like to consider three issues that will confront us if we are successful in our goal and demonstrate the utility of this open source thinking and social software approach to marketing research.

Representation

As an industry we need to be more candid as to who is actually included in our research projects. In a world of low and decreasing respondent cooperation this is an issue for all the research modalities.

We have been explicit in favouring an approach that seeks to find certain types of people and then utilise a social networks approach to gather data, our ‘weak signals’ that do not usually emerge from the more empiricist approach. One of the key themes of this paper has been the idea that markets are fragmented and, in these fragmented markets, not all consumers are equal when it comes to spreading marketing messages. The diffusion literature guides us on whom we should be studying if we wish

to develop effective advertising and launch new products. Yet, as an industry, we still spend a large amount of time and effort in trying to interview people who will probably have little effect on the success or otherwise of these products. We have shown that social networks can be created specifically for research purposes, or existing networks utilised, and we accept that the people who are likely to be members of these communities are also likely to be those who are engaged and interested in the subjects that we are investigating.

Our approach is explicit; we are conscious that this approach does not cover all types of people from the relevant population. We will exclude many individuals. Our appeal is for a more transparent approach – one in which we are explicit about these limitations but are prepared to trade them off for the rich consumer insights that are to be gained from studying consumers within their social networks.

We appreciate that this will not represent the whole truth but it is in keeping with the advice Wendy Gordon (2006) gave market researchers when she wrote:

All methods of trying to understand another person or group of people give partial truths. That is why bricolage is so powerful. Using different lenses to search someone else's thinking processes and behaviours gives greater confidence than relying on one method alone.

Conditioning

In this type of socially networked panel, the issue of conditioning is especially important. As soon as there is any degree of visibility of each other's statements, or periodic reports of findings in order to maintain engagement, the panel becomes a place not just for conversation but for debate and dialectic. Consequently the distribution of attitudes among panel members will not remain static. For unless the exercise is restricted to a narrow time frame there will be opportunity for members to consider the views of others (in particular or in aggregate) and revise their own views accordingly. To many researchers this will, of course, be anathema. It is 'conditioning', the contamination of objective data by the act of observation.

Yet here is the paradox, if you accept that humankind has meaning as part of a social system, then the traditional modalities, based on random selection, also have measurement problems. Mark Oldridge (2003) identified two. First, that real-life interactions are lost in the traditional recruitment and interviewing process; the use of social software may allow

us to examine these interactions and measure social outcomes rather than individual static responses. Second, that:

An artificial series of interactions are created among participants, in focus groups for example, that operate (and are valid) only for the duration of the research. Responses in this context are the responses of a group dynamic triggered by the observer – Schrodinger springs to mind.

Writing in 2003 Oldridge did not believe that market research had the tools to look at the ‘local-level interactions of consumers’. We feel that the use of social software and social networks provides us with the basis for developing such a methodological approach. If we think of these interactions as normal consumer behaviour and accept that ‘conditioning’ (or do we mean advertising, word of mouth or marketing?) is part of the very human condition we are seeking to observe, then it is easy to accept that conditioning is present within these social networks and that it is not always necessarily a bad thing.

It is possible to view these attitudinal and behavioural changes in a more positive manner than we have traditionally done. They can be seen as a way of observing change itself, a way of identifying the emergence of ‘weak signals’ that are so often lost in traditional marketing research. One can but increasingly feel that this must be an advance on stopping someone in the street, or intercepting them on the web, and asking possibly a single question, with little or no contextual understanding on the respondents’ part and taking as gospel the very first unconsidered response that the respondent makes.

So conditioning may be present but not necessarily bad. Most of the marketing cycle is not about market measurement. It is about innovation, identifying emergent trends and needs, concept testing, product development, brand positioning, advertising and marketing communications, and not forgetting consumer experiences.

Quantity

We envisage an exciting future, made possible by the technical platforms that we can create through the social networking software of Web 2.0. The resultant challenge, if we grab this opportunity, is how would we make the very large quantities of data generated accessible to panel members and analysable by researchers. In short, how do we avoid shifting prohibitive research costs from the field into analysis? The answer is the very Web 2.0 technology and social software tools that led us into writing this paper in

the first place. The machinery of tags, links and citations, blogs and blog indexers, self-profiling, trackbacks, playlists, 'my favourite', peer ratings and feeds is what has provided the meta-glue to keep online life connected.

The organising principles that now run through the web are only possible because of (a) the robust and near-universal underlying technologies, and (b) the fact that *the people do the work*. A gargantuan labour is being distributed. Wikipedia is a popular example, but even Google can be regarded as the collective work of millions. We believe that the 'data' generated by a large networked panel could be made accessible to members and analysable for researchers by the right collection of Web 2.0 tools and thus allow discussions to dynamically organise and reorganise within the panel. Respondents no longer merely respond to signals: they generate the data, they edit it, via their communal participation, revising it in response to others, irrespective of whether the others are researchers, clients or respondents.

In short they co-create, and in this new world 'respondents' become 'participants' in a shared enterprise, with rights to set the agenda as well as simply reacting to outside stimuli. Open source thinking brings the end of a research model based on a command and control mentality. The researchers' great skill and our contribution to our clients' marketing efforts will be our ability to build insightful models that represent these emergent realities for our marketing clients. This is the application of our right and left brains to the identification of weak signals.

Finally ...

You might not want to go as far as Mark Oldridge (2003), who recommends that 'The prevailing empiricist approach to management sciences should be abandoned and consumer markets would better be regarded as complex adaptive systems', but the second part of this proposition fits well with a social network perspective. He argues that our prevailing approach, with its great prize of 'predictability', 'has removed considerations of time, context, cause and ultimately change'. We contend that, five years later, we now have some of the tools to put these considerations back into the market research domain.

Research approaches built around social computing technologies and open source thinking allow us a window through which to analyse the interrelated parts of consumers' various behaviours, within their social networks. We can begin to look at the way consumers interact with each other, over time. Moreover, we can study the environmental context within

which they interact, and how apparently small catalysts cause these systems to change, and then ultimately rise to the challenge of understanding consumer behaviour in the round.

We hope we have shown that an adaptive systems approach to understanding consumer behaviour is one that has utility, and that the new Web 2.0 tools give us a great opportunity both to analyse organically arising social networks and to create specific social networks to understand consumers. As we utilise these social networks we will become increasingly comfortable with using both sides of our brain, and become far better at recognising the weak emergent signals that are so crucial in providing the consumer insights sought by our clients. If we do this then research will also be part of the intellectual revolution that we are seeing around us. It is nicely captured by Dan Pink (2005) thus:

... we are moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computer-like capabilities of the Information Age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathetic, big picture capabilities of what's rising in its place, the Conceptual Age.

We think that is an exciting future for market research as we look forward to the next 50 years.

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