

Web 2.0 and social media create new opportunities for research

Digital media allow deeper engagement with research respondents, using techniques such as crowdsourcing, communities and co-creation, says **Andrew Needham**, Face

AT THE MRS Annual Conference earlier this year, there was a debate on 'the opportunities, threats and ambitions for market research and innovation'. It became clear that empowered consumers and web 2.0 present the research industry with a challenge. Researchers are learning that the online world's influence means that things need to change urgently in the face-to-face world of focus groups.

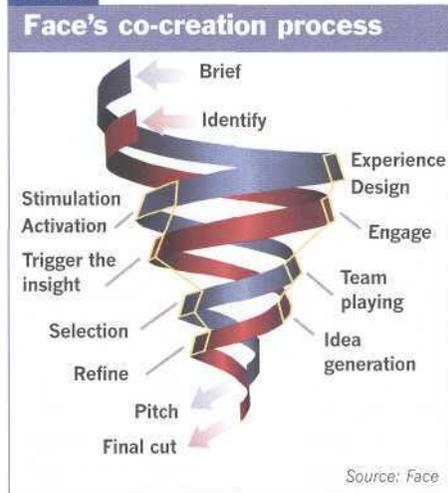
This presents a threat and an opportunity. The threat is that the research industry will not embrace change fast enough. Research is rooted in thinking that pre-dates the web - find people, put them in a room with a two-way mirror and ask questions. Many forms of research are struggling because they are not engaging or interactive - the two things social media and web 2.0 have taught consumers to expect.

Wealth of information

The opportunity is that we now have a huge amount of natural information about consumers' consumption habits, tastes, opinions, lifestyles and attitudes, available online and for free. Most importantly, we have social data: identity (who you are), contacts (who you know) and activities (what you do). Personal profiles on sites such as MySpace, Bebo and Facebook allow marketers access to preferences, allegiances, recommendations and conversations they could not have dreamt of, even five years ago. And there are communities for every niche, so the same data richness can be experienced for every brand, sector or topic. It is always up-to-date, being spontaneously added to by consumers. With the right tools, we can do qualitative research on a mass scale. But it's not just about getting great qualitative data for free. Web 2.0 has given consumers the confidence and ability to take more control of the relationship they have with brands. They have the tools to create their own content and share it, and so re shape what the brand means to them and how it is communicated.

Apple tapped into this when it launched the iPod Touch with an ad that had already been created by a Leeds Uni-

FIGURE 1



versity student, who had posted it on YouTube. The increase in this type of consumer involvement has given rise to the term 'empowered consumers', a new breed of customers who have a strong belief in their own creativity, ideas and self-expression. It is coming to the point, says Mark Earls author of *Herd*, where it is no longer about what your brand does to the consumer, but what consumers are doing to, and with, your brand.

How should the industry respond? Is it simply about using new web 2.0 tools to do research in the same way, or does it require a more fundamental shift in researchers' view of their own role and the part consumers play?

It is important for researchers to do more to help brands, find their 'adfluentials' - consumers who have the passion and brand connection to work with you and influence what you do, who have the skills to do so and the networks to involve their peers and friends. By understanding the 'adfluentials', we can go a step further and develop a new segmentation model, based on looking at consumers as people who want to have a deeper and more meaningful relationship with you.

This new relationship is framed not only by what consumers tell you or what you ask them, but by their real behaviour and actions; by the way in which they interact with your brand and other consumers, and what they do, ask and say to each other. There are all sorts of con-

sumers with different levels of passion, interaction and sizes of network. Their desire to do things with you varies, so they need to be engaged-with differently.

Consumers' desire to be listened to and involved more directly in what a brand does and says means there is a great opportunity to research with them, rather than at them, through online research communities. These are either closed (bringing groups of consumers together with client stakeholders in a web-based environment), or open (taking client stakeholders out into existing communities that are already live on the internet).

This growth in online qualitative research has given more prominence to a qualitative, interpretative methodology termed 'netnography'. This uses internet optimised ethnographic techniques to study the social context in online communities (see case studies, opposite). It is faster, simpler and less expensive than traditional ethnography.

Consumers control discussion

Consumers, through conversations with their peers, are as much in control of the discussion as the brand owners and researchers. This involves letting consumers take you to places you would not have thought of at the outset, helping you to uncover new insights. It also allows brands to develop relationships with customers over time, and this helps to produce richer and deeper insights as the whole process is more fluid and interactive than face-to-face.

This could even go a stage further, moving away from asking people about themselves and their behaviours towards asking them to play to their strengths in observing and listening to their peers.

One approach that is becoming more widespread is 'crowdsourcing' - the process of a company taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to a large community of people in the form of an open brief. Procter & Gamble, Nike, Best Buy, Threadless and Starbucks have created digital platforms that allow customers to help them create new products and messages. Starbucks received over 17,000 coffee ideas in the first 14

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Case studies

Unilever Surf

Soapbox is an online research community of 50 UK-based women of diverse backgrounds, brought together to reveal their true lives to the Surf team at Unilever. Over a 12-month period, the women are engaging with the site, using forums, blogs, multimedia diaries, instant chat and voting to complete tasks developed by Face and Surf. Due to the long-term and flexible nature of the project, the tasks can be topical and reactive to the current environment, while Surf can gauge



instant reactions and feedback from the community.

The project is not restricted to online. Over the course of the year, the brand stakeholders meet the women in a variety of settings, such as meet and greets, interviews and events. The women, who were recruited based on their varied interests and web-savviness, and who include fashion designers, bloggers, lecturers and actresses, will also have the opportunity to invite stakeholders and fellow Soapbox members to events or openings they are part of.

The flexible nature of the project, the sense of partnership and active participation and the socially and geographically diverse group of women online will inevitably result in a long-lasting legacy of insight for the Surf team to continue to use time and time again.

Tango

Face worked with Britvic last year to help it relaunch one of the UK's most iconic brands, Tango. In the 1990s, Tango enjoyed fame and notoriety with its 'You've been Tango'd' campaign, but by 2000 it had lost its way and, by 2008, was sitting forgotten on the shelf. Face worked alongside the newly appointed advertising agency, BBH, to help co-create a relaunch plan with consumers.

We started by engaging the brand's teen target market in an online research community, where we explored a range of potential areas that Tango could play in. Consumers were interacting directly with the client and the advertising agency in real time, and in two weeks there were five clear platforms. We then invited 16 of Tango's most creative consumers to work with BBH and the client directly to generate PR, digital, events and new product ideas in a 48-hour co-creation planning workshop.



The creative experience culminated in the consumers pitching back five potential positionings for the relaunch that they would buy – the acid test. Just four months later, BBH launched the Save Tango site, which was directly inspired by consumers' ideas. To date, the campaign has seen sales of Tango increase by 8%.

months since the launch of its online forum, www.MyStarBucksidea.com.

Dell has also done this, in a process that began in 2005, after blogger Jeff Jarvis began writing negatively about the company. This very quickly turned into a campaign against Dell, whereby thousands of customers who, like Jarvis, were fed up with its products and service, came together to vent their frustration and anger as part of 'Dell HELL'. It culminated at a conference in Japan, when Dell computers caught fire and exploded. This was the low point for Dell, with 49% of the blogging community writing negatively about the business. Dell responded to this barrage by taking the bold step of opening up its business completely to the power of its consumers. It engaged with, and listened to, experts - the blogging community and consumers - by launching its own blog, Direct2Dell, and an open online innovation space called Idea Storm. In 2008, Direct2Dell ranked 700 on Technorati, among the highest corporate blogs, with five million unique views per month. Idea Storm has had 7,000 ideas submitted.

Co-creation takes consumer involvement to another level. It differs from

crowdsourcing in that it brings brands and consumers together on the same level and involves consumers at the beginning of the process. Company stakeholders collaborate directly with selected groups of consumers to work on a specific brief. This can take place in online communities, offline in workshops, or both.

Through our co-creation communities for young people (named Headbox), and for women aged 25-50 (Mindbubble), we have been helping Unilever to co-create a range of new products (see case study, above).

Another example has been our co-creation of Axe/Lynx's 2010 variant in terms of both product and fragrance, which has never been done before. It will be launched later this year.

Structured creative process

As with all new approaches, there are significant lessons that we have learned along the way. The first is that, when you are bringing leading-edge consumers together with brands, it is vital to have a coherent and well-structured process that gets the best out of your combined creativity, so that it delivers better outputs that go on to test well.

The second is that, within this structure, it is important to have a mix of online and offline methodologies because they produce more ideas of better quality.

Finally, the role of the consumer is critical. Treat them as active equals in this process and give them as much responsibility, with direct involvement throughout the entire process.

Social media and web 2.0 have given us new tools and methodologies, such as netnography, online communities, crowdsourcing and co-creation, to help us get much closer to our customers and stay close to them for continuous periods of time.

But we also need to be able to articulate the ambitions for research. If, through social media and web 2.0, we are able to involve consumers in more exciting and different ways, through both mass collaboration and intimate co-creation, while at the same time finding ways of accumulating robust qualitative data that we can make sense of from the web, then research faces an exciting future. It will herald a new era - Research 3.0.