

Adopt new technology to be more fleet-footed in market research

Focus groups still have their place, but shorter surveys to get the answers you need right now are the way to serve clients' immediacy needs, says **Jill Telford**, Synovate

THE PRESSURE ON MARKETERS to deliver faster advertising return on investment should be a good thing for the research industry because it forces us all to question some fundamental research practices.

The most notable of these is client dependence on long surveys, which ultimately means a longer research process. This tendency to 'boil the ocean' on a regular basis usually stems from an innate fear of missing something important. The truth is that, while clients do recognise the need to streamline their research to save time and safeguard data quality, many remain reluctant to make a trade-off between real information needs and quality. Research buyers spend huge sums on tracking research, yet our research shows that 70% of clients are worried about data-quality because their questionnaires are too long. Some clients even admit that up to 90% of tracking data can be redundant, partly because change is not constant and partly because many questions are simply unnecessary.

Yet, despite the need for faster delivery of research results, there is pressure from various stakeholders to get answers to ever more marketing questions, even when budgets have never been tighter. It must seem prudent to cover all the bases, then decide which areas to jettison.

This puts a great deal of pressure on research agencies, who are trying to do more for less money, and faster. Long surveys are not very popular with respondents, either - something we cannot afford to ignore. We are all dependent on the co-operation and goodwill of consumers in our quest for their attention and responsiveness.

Elusive consumers

Consumers are also becoming much more powerful, and elusive. It's not just the way they are interacting with brands and advertising that is different; their response to market research is also changing, in some cases giving researchers less direct control over collecting data from them. This presents several challenges. Plummeting response rates are a major concern. Research must move from mere-



ly questioning, to engaging with and listening to consumers. We need to have a place in their world. Consumers are also increasingly bored with surveys. Research must be relevant, well designed and lean. Consumers are forming their own loosely organised groups and opinion panels via social networking. We stand to miss out on this candid feedback and discussion unless we are there, facilitating those discussions, or at least listening to them.

These challenges mean the market research industry is caught between a rock and a hard place: researchers have to woo both clients and consumers to stay in business. They must make the interview task shorter, simpler and more engaging for the consumer, while giving clients what they need to make decisions and justify their research investment. Research companies are tackling this challenge in different ways, from using new technology to engage with consumers to developing smarter survey techniques.

These new approaches to consumer research acknowledge two truths about consumers: first, that they are increasingly living interactive, digital

lives, and second, that we can no longer interrogate them at will with endless questions. They have far less tolerance than before for answering the same old rating scales and attributes.

Natural interaction

One of the most exciting new methodologies in market research is the community panel. It allows consumers to interact with brands in an environment that is increasingly natural for today's digital consumer. Clients can tap into these at any time, harnessing the mechanisms of social media to get a handle on what's swirling around in their consumers' minds and conversations.

We have always known how powerful word-of-mouth is in influencing brand choices. Community panels now enable us to pick up on 'word of mouse' and listen to consumers to fully understand the real reasons for their opinions and reactions. We really have to pay attention to these 'conversations', given the power that social media lends to the consumer. Community panels are a contract with the consumer to collaborate with us to create the products and communication they desire. We do not attempt to control the consumer - rather, we harness their power for joint success. In return for their engagement, we need to reward them with insider information.

Communities can take on a life of their own, replicating the uncontrolled forums littered across the internet. Like-minded individuals coalesce and reveal untapped potential for marketers and their brands. These new types of panels are not a global panacea, however. They cannot replace large-scale research among representative samples, but they do provide a good basis for instantaneous understanding of how customers react to new ideas, products and markets.

Trusted old research methods still have their place, but we need to be ever more careful in selecting the best method for each client need.

A case in point is focus groups. It's quite possible that they will never go out of fashion because they are an incredibly useful way to get flexible, first-hand

Jill Telford is chief executive of Synovate UK. Before arriving back in the UK this year, she headed Synovate North Asia. As a researcher, she specialises in financial services and luxury brand work, jill.telford@synovate.com



insights that can be used immediately. It helps that the client and agency team can view the research in action, discuss the findings with the researcher, and are able to make decisions on the spot. So, focus groups remain an excellent way to obtain inputs for campaign development, among other things.

But, of course, they cannot give the definite answers to a hard-pushed marketer on whether they will get real returns on their marketing investment.

Communications pre-testing has always been a just-in-time activity, and we have moved from the days of biking video cassettes to halls for fast turnaround online tests. There is still a need to understand 'will it work?', 'how will it work?' and, of course, 'is the campaign effect greater than the sum of its parts?' The 'will it work' part needs to be measured in terms of the creative's ability to influence the brand relationship with measures that have strongly validated links to real business outcomes. The 'how will it work?' part now needs to encompass a whole range of media, many of which are now designed to provoke engagement and participation with the brand. The measures used, and the way in which the creative is presented, have had to adapt as a result.

There continues to be a need for communications tracking, but in the increasingly fast-paced world in which we live, consumers don't have 25 minutes to waste on long, repetitive image batteries and diagnostic measures that have already been collected in your pre-testing.

Look to cut the internal redundancy out of the questionnaires; if the question is correlated with something else, don't ask it - the consumer won't wear it in this day and age. Right now, 'thin tracking' is king (see panel, above right) - ask only what you need to know now to prove your ROI, not what you think might come in handy one day.

Some new approaches are being developed or adapted to meet changing needs, while others are probably here to stay for some time yet. But the need to be able to interpret research findings will remain. However quickly, effectively and cheaply we gather data and opinions, we still need

Thin trackers: a cunning plan

Thin tracking addresses the need to eliminate internal redundancy in questionnaires. The idea is to focus only on key topics or measures and avoid asking anything that is unlikely to be correlated with other survey elements.

Thin tracking restricts the tracker to core information that tells you how well your brand is doing and if anything important is happening that requires follow-up study. To do this, you need good, predictive, dashboard metrics (such as attitudinal and market equity, basic brand imagery and basic communications effectiveness) in a questionnaire that will probably be longer than five minutes but should be shorter than 10 minutes.

Essentially, the 'thin' tracker mantra is: only measure what you need to know, when you need to know it. Many clients do trackers every three or six months - as though changes occur every few months. But we know that, in reality, that's not the case. The key to thin tracking is to have a set of simple, short measures in place that tell you how much is happening. If it's little, then that's all you do. But if you see things changing - in your own or your competitors' numbers - then you increase the scope of your questionnaire.

Of course, we always have to apply flexibility and good judgement to ensure we apply economy of measurement without any loss of validity in the data.

expert opinion on what it means for advertisers and marketers.

Consumers are good at giving their opinions as individuals, and the researcher's job is partly to make it easier for them to do so. However, it's quite another skill to be able to analyse the information consumers give us - all the more so now that the volumes of data are piling higher and higher, making it harder to pull out the best bits. Teasing out the key themes - the one or two truths that will have the greatest impact on the market - and pointing out the implications for the client will always be a valuable skill. Therefore, the researcher's ability to think and interpret for the consumer is unlikely to become obsolete any time soon.

The way forward

There are clearly some big challenges facing market research. We need to be more fleet-footed generally. We need to work with our clients to abbreviate and adapt the task we give to consumers/respondents and trust that less is more - otherwise we risk losing them completely.

Until we have the courage to forgo long, repetitive questionnaires in favour of focused, leaner, and more interesting discussions, we will not be able to deliver faster insights while maintaining quality of response.

We must embrace technology because

consumers already are, and they will not wait for us to catch up with them. The world of the internet has promoted collaboration between consumers and companies, and this now drives the way that we treat our respondents and work with our clients. This has implications for the technology that research companies adopt - slick, technology-driven platforms that allow researchers to think more and project-manage less are the way forward, but old, tried and tested techniques, like focus groups, still have a place in this new world.

You could say that everything is changing while some things never change. The key is to: use the right tools for the job; keep an open mind; resist the temptation to find out everything all the time; and strive to count less and think more.

To the last point, as Einstein said: "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." Research companies that are flexible and open enough to adapt to the new challenges will thrive, while those who continue to bombard their respondents with endless questions and treat them like machines will inevitably wither and die.