

A little thought goes a long way: how to use the most powerful tool in ad research

Presented at the 2012 WARC Advertising Research Conference, by Graham Booth, Movement Research and Stuart Peters, Aviva

Today we're going to talk about the most exciting and powerful technology yet discovered to help us explore how people process advertising ideas. It's a truly radical piece of technology and it can change the way we do our work and transform the effectiveness of ad development research. I've been using this technology successfully for many years, and later I'll tell you how we used it to develop the highly successful Aviva advertising campaign featuring Paul Whitehouse.

And yet, it's a technology remarkably few people know how to use, and something that many avoid because they don't understand it. The name of this technology?

Thinking.

No, it's not 'social'; it's not 'herd'; it's not 'mobile'. Yes, it's 'neuro' - but it's not 'science'. And this technology certainly isn't *rocket science*, although you'd sometimes think so, given how often one encounters a reluctance to use it.

So, in this talk today, there are no buzzwords, no bright shiny baubles of which we as an industry are so fond. Instead, I'll be encouraging you to bring your ad development research right up to date, by using a technology familiar to Plato.

Why have we chosen to focus on this today? It's my observation, based on over 30 years of working in the business, that a disinclination to *think* is becoming increasingly commonplace in marketing. I think this is a microcosm of a broader socio-cultural malaise, in which we see the distrust of intellect, the imperative of action over contemplation, the pressure on thinking time of an 'always-on' society and, fundamentally, a lack of training in basic thinking skills at an academic level and in business. You could say thinking is in crisis.

I am seeing the negative effect of this in my field of expertise: advertising development research. Today, too much ad development research is misused, owing to a poor understanding of how it works and a disinclination to put in the thought required to get the most out of it. At its best, qualitative development research provides invaluable insights that can show us how to make advertising ideas more effective. But this only happens if those involved take the time and effort to really *think* about what they are doing.

So, in this paper, we will explain and demonstrate how you can ramp up the quality of your ad development research - and hence improve the effectiveness of your advertising – *not* through more 'bells and whistles', but through more thinking.

More thinking can make a big difference at every stage of your ad development research. There are 5 key questions you need to be asking to ensure the right thinking is going into your ad development research:

- 1 What is the *purpose* of advertising development research?**
- 2 Do we even *need* research?**
- 3 How can we make research as *insightful* as possible?**
- 4 How should we interpret what we hear?**
- 5 How can we ensure that what we have learnt is acted upon?**

Asking these questions will provoke the thinking that will make your ad devt research more effective.

1 What is the *purpose* of advertising development research?

To find the answer, we did some research! I asked this very question of a number of people working in brand marketing and advertising. Here are some of their answers:

- to know what you've got right, what you've got wrong, what you've overlooked and what is possible
- to inform business decision-making relating to advertising
- to be sure that the communication will have the desired effect of being noticed, distinctive, relevant & motivating.
- to ensure the advertising makes a real connection with real people
- to gauge the effect an idea is likely to have on people.

All reasonable answers on the face of it. But, actually, we don't think any of them is quite right, because respondents can't actually tell us *any* of this stuff. In fact, they can't even tell us what they think and feel - only what they *think* they think and feel – and that's not same thing at all. What we now know about implicit ad processing from Robert Heath et al, what behavioural economics tells us about non-rational decision making, and lots more besides, all confirm what qual researchers have always known: nothing we hear from our respondents can be taken at face value.

We also need to remember that research is not reality: we are asking people to talk about ads in a way they never normally would, using unfinished ideas, in an unrealistic environment in which they have paid attention in a way that is wholly

unrepresentative of how they would encounter the ads in the real world. Attempts you might make to mitigate this 'laboratory' scenario and make it more 'realistic' - such as putting press concepts into magazines, or drawing up storyboards for TV ideas – frankly don't make your research any closer to 'reality'.

So, if research isn't reality, and if respondents can't tell us what they really think of our ideas, what is its purpose? Well, I believe the purpose of advertising development research is **to help us think**: hearing different perspectives from ordinary people, who are in the market but have no stake in the marketing, provides invaluable *stimulus to our thinking* about how ideas might work and how we might make them better. So, the first point to be made about the need for more thinking in ad development research is this: the research will be more powerful if you accept that the aim is *not* to find out what people think, but to help us to think.

2 Do we even need research?

Probably half the ad ideas I research should never have gone into research, for a number of reasons, such as: they're not on strategy, they're completely generic, they simply don't have a creative idea, or they're just plain dull.

These are all issues that brand teams and, of course, their agencies, should be able to identify; you shouldn't need to commission research to work out whether your ad concepts are on strategy, distinctive and interesting - just look at them... and *think!*

Incidentally, a useful tip for doing this well is to take off your marketing hat for a few moments – stop being a marketing or insight person and just be yourself: someone who shops at supermarkets, buys cars, takes holidays, uses websites, buys insurance - just like anyone else. Be a *human being* for a moment, not a marketing person, and see what you think of your ad concepts. Maybe fewer of them would get as far as research.

So the second point about the difference that thinking can make is a simple one: don't research work that, if you *think* about it, you can tell isn't right in the first place. Do *more* thinking and you'll probably need to do *less* research. Think, and you'll probably save yourself time and money.

3 How can we make this research as insightful as possible?

Here's the meat in the sandwich. The things you do *before* you talk to any people in research will make all the difference to the value of what comes *out* as a consequence. At the start of your creative development project, ask yourself 3 questions:

i) How do I think these ideas work?

- ii) How did the creatives get to these ideas, and how can they envisage them developing?
- iii) What's the best way of putting these ideas in front of people to get a meaningful response?

What you are doing here, of course, is developing hypotheses, some ideas about what might be happening and what one might do in different scenarios. Developing hypotheses is a central discipline within the practice of good thinking, and yet it's surprising the number of people who go into research with the intention of "seeing what people think", rather than exploring hypotheses. Go into your research with some hypotheses, and you have some start points from which to build. And, if your hypotheses don't fly, you at least have a head start in thinking about how to build some better ones.

Let's take a look at each of these three questions in more detail to see where more thinking makes a difference.

As we should all be aware, advertising works in many different ways. There's no single, universally applicable model, and don't listen to anyone who tells you the same measures can be applied to all ads; they can't. Thinking about the way the advertising might work shapes how we explore it in the research and the type of stimulus material we should use.

A big help in answering the question 'how do I think this ad works?' is to know the thoughts of the people who *created* the creative idea. I've found that discussing creative ideas with their originators has never failed to give me new insight into how they might work and a better sense of where the opportunities for creative development lie – and, indeed, the limits. There's no substitute for getting it 'from the horse's mouth'. In fact, when I do this, it's not just *me* who gains new insight into the ideas – my clients do too, even the agency account team. This is not least because I, as the research geek, have 'permission' to ask the 'dumb' questions about the creative work that the brand and agency account people cannot, for fear of undermining their credibility.

So, in helping us all develop some hypotheses about 'How might these ideas work?', I think the perspective of the creatives is invaluable. But don't just take my word for it - listen to what Mike Hannett, the lead creative at AMV on the Aviva campaign has to say about the issue in this video. My first question to Mike was: how often have you talked to the researcher before they take your ideas out into development research?

Developing some hypotheses about how the ideas might work is also vital in helping you answer the question: 'What's the best way of putting these ideas in front of people to get a meaningful response?' We're talking about stimulus material here: what's the right type of stimulus to use? The very scary truth is

that the suitability or otherwise of advertising stimulus material can make the difference between an ad idea living or dying in research. So, using the right stimulus material is an incredibly important issue, but it receives nowhere near enough thought.

I'm all too often presented with stimulus material as a fait accompli, most notably for TV ideas: nearly everyone defaults to producing the same, standard form of stimulus, regardless of the nature of the ad, which is usually a bunch of key frames and often a recorded VO. However, in my experience, key frames generally *get in the way of the idea*. Respondents get hung up on erroneous details and distracted trying to interpret weirdly drawn visuals. Key frames make ideas seem pedestrian and staccato when the ad itself would have pace and continuity, while they can also convey a misleading visual style and tone. In any case, they bear no resemblance to what will eventually appear on TV, so why bother with them?

Many is the time when I have had to throw away the key frames I have been given (and *obliged* to use because money has been spent on them) after the first couple of groups because they are completely handicapping our ability to get a response to the creative idea. And, as for animatics: don't get me started!

So, what is the right type of stim? The answer is: *it depends*. There is only one 'rule' about the 'correct' form of stimulus material: **use whatever most faithfully conveys the creative idea**. You'll notice that I say '*creative idea*', rather than 'ad'. That's because, in creative development research, *by definition*, you're *not* researching the ad. Stimulus material, particularly for TV, can never express the reality of the ad as it will eventually appear, but it *can* faithfully express the *creative idea*.

There is an important implication of tailoring stim to the individual ideas: you may well have to use *different* types of stimulus material to look at your various TV concepts in the *same* piece of research. This is anathema to many people, who say "If you're not using the same type of stim for each creative route, it's not a level playing field." This completely misses the point: yes, we do need a 'level playing field', but for the *ideas*, not for the stimulus material. If we produce different types of stimulus that allow the individual creative ideas to be understood as clearly and faithfully as possible, *then* we have a 'level playing field'.

Most often, at least with stimulus for TV ideas, less is more. I typically use nothing more than a carefully written narrative description - no pictures except for the end-frame and pack shot. This is not *always* the case - as I said, "it depends" - but for most TV concepts, people are much better at envisaging them in their mind's eye from a vividly written description than from Magic Marker boards; a picture may be worth a thousand words, but your creative idea for a TV

commercial will probably be more accurately conveyed by a few well-chosen ones.

I'd like to give you an example of this from the work we've done developing the Aviva campaign with Paul Whitehouse. I've never used key frames to develop the ads in this campaign. We *did* use some visual stim when we first researched the idea. Because the idea is based on Paul performing as different characters, it was necessary and legitimate for us to show video clips of his characterisations from TV shows. However, other than that, we've only ever used narrative scripts, which I have personally read out in the groups, to develop what has been a fantastically successful campaign.

One of the stand-out commercials in the campaign was for life insurance, a notoriously difficult product to advertise in a compelling way. The advertising idea was intended to be highly emotive, driving identification at a deeply personal level to shake people's inertia and prick their conscience about the need to confront the unpalatable implications of life insurance. We used a narrative to explore the idea in the groups; listen to this, recorded from one of the groups.

I suspect you had no problem picturing the commercial in your mind's eye when you listened to that. How did it feel? A bit more powerful than showing a bunch of static, key frames with a recording of an actor speaking the words? Here's the finished ad, so you can see how faithful that narrative was to the creative idea when it eventually appeared.

This ad performed really well, by the way: it exceeded its targets on key brand and ad attributes, achieved excellent levels of awareness relative to the weight of TV exposure and it doubled ad recall and trebled brand attribution compared to previous Aviva life insurance executions.

So, don't do key frames, unless they really are the best way to convey your idea. And, more importantly, always think carefully about *what form of stimulus will most faithfully convey the specific creative idea*.

4 How should we interpret what we are hearing?

As I mentioned earlier, respondents often don't *know* why they have reacted as they have to the ideas we put before them. When you hear the researcher probing "why?", it's not because the respondents can necessarily give us a true answer, but because what they say may give us *clues* about what the answer might be – it can help us *think* about 'why?'

I'll give you an example: sometimes, when we ask respondents why they have reacted negatively to a creative concept, they'll tell us it's because the idea is "unrealistic". Now, that's *never* the reason they dislike an idea. *Most* advertising is 'unrealistic' to greater or lesser extent – some of the best

advertising has been quite preposterous. So, when respondents criticise an ad idea for being “unrealistic”, what this in fact means is something else entirely. It may mean that the creative idea is not a good fit with your intended communication, that what it communicates lacks credibility, that the idea is derivative or that it has an element preventing it from being clearly comprehended. *Those are the kinds of things people mean when they say the idea is “unrealistic” – but you’ll never hear them say it. There is no issue with advertising portraying the brand benefit through wild hyperbole or make believe, if it’s legitimised by the appropriateness of the creative idea.*

Equally, we have often heard respondents criticise the Aviva TV concepts we have looked at in research because they do not personally identify with the character Paul is portraying. However, we don’t necessarily take this at face value either. Identification was important in the life insurance ad, but the Motor and Home insurance ads in the campaign, which promote deals, work in a different way. This ad – one of the most successful in the campaign - is a case in point. In our development research, a lot of respondents *said* this wasn’t a good ad, because they couldn’t *identify* with Paul’s character and his passion for ballroom dancing. However, in the Motor and Home insurance parts of this campaign, where we’re talking about deals, we have found that the advertising doesn’t work through identification, but through the engagement and entertainment built around the deal messaging. What respondents *didn’t* say, but we could tell from their reactions, was that the context within which the deal saving was conveyed had entertainment potential. And we knew that Paul could perform these key sequences in an entertaining and engaging way.

So a great deal of thought has to go into the *interpretation* of what people say, and this applies as much to those *observing* the research as it does to the person conducting it. We’ve all heard the mantra that ‘research kills creative ideas’ but, in my experience, the greater threat to creative ideas comes from the knee-jerk response of those sitting behind the one-way mirror to respondent reactions that are, when taken at face value, less than positive.

You won’t find the answer in what you hear respondents say, but only as you reflect upon the *meaning* of what they’ve said in your post-fieldwork analysis. But this invaluable thinking takes *time*. I think of research analysis as being like the layers of an onion: you have to peel away the outer layers of understanding before you can even see what lies beneath - the deeper truth that lies at the heart of the ad response.

So, please give the *researcher* time to think, and don’t deprive *yourself* of time to think, either.

5 How can we ensure what we have learnt is acted upon?

Finally, thinking doesn't end when the research has been debriefed. The most brilliant research insights in the world can be lost if the key stakeholders are not involved in the debrief. It doesn't matter how senior the stakeholder is; if they're at board level, put the researcher in front of the board, the researcher should be able to hack it. Also, ensure the creatives are involved – they're going to be the ones who go ahead and make the ad, so it's pretty important that they embrace the findings and are willing to act on them.

But, we're not quite there yet. Even when your ad development research gives you brilliant and clear guidance, which the key stakeholders buy into at the debrief, this can *still* be lost in the journey from debrief to production. Many is the commercial that I have researched in script form and then subsequently seen on TV and wondered "What on earth happened there? How did they come to lose the very things that made this idea work?"

How does this happen? Most probably because no-one took it upon themselves to ensure that the key features of the idea that made it work didn't get *lost in the production process*. It's worth allocating this responsibility to a specific individual who acts as the 'guardian of the learning'. It's a small thing to think about, but an important one none the less: *someone needs to take responsibility* for ensuring that key learning reaches the screen or gets onto the page.

So, I hope we have convinced you of the benefits that can come from putting *more thought* into ad development research. Thinking is the most powerful advertising research technology we have: it's free, it's simple - and you can start tomorrow.

Remember, good research costs no more than bad research – the difference is the thinking that goes into it.

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