

Research looks at the signs of the times

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Market research used to be a fairly simple business. Get a few pollsters out on the street with clipboards, or a couple of focus groups into a studio, and ask people what they thought about the latest brand of coffee or toothpaste.

But now, as companies struggle to stand out in crowded markets and invent entirely new products in fast-evolving businesses such as mobile phones and gaming, the research industry is embracing newer techniques such as semiotics and ethnography.

"Historically market researchers have been seen as providers of data, but now there is more expectation for them to provide insight into what the data means," says Colin Shaddick, director at Continental Research.

Semiotics, the study of signs, is being called upon to help companies understand cultural contexts better, and find ways to create a buzz around their products.

"The market research industry has over the last five years realised that reliance solely on consumer responses is only giving them half the story," says Alex Gordon, semiotician at Flamingo International, the market research company. "Classical research asks consumers for their opinions. Semiotics looks beyond that to what is forming those opinions - and how to change them."

Flamingo - one of the first market research companies in the UK to hire an in-house semiotician - says many of its clients are traditional companies, such as fast moving consumer goods businesses.

A classic example of a semiotics-driven campaign is the series of ads for Pot Noodle, which show the fast-food snack as a sinful indulgence and a lapse of taste. Pot Noodle was difficult to justify on a nutritional basis, so semioticians turned the idea on its head. Instead of trying to insist that Pot Noodle had any health benefits, the campaign said exactly the opposite. Pot Noodle would never be healthy or upmarket - but it would always be the secret vice that you would return to, time and again.

"We live in a world dominated by signs. If you know how to disrupt these you can create a reaction. By simply swapping the male and female signs on the toilet doors of a pub, for example, you can generate laughter, anger, sex, humour," says Gordon.

Ethnography, the branch of anthropology that studies human cultures, on the other hand, is being brought in to help companies plan product and service design.

"Many of the companies that come to us are in the mobile space," says Simon Rubens, director at new experience, a company specialising in offering ethnography services. "They need to understand people's changing behaviour and are looking to introduce new products and services for which no comparisons exist."

"There is nothing wrong with focus groups - they are useful for testing concepts out. But they can be very abstract - they are not valuable for looking at how products are actually being used in everyday life."

Ethnographic research seeks to get away from the artificial focus group environment and observe people in their natural surroundings. This can include accompanying people on shopping trips, observing them at home, asking them to make video or audio diaries, intercepting and interviewing people in public places.

The technique is not new - ethnographic research has been used to inform product design since the 1980s. But in the past year, says Rick Robinson, global director of observational and ethnographic research at NOP World, there has been an increased demand from clients to integrate it with the rest of the market research portfolio.

Robinson joined NOP World to set up the ethnography practice this year after repeatedly working together with the research company at the request of clients such as Sony, General Mills and Ford.

"Clients were coming to us saying they would not only like to have ethnographic research accompanying their quantitative market research, but for the two to work together in a more integrated way," Robinson says.

There are of course, still a few sceptics. "It is taking time for some clients to get used to using new techniques," admits Flamingo's Gordon. "Many can initially be sceptical about what they can get out of it."

Credibility can sometimes still be an issue, says Rubens, as sample sizes used in ethnographic research are often smaller than in the classic focus group. "For focus group research you would usually get in four to six groups of eight people, whereas in ethnographic research we might just study eight people in total. People do ask whether this is enough to get a reliable indication from."

But, he points out, the purpose of these small in-depth samples is just to throw up ideas - it is always possible afterwards to evaluate them by quantitative surveys.

Price can also be an issue, says Luc Rens, director of Research International's consumer understanding group. Time consuming ethnographic research - or the time of an academically trained semiotician - costs more than a classic focus group session.

It is clear there is no shortage of work. Gordon is constantly on trips across the UK and abroad, while NOP World's Robinson says his team of seven ethnographers is already "overwhelmed with work" and ready to expand.

Even the old hands of the market research sector have to hand it to the new boys. "Whether these techniques will be as 'buzzy' in five years' time remains to be seen," says Continental Research's Shaddick. "But clearly there is a role for them."

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