
VISUALS ARE THE NEW LANGUAGE OF CONSUMERS AND MARKETING RESEARCH



Parry Bedi

Many articles have been written about the impending implosion of the marketing research industry, and many have questioned if the industry is still relevant in the age of big data. Compare practically nonexistent growth rates in the research industry to the meteoric growth we have seen in other data (primarily passive) collection and analysis methods, and you'll probably find that these criticisms ring true. This article is not meant to rehash those criticisms, but to try to make sense of them and offer a perspective on a possible way forward. With that in mind, here are the common gripes about research.

It's Overly Complex

As an outsider to the industry (albeit from an engineering/quantitative background), I was very surprised by how complicated we make the seemingly simple stuff out to be. Does a report really need to be 25-plus slides of raw numbers that only a statistician can understand? The complexity limits research effectiveness. It ensures that recommendations are never even fully read, let alone implemented.

We Apply Old Methodologies to New Platforms

This, by far, has been the biggest criticism of our industry. We continue to view the industry's sweeping technical shifts solely through the prism of marketing research and therefore are content with applying old methodologies to new platforms. For example, there are many companies that gather market data by administering online surveys. The natural evolution in this space is to extend this model to enable users to respond via their smartphones. Several firms have made this transition, while others are explicitly positioning themselves as a platform for learning about customer experiences. However, what we have done is brought the hours and hours of "log-your-life diaries" to mobile ethnography. Additionally, we haven't changed our business model when we deploy these new technologies. Even a simple study needs several analysts and project managers – all charging hefty consulting fees. The value of mobile is in the simplicity of the user experience and also the ability to reach your audience everywhere. Neither of these approaches leverage mobile's real strengths.

It's Not Truly Representative (aka Boring)

While we claim to be building customer-centric communities, the unfortunate truth is that oftentimes we view participants as an unavoidable expense. We are paying for their time after all! We put little thought into making research experiences

non-intrusive, even fun, engaging and I dare say, addictive! This narrows down the segment of people who are willing to participate in research to a smaller self-selected segment of the population.

Enter a Visual World

One of the major secular trends of our time is that the world is increasingly becoming visual. As evidenced by the rise of visual platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest and Vine, consumers across the world are abandoning text and letting pictures and videos do the talking. In fact, visuals are emerging as the predominant posting type on Facebook and Twitter as well. And why is this the case? It's simple: visuals are often more concise and more effective units of communication.

Especially on Mobile

Mobile and visual together can also be a power couple for marketing researchers. Millions of millennials overwhelmingly use visual to communicate on a personal level. By not using visual and mobile, you're missing out on reaching a demographic in their preferred language and on their preferred platform. Visual and mobile combined also offer another compelling benefit – great data at scale and speed.

But, researchers are still not using either to its full benefit. For example, while there are many firms in the marketing industry that are enabling clients to understand and speak to consumers in this new, visual language, marketing research firms have, for the most part, only focused on analyzing imaged-based social data that consumers are already posting – being voyeurs, so to speak. However, there is so much more to social, especially imaged-based social, that by doing so they are missing out on a major opportunity. Marketing researchers should also use social and visual social as an opportunity to directly solicit responses to gather meaningful, in-the-moment-

of-truth insights, both quickly and cost effectively, while ensuring a stellar respondent experience.

Gathering imaged-based data can be very valuable to your marketing research efforts. With visual, we can ask fewer questions and still gather mountains of information. Why not have them write about their experiences in a log? That way we have loads of data to digest and pick out nuggets of wisdom from. To that I would say not true – a picture is truly worth a thousand words. And when solicited and examined properly, it can enable researchers to garner vital insights in a manner that is non-intrusive, fun and very natural to consumers.

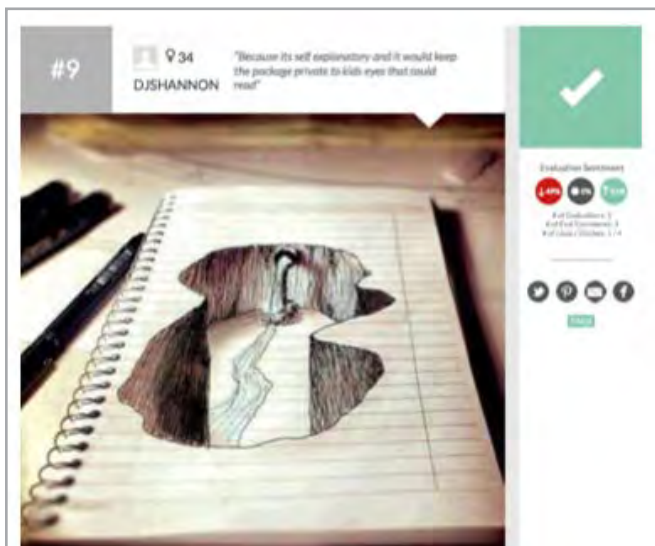
Allow me to illustrate through an example. The company in this case, a pioneer in the personal care space, was looking to create a new packaging for its upcoming vaginal care cream product release. It had a hunch that the existing packaging mechanisms weren't working for customers. As you can imagine, this is not an easy product to conduct research on – rarely do people talk about vaginal care cream in their private lives, let alone on social media. Also using imagery for such a product? That seems totally counterintuitive.

But here is how it went about it:

It asked a single question: “Show us what the best packaging for a vaginal cream product would be and tell us why in 140 characters or less.”

The responses were varied, but after an exhaustive analysis, one clear theme started to emerge: What women wanted was something that was discreet.

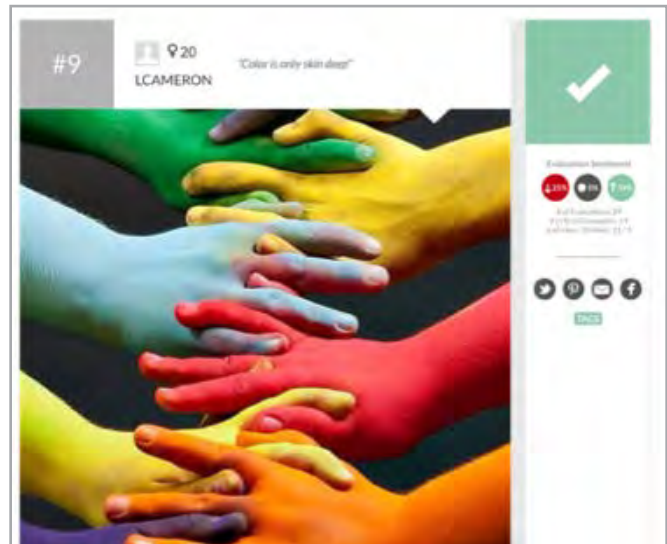
Here is one of those responses that illustrates what discreet meant to people:



As you can see, this respondent wasn't looking for something small, necessarily. To her, discreet meant hidden. She desired a product that could easily masquerade as something else. Imagine the cost and effort involved in getting to this insight through traditional means.

In the next column, is another example of a visual study that came from a consulting group working in public policy arena. It asked: “What does diversity in America mean to you?”

The group's biggest takeaway was that a bright array of colours is often associated with social diversity. If your goal is to



signal positivity and diversity and you are designing a website or a campaign, you know what to do.

It's as simple as that!

And it's this simplicity that enables rapid iteration or agile research where you can learn from the insight, refine or change your next question and ultimately arrive at that elusive “aha” moment.

The method illustrated in these examples is just one of the ways to exploit what I believe is one of the biggest trends of our era: Visuals have become a means of communication on par with modern languages – even one that transcends cultural and traditional linguistic boundaries. This rise of visuals also provides a great opportunity for the marketing research industry to get closer to consumers; closeness that enables brands to co-create, co-ideate and co-brand their products. Visual engagement allows brands to communicate with consumers in a manner that everyone is more accustomed to, and better yet, brands find this engagement better, faster and cheaper.

Parting Thoughts

These are tumultuous as well as exciting times for our industry. If we are to be relevant and prosper over the next few years, we have to continually innovate and most importantly be open to change. I know it sounds a little cliché, but oftentimes in our industry, I have seen really smart researchers resist change even when data is clearly showing it to be necessary. And it's understandable – new techniques for gathering and analyzing data don't fit in neatly with the models we have carefully curated and developed over the last three decades. It's simply hard to shift the momentum of 30 years, but we have to give it a try.

So the next time you hear someone in the office saying “but where are the benchmarks?” my advice would be to empathize with them. “Yes, this technique is different, and yes, it doesn't fit in with what we used to do, but the world has changed, and so must we.”

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