

# On Babies and Bathwater



## While some behavioural scientists are critical of market research, each discipline can learn from one another and together are powerful

Although behavioural science has been a buzzword in market research for years now, in 'purist' behavioural science spaces there lurks huge scepticism of surveys and the market research industry as a whole. These purists, populated largely by ad men and academics, quote David Ogilvy saying, "The trouble with market research is that people don't think how they feel, they don't say what they think, and they don't do what they say."

Indeed, reading the latest behavioural literature can make anyone question work we do: psychological evidence demonstrates that we don't know our own mind. Research has clearly demonstrated that the impetus for behaviour comes before involvement of the conscious mind, that memories are imprecise at best and wildly inaccurate at worst, and that most of what people claim is their reason for behaviours is post-rationalisation rather than the 'real' trigger.

However, I think those that use this evidence to say that we shouldn't conduct market research are tossing the metaphorical baby out with the bathwater. Although it has limitations, research has a critical role in behaviour change. Most academics are using surveys and interviews to gather evidence, and even author Richard Shotton<sup>1</sup> admitted to me he's "not critical of market research, just unquestioned survey data directly reported as truth". Consider me biased, but I will fight tooth and nail about the value that market research brings to understanding human behaviour, specifically:

- **Understanding narratives people tell themselves** – although people might not be able to recount 'real' reasons for decisions, the stories they tell themselves are still important as these can form the basis of messaging for that behaviour (non-conscious drivers like fear or laziness, might not be acceptable to explicitly promote upon).
- **Understanding context** – much of behaviour is steered by physical, social and emotional context. In market research people can usually recount basic factual elements about situations in which behaviours occur, and when we

understand this context (through methods like in-home interviews or diary tasks) we uncover potential non-conscious influences on decision-making without asking the participant to directly link their significance.

- **Asking about others** – although everyone likes to present themselves in the best possible light, using social dynamics can help identify deeper motivators, even in a market research environment. Although an individual might not admit to something 'socially undesirable' or being influenced by non-conscious influences, they are more willing to say that 'other people' are.

Conversely, though I'll fight for market research against detractors in behavioural science, there is more we should do in the market research industry. A few steps can help mitigate the potential for unrealism in the way we operate:

- **Prioritising gut instincts** – behavioural science says the initial response is often the most honest. When we 'probe deeply' this detailed exploration of a theme builds on several biases to possibly deviate from truth: the tendency to post rationalise, as well as consistency bias mean that respondents are likely to build on prior responses without stopping to say 'perhaps I actually didn't do that at all'
- **Replicating real choice environments/running trials** – something research and behavioural science have in common is the best way to understand whether something works is to try it. Although regulated healthcare environments often mean we can't run full randomised controlled trials (rolling different interventions out to different populations), using monadic tests in surveys or creating 'simulated interventions' in research can get us as close as possible to observing whether solutions work rather than relying on the participants' estimates.
- **Using iteration and real-world data** – past behaviour is a better predictor of future behaviour than people imagining how they would behave (prospection). Using aggregated opinions and real-world data about demonstrated behaviour is a powerful lever to understand 'whys' behind behaviour because it removes the veneer of participants representing their 'best selves', instead they build on the 'reasons why' including the perspectives that others cited.
- **Being willing to go against 'popular' opinions** – because people don't know what drives their behaviour, they can skew research data toward 'rational'/'logical' choices, which can miss potential to inspire change<sup>2</sup> with less logical choices. So; taking reported responses with several pinches of salt and not relying on just stated research findings alone to identify recommendations.

Furthermore, the power of behavioural science in tandem with market research is greater than the sum of its parts. Not relying solely on one or the other to answer business problems but working with them together, we'll have a clean baby rather than just baby or bathwater.

Katy Irving, Global Head of Behavioural Science, HRW

<sup>1</sup> Shotton, R (2018) *The choice factory: 25 behavioural biases that influence what we buy*. London: Harriman House.

<sup>2</sup> Sutherland, R. (2019) *Alchemy: The Surprising Power of Ideas That Don't Make Sense*. Penguin

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