

# Unconventional Wisdom

So many “insights” are being shared in today’s marketplace. You can’t open your inbox, turn on the radio, or browse the web without coming across at least a few research “briefs.” Some recent examples include: “coupon redemptions are up in today’s economy.” Or “20 percent of consumers own a smart phone (and growing every day).” Or that “more shoppers are switching between store brands/private label and national brands.”

While these “insights” may all be true, that’s about as far as the intellectual curiosity goes. From that point on, the research quickly morphs into providing only a point-of-view — hypotheses masquerading as facts. They can be very persuasive hypotheses or very thinly veiled “PR” efforts.

Think about today’s media landscape. How much of what you read, hear, or see in today’s media is based on true, investigative, objective journalism? How much is based on an observation that is then used as an angle for an evening newscast, blog post or the subject line on your favorite daily email newsletter?

Now, think about how often in your business teams — whether they are agency teams, cross-functional brand teams, or senior management groups — those points-of-view become transformed into facts themselves. When a point-of-view is repeated by so many sources so many times it can become hard to argue with.

We have a term for that in our society: *conventional wisdom*. Increasingly, conventional wisdom has become the basis for strategic brand, organizational, retailer, and agency decisions. Hundreds of millions of dollars are wagered based on conventional wisdom, not facts or genuine insights.

That’s why it’s important to have some discourse on an increasingly harmful barrier to growing our businesses — the disappearance of thoughtful, grounded consumer and shopper insights from our marketing and shopper-marketing strategies and programs.

It’s quite a juxtaposition, when insights are being asked for by retailers as the conversation starters with brands and manufacturers, that we’ve lost our way on what really defines insights and how they can help us succeed.

## BACK TO REALITY

What is a meaningful insight? It is a statement that describes the psychological motivations for consumers or shoppers behaving the way they are. These statements are grounded in the category and the retail experience (in the case of the shopper).

Most important, insights provide the launching point for motivational strategic and tactical selling plans for the brand. Integrated selling is not possible without meaningful insights.

There are some great tests you can give yourself to see if you’ve identified an insight. For example, which of the following is an insight:

“Online food and beverage sales are expected to double in the next five years” or “I began using an online food retailer when I gave birth to my son because I was frequently stuck at home and didn’t want to expose my son to all those germs at the store. I just kept using the service from that point on.”

If you selected the latter, you would be correct. It describes the shopper’s *motivation* for their choices, and provides *inspiration* to the retailer for how they could uncover a whole new marketing opportunity.

Here’s another example:

“Kroger is all about dunnhumby and their shopper segmentation” or “I shop Kroger for my fill-in needs because it’s convenient to my commute home from work and I am very confident they carry the exact items I need.”

Again, if you selected the latter, you’d be correct. The former is a retailer’s approach in the marketplace while the latter is the shopper’s motivation for using Kroger.

# Meaningful insights are more than just opinions masquerading as facts.

## SOME INSIGHT ON INSIGHTS

So, how do we get to those meaningful, powerful insights? How can we make sure they are a bigger and more continuous part of our business dialog? We can get there in three simple steps.

First, reinvent the art and science of listening. The art is creative and divergent, but the science is what will validate your hypotheses and create sustainable growth opportunities. Learning how to integrate both aspects will make you a world-class knowledge manager.

Best practices for approaching the art and the science are not located all in one place, however. Top-tier consumer packaged-goods companies hold the crown for the art of listening, otherwise known as ethnographies, shop-a-longs and other observational research.

These approaches offer a powerful way to uncover new insights regarding how consumers and shoppers interact with brands and discover new categories.

On the other hand, direct marketers are experts at the science. The process of test, learn, scale, and repeat is well entrenched in the direct marketing world. This rigor in approach allows for substantially greater learning to be garnered in a shorter period of time with a validated platform for moving forward.

Consider the potential knowledge power unleashed by fusing these two approaches. Lew Sanders, a well-known asset manager, told *Barrons* recently, “Research permits you to do the unpopular, and the unpopular is almost always the most profitable.”

Now, while Mr. Sanders is not part of the shopper-marketing community, his assessment is relevant — *research gives you the knowledge necessary to make the right decision for your business, whether that follows conventional wisdom or not.*

Second, use today’s technologies to better understand the nuances of insights. New technologies and innovations (at least the more successful ones) have offered new twists on the familiar. In our agency, *digital shopper-marketing* is an important innovation that builds on the more familiar shopper-marketing competency.

Uncovering and communicating insights can take a similar route, and we can all play a part in helping

the research industry — typically slow to jump on the technology bandwagon — adopt relevant technologies to reinvent insight communications.

Social data auditing tools, such as Radian 6, provide a new “ear to the ground” on what people are talking about with each other. Immersive interviews conducted by blogs and aided by Flip video cameras, potentially provide even more authentic responses than observing consumers in their own homes (since you know they probably cleaned up before you arrived).

In the measurement world, rather than discounting web activity data or word-of-mouth marketing activity because they are hard to compare to traditional TV GRP data, embrace it as a new angle on understanding shopper behaviors.

Most important, use technology to improve how we communicate insights — there is nothing more powerful than quotes, pictures, and videos that capture what is happening with shoppers from their own perspectives. It may be easy to ignore something abstract (like a data table) but it is far more difficult to fail to address a real person’s issues.

Third, demonstrate the difference between what you would take action on, based on the insight, versus what you would have recommended without that knowledge. Power resides in the contrast between what you *did* and what you *will* do. It illuminates the “ROI” of insights in an incredibly clear way. Your team and your management will appreciate the clarity.

These simple steps will improve how you identify insights, use them, and communicate them with your marketing and shopper-marketing teams. Fewer point-of-views and more insights help drive business and better anticipate and address where consumers and shoppers are going. ■



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