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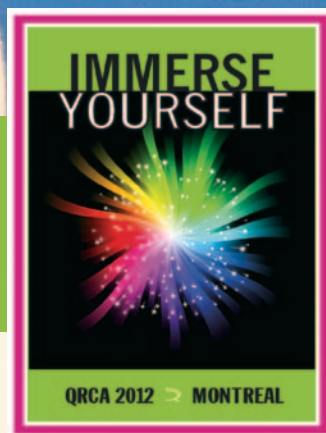
THE NEW RENAISSANCE CHILD


PLUS:

BACK TO
THE FUTURE?


*The Legacy of
Dichter and the
"Depth Boys"*

*Special Inside! Sneak Preview of the
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Back to the Future?



The Legacy of Dichter and the “Depth Boys”

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Through its direct face-to-face engagement with consumers (think of it as greater “band width” that enhances clarity), qualitative research has a unique opportunity to negotiate an ethical relationship in terms of what respondents are willing to share. They are made aware of the purpose and uses of what they reveal, and guidelines and best practices have been developed to ensure that research is ethical and that consumers’ confidentiality is protected. This is one of the key functions of QRCA and AQR — to be the “conscience” of our industry.

This article takes a brief look at the changing ethics of qualitative research in its widest sense and how advertising and marketing agencies have used its findings in ways that sometimes have been accused of unethically manipulating the public. Our aim is not to be comprehensive, but to highlight some issues and perspectives.

Dr. Dichter and the Origins of Motivational Research

The in-depth qualitative research methods in QRCs’ current toolboxes had their origins in the 1940s and 1950s with motivational research,

Dr. Dichter’s work and that of similar motivational researchers — sometimes known as the “depth boys” — underpinned the marketing and advertising of Madison Avenue, and with it came a whole new era of marketing that encouraged indulgence, product desire and replacement of the old with the new, even if the old was still serviceable.



which was popularized by psychologist and psychoanalyst Dr. Ernest Dichter. He laid the foundations for exploring the needs and motivations of consumers (some of which are still seen in in-depth methods and approaches used today), and he was partly (or even largely) responsible for introducing these methods and approaches to Madison Avenue advertising and later the U.K. and beyond.

Dichter was a sensation. Motivational research used psychoanalytic methods to reveal consumers’ hidden motivations and desires. Dr. Dichter’s work and that of similar motivational researchers — sometimes known as the “depth boys” — underpinned the marketing and advertising of Madison Avenue, which was one of the main driving forces behind the post-World War II boom, and with it came a whole new

era of marketing that encouraged indulgence, product desire and replacement of the old with the new, even if the old was still serviceable.

Cars became objects of male potency. Dr. Dichter empowered the Esso motorist with his “Put a Tiger in Your Tank” campaign. He likened the convertible to a mistress and the sedan to a wife, and he recommended the development of the hardtop car so that men could benefit from the feeling of having the mistress without straying from the safety of the wife. Indeed, consumers lived in an exciting new golden age of consumerism.

Dr. Dichter and the depth boys revealed consumers’ real needs and wants by giving objects new meanings. By association through advertising images, lipsticks became phallic objects, and lips adorned with their bright colors were a honey trap for men. And every woman dreamed of walking down Park Avenue in nothing but a Maidenform bra!

Critics Sound Off

The use of motivational research by admen, however, was not without its

critics and concerns about the ethics involved. In 1957, American journalist Vance Packard wrote his famous exposé, *The Hidden Persuaders*, which sold over a million copies and was the top seller for non-fiction books for six consecutive weeks. Packard claimed that unethical advertisers were using hidden symbols to manipulate the unconscious mind by “channeling our unthinking habits to influence our purchase decisions and our thought processes.”

Packard, however, was too late. Far from discrediting motivational research, his book was responsible for exposing its popularity. The public, even if reluctant to admit it, was fascinated by the change in consumer culture that such research had brought — advertising became more interesting, more exciting and more fun. The tide had turned; indeed, most consumers were enjoying the narcissism

Cooper and Patterson asserted that consumers enter into a cooperative relationship of mutual consent rather than trickery and that they are not unwitting in their seduction — instead, it is a game played in the modern world between consumers and brands.



Is covertly trawling social-network sites with cyberbots, unseen and unknown to consumers, a violation of data privacy? Or are participants willingly giving their opinions and individual data, in exchange for the opportunity to expose their lives to anonymous and secret outsiders?

of being the center of marketing attention and being seduced, rather than sold to in a cold and rational manner, as had been the previous way.

Trickery or Mutual Consent?

More recently, in 2000, a paper by Peter Cooper and Simon Patterson, entitled “The Trickster,” tackled this same subject of the ethics in marketing and advertising. The authors explored the mythology of the Trickster and how this ancient archetype works in branding and advertising to seduce the consumer.

Unlike Packard, however, Cooper and Patterson asserted that consumers enter into a cooperative relationship of mutual consent rather than trickery and that they are not unwitting in their seduction — instead, it is a game played in the modern world between consumers and brands.

In this viewpoint, consumers are actually accomplices in their own seduction. They allow themselves to be enticed, convinced, seduced and dazzled by the Trickster’s charms.

Indeed, the Trickster operates at a deep psychological level within the more primitive part of our brains, appealing to our wishes to be persuaded, by using an array of devices to entice, convince and seduce, and we are dazzled by its charms. We allow our id to have its way and play along with the Trickster, who tickles our fancy.

We know that Esso will not actually put a tiger in our tank and that Axe will not give us Herculean pulling power; but, as knowing participants,

we willingly play along as insiders in this post-modern joke.

Ethical Research Requires an Open Conversation

The ethics of contemporary qualitative research are well integrated into current professional practice. They rely on an open dialogue between researchers and respondents. Only by taking an interest in and engaging with consumers, sharing their lives as collaborators and partners, can we fully explore their motivations, emotions, aspirations and desires, along with the pressures and influences that shape their decision-making.

To achieve this, qualitative research needs to be a conversation, which gives it cultural validity and authenticity. By taking an interest in consumers, exchanging ideas, hearing their stories and actively listening we can come to “know” the consumer in an open and honest fashion.

Social-Media Monitoring — a Breach of Data Privacy?

A pressing concern for us in the contemporary research culture is the role of social-media monitoring and Facebook scraping, which some quarters seem to consider as a valid alternative to qualitative research. Apart from issues of the validity, authenticity, superficiality and interpretation of the data, the ethics and morality of this method of data collection are being called into question.

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individual data, in exchange for the opportunity to share their lives and personal opinions with anonymous and secret outsiders? In shaping their own internet experience, are they engaging themselves as participants and partners with brands and advertisers?!

It would appear that many consumers are willing to openly expose their views, ideas and personal information through social media, but on the condition that they can adopt whatever persona they want. This, however, poses a serious danger of undermining the value and credibility of marketing research.

New ESOMAR guidelines on social-media research have been produced to regulate the potential abuse of data privacy, to make sure that consumers are willing participants and that their data remains private.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, ethical qualitative research is dependent on collaboration and co-creation with consumers. Indeed, it is in our interest for consumers to share their thoughts and feelings with us in a way that is not cynical or jaded from unethical practices, by both respondents and researchers.

Research should be a democratic process in which respondents reveal their ideas and feelings on brands and services. The journey that qualitative research has taken, which was provoked by Ernest Dichter and the depth boys in the 1940s and 1950s, has evolved as society, culture and technology has evolved. The essential purpose of our task, however, remains the same, and the ethical and moral issues are still dependent on creating an open relationship between respondent and researcher to leverage valid and reliable insights for our client.


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