Qualitatively Researching Engagement

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Tuesday, 05 June 2007
Last Updated Tuesday, 05 June 2007

Qualitatively Researching Engagement, Written by Joanna Chrzanowska, Genesis Consulting

Everybody is talking about engagement right now; how to engage and co-create with consumers, how to measure the engagement of media vehicles and advertising, how to harness Web 2.0 in the marketing mix.

While some of these issues are to do with finding a new media buying metric and understanding how consumers interact with new media, the idea of engagement is filtering through into qualitative research briefs. It's useful to be able to use the same, or at least a similar, concept in both quantitative and qualitative thinking.

So now the questions for qualitative researchers are:

- Where has the idea of engagement come from and what does it involve?

- How can it be researched qualitatively?

Although planners, marketers, and media buyers are still arguing about it, there is an official definition of engagement from the Advertising Research Foundation.

Engagement is turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context. (Advertising Research Foundation)

From a qualitative perspective there are some further concepts around the idea of engagement:

1. Itâ€™s about â€˜turning on a mindâ€™

A subtle, subconscious process in which consumers begin to combine the ad's messages with their own associations, symbols and metaphors to make the brand more personally relevant. A consumer may see an ad, recall it, and even repeat the key benefit, but until they undertake this process, or "co-create" the meaning, they haven't truly engaged and it is unlikely to impact their behaviour.

2. The active consumer â€“ Itâ€™s not what it does to you, itâ€™s what you do with it

This idea was famously first presented by Lannon and Cooper in their paper on Humanistic Advertising in 1983 and represented a major paradigm shift. The old models of advertising as a force or influence that does something to people, have to be replaced by a model where a brand and its advertising is seen as being constructed by the consumer.

With the new concept of engagement, it is now about providing opportunities for the audience to not only see something but to do something; to capture what they hear about a brand and use that knowledge in a personal way. "It is the ability of the brand and the brand media environment to meaningfully connect with the consumer."

Engagement is a new mental model for advertisingÂ - not longer AIDA - Attention, Interest, Desire, Action, but Feel, Think, Do.

Measures of "brand feeling" are much more highly correlated to purchase intent than ad recall. In this model, an ad's job is not to provide compelling, fact-based features and benefits of a product, but to seduce the consumer into beginning a subconscious processing of the brand.

3.Â The challenge for researchers is to expose this non-rational process

When the consumer "engages" in this subconscious processing, he or she creates associations, affixes symbols, imagines metaphors and imbues experiences into the ad message to give it personal relevance. This means that one of the challenges for qualitative researchers is to be able to delve into these symbols and metaphors, understand the connections being made, and therefore understand how those might impact behaviour at the actual point of purchase.

4. Engagement is in itself an interesting metaphor

In the world outside of marketing, Engagement is what happens when two people make a commitment to each other; they feel comfort and togetherness, they trust each other and feel loyal to each other.

This metaphor gives us a model by which we can start looking at levels of engagement.Â With any product, brand, or organisation, to what extent do people:

-Â Feel interested in it?
-Â Find parts of it personally relevant
-Â Feel comfort and â€˜togethernessâ€™ when interacting with it?Â
-Â Feel understood by it?
-Â Feel the brand has their interests at heart
-Â Feel the brand listens to them and respects them
-Â Feel they have a say in how the brand operates
-Â Trust the brand and therefore are willing to be influenced by it
-Â Feel proud to be a customer
-Â Feel so loyal they donâ€™t want to spend their life without it (almost), would continue to use and would recommend it to their friends
-Â Feel its part of their identity

Some examples of the questions a qualitative researcher might want to ask or adapt to understand engagement:

- What had most /least meaning for you?
-Â How enjoyable is it toâ€¦â€¦..?
-Â Were you able to connect any of it to things that have happened to you or that you care about?
-Â What do you feel XXX were thinking when they createdâ€¦.
-Â Who did XXX have in mind when they designedâ€¦
-Â What sort of people are (organisation) and what is important to them?
-Â If you met (People from organisation) how would you get on with them?
-Â If there was a problem, how would you expect to be treated?
-Â How much would you trust (organisation) ifâ€¦â€¦
-Â How would you feel about telling your friends aboutâ€¦â€¦.
-Â To what extent is XXX for people like you?
-Â How likely are you to recommend [brand] to a friend/associate?

Given that consumers might not be fully aware of the ways they are attaching meanings, it will also be helpful to use projective techniques, such as Collaging, or bubble drawings that depict a two-way conversation between the brand and the consumer.

Analysing and making recommendations

This will of course depend on the level you are working at.

- Ad engagement draws the consumer in to begin to create that personalised meaningÂ
-Â Engagement marketing reactivates the associations and symbols at a time when the consumer is ready to move from the emotional, subconscious form of engagement to an active formÂ
-Â Brand engagement results when the individual ads, messages and experiences blend into a seamless whole that drives preference, word-of-mouth recommendation, and other loyalty behaviours.

Engagement is not simply about symbols and metaphors; practically speaking if a company wants to move its customers from â€˜quite satisfiedâ€™ toÂ â€˜emotionally engagedâ€™, there is a lot of work to be done on the whole customer experience including the product and the employees who deliver it.

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