

Putting Mobile Research Into Context

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Mobile technology is changing consumers' lives and how we conduct market research.

Smartphones and tablets are transforming how we communicate, socialise, work, consume media, play games and shop. The mobile has become an extension of our brains and our personalities. In emerging nations, it is providing a basic level of education and healthcare that is improving and even saving lives. And there's more innovative technology on the way. Dating via mobile augmented reality apps will help you spot your perfect match simply by pointing your camera phone towards a fellow date-seeker to assess compatibility. In retail, Tesco has created virtual stores in Korean subway stations, allowing busy commuters to shop via their smartphone whilst waiting for their trains.

It is no surprise that market research has responded to this revolution by adopting mobile research methods to take to clients. But there are dangers that in the haste to "tool up" we forget to consider exactly why we are adopting these techniques and how they can have the most impact on market research. Mobile research should not simply be offered to clients because it's new, exciting or cool, but because it's the best tool for understanding and predicting behaviour.

Humans don't think as much as we like to think we think. Nobel Prize-winning psychologist and leading proponent of behavioural economics, Daniel Kahneman, describes two processes for making decisions and judgements: System 1 (implicit, instinctive and emotional) and System 2 (explicit, analytical and cognitive) thinking. Many of our day-to-day decisions are made through System 1, instinctively and intuitively, which explains why we are so susceptible to the environmental and social influences around us, and to our own fluctuating cognitive and emotional states. The external and internal context of decision making is absolutely central to the outcome of our decisions. Yet most of the research done today is designed for and carried out in a context-neutral environment, where we ask people to respond hypothetically using evaluative System 2 measures. Context and contextual research is, then, absolutely essential to understanding and predicting behaviour.

The context

Research via mobile offers a chance to get closer to this context, helping us to understand consumer behaviour and the decision-making process better. So, at BrainJuicer, we prefer not to talk about "mobile research" but instead to see what we are doing in the mobile space as "contextualised research." It just so happens that the mobile device is the ideal tool to use.

The smartphone and tablet enable us to understand consumers in the moment and tap into their emotional and instinctive decision-making processes. Kahneman's "peak-end" rule establishes that we tend to evaluate an event or experience by how it was at its peak and at its end. Mobile devices enable us to monitor consumers throughout their experiences and overcome this bias of retrospect. In shopping, for example, we can track emotional responses at the key moments of truth and also look at how the visceral states felt by shoppers as they enter a store might affect behaviour. A recent experiment suggests that average spend per shop could increase as much as 9% if customers are happy or hungry. Such findings are likely to prove invaluable to retailers designing store environments and customer care programmes.

In 2006, Dan Ariely and George Lowenstein ran a famous experiment amongst male college students to show the important role "hot states" play in decision making. Sexually aroused students were significantly more likely to say they would engage in morally questionable behaviour (in order to obtain sexual gratification) than those in an un-aroused state. Mobile research allows us to gain feedback whilst consumers are in these "hot states." A recent BrainJuicer mobile research event on the night of the Super Bowl showed just how powerful in-the-moment reactions to advertising can be when combined with emotional response and live group discussions.

Augmented reality

At the cutting edge of experience research, we can also leverage augmented reality (AR) to create and measure the impact of this emerging communication channel. Snack packaging that comes to life to offer the latest promotions, or hair-care packaging that allows you to see what different hair colours look like on you are exciting for technology-savvy consumers and offer a new marketing channel for marketers. To evaluate these AR campaigns effectively we need to ensure the hot state is retained by embedding our research within the AR experience.

Humans are poor witnesses to our own behaviour, and traditional research finds it difficult to capture reported rather than real behaviour. But mobile research can give us a window into human behaviour without us interrupting it or having to ask people what they are doing. Mass mobile ethnography has enabled us to collect data by sending out groups of observers to report back on topics as diverse as binge drinking and pet food. Increasingly advanced mobile devices enable us to acquire rich context around these observations in the form of photos, videos and location information.

Finally, mobile research must look beyond phones and tablets as tools for data collection.Â Internet-connected watches, wristbands, trainers, TVs, fridges and washing machines amongst others, are all part of the modern connected world, an “internet of things,”™ and have the potential to generate precious research insights as more and more devices connect to talk to each other and share information. Assembling the pieces of the jigsaw by combining active research data with passive behavioural data will bring researchers closer to understanding the irrational and often forgetful consumer.

The market research industry is only at the start of what we can achieve as technologies and methods evolve. Innovating and pushing boundaries should be encouraged, and technology should be embraced with open arms. But for ultimate success, we need to keep grounded in the basic principles of understanding human behaviour.

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