

Why is a Good Insight Like a Refrigerator? - Jeremy Bullmore on the value of high potency insights in marketing planning and research

Here is an insight: "*Product satisfaction arises less from inherent construction and performance than from consumers' internalised perceptions of personal utility.*"

You may have found it faintly familiar; and - when you finally worked out what it meant - more than faintly obvious. What you won't have found it to be is exhilarating, inspiring, memorable, actionable, evocative. You will not have been tempted to repeat it to colleagues or include it in your next internal newsletter. Certainly, it contains a truth - and an important truth at that; but it just sits there.

Between 40 and 50 years ago, Professor Theodore Levitt famously told his Harvard Business School students:

"People don't want quarter-inch drills. They want quarter-inch holes." It's been quoted a million times ever since and enlightened generations of marketing people. But what if Professor Levitt had chosen to say this:

"Product satisfaction arises less from inherent construction and performance than from consumers' internalised perceptions of personal utility." (Doesn't improve with repetition, does it?)

His diligent students would have noted it down; but it would never have been quoted and it would have enlightened nobody.

Whether from their research companies or their communications agencies, marketing companies today are unanimous in demanding insights. There seems to be no universal agreement on what an insight is but a reasonable definition would seem to be something like this:

"A new understanding, probably of human behaviour or attitude, as a result of which action may be taken and an enterprise more efficiently conducted."

The call for insights is natural. To return to Levitt's dictum, marketing companies don't want research; they want enlightenment. Conventional market research, professionally conducted, can paint an invaluable picture of the immediate past; but companies also need help in forging their futures. That's what lies behind the demand for insights - but not all insights are equal. They come in two very different styles and with very different values. There are low-potency insights and there are high-potency insights.

"Product satisfaction arises less from inherent construction and performance than from consumers' internalised perceptions of personal utility" is a low-potency insight. "*People don't want quarter-inch drills. They want quarter-inch holes*" is a high-potency insight.

And the difference in value between these two has nothing to do with the intrinsic observation itself. Both assertions contain the same truth. In fact, to be really pedantic, the low-intensity version, when scrutinised carefully, actually turns out to be more accurate and more comprehensive than the Levitt version - because, of course, people don't want quarter-inch holes any more than they want quarter-inch drills. They want bookshelves or wall lamps or rabbit hutches. The low-potency version, with its reference to "consumers' internalised perceptions of personal utility" neatly covers this point: but at what cost. Literal accuracy prevails but inspiration is smothered. Where the low-potency insight utterly fails is in instant, heart-lifting revelation. It never elicits that immediate, exultant response: "Yes, of course! That's exactly how it is!"

Bold hypothesis

This is familiar stuff to all creative agencies. The account planner or strategist who comes up with an immaculate and scrupulously accurate relief map of the brand and its market - and absolutely nothing else - will not be greatly loved by the creative group. By definition, a good creative brief contains a bold hypothesis. To generate hypotheses you need to speculate: you need to progress from the known to the unknown. But you cannot paint the future in the colours of the past. Other people's imaginations need to be engaged, excited, signed on as accomplices. And the choice of the language you use is not arbitrary and inconsequential; for an insight to have real potency, the language in which it is couched is at least as important as the inner truth itself. For an insight to have real potency, literal accuracy is less important than its power to evoke.

A long time ago, I wrote a short piece about brands in which I said: "People build brands as birds build nests, from scraps and straws we chance upon." And I've been extremely gratified ever since to find this phrase quite widely picked up and approvingly quoted.

I've also been amazed that no one has ever challenged it; because, as I can now exclusively reveal for the first time, it's demonstrably untrue on at least two counts.

As every ornithologist knows, birds don't build their nests from scraps and straws they chance upon; they know exactly what raw materials they need and they set out deliberately to find them: mud, sheep's wool, moss, twigs - are all knowingly sought out and secured. That is how birds build

nests; but is not, of course, at all how consumers build brands.

Nor do we, as consumers, chance upon most brand clues: they are laid in our path by the brand's owner - the packs, the promotions, the price, the advertising - in the cunning hope and expectation that the brand we thereby build will be the one we'll come to love and favour.

Had I been more responsible, more concerned with accuracy and truth, this is what I should have written all those years ago: "*Stakeholders form the framework of brand concepts less from holistic perceptions than from the convergence of disaggregated structural elements.*"

It's no new game to mock marketing language - though too much of it still continues to invite mockery. There are times when marketing language kills thought, strangles speculation, anaesthetises the imagination. While marketing jargon remains guilty of these crimes against understanding, it deserves to be mocked. But there's an even more serious point to be made.

In business, we seem to want to follow the linguistic philosophers; to believe that the rigorous researcher or the business professional deals only in matters of fact; always defines terms; and aims for the total elimination of ambiguity. In fact, of course, if every word employed is underpinned by definition, it follows that every definition employed needs to be underpinned by definition - and so on into what is called infinite regression. In the pursuit of economy and precision, we achieve instead circumlocution, opacity and chaos.

"Stepping stones for thought"

Instead, when searching for high-potency expression of sometimes complex insights, it's a great deal more fruitful to accept the limitations of language; and to agree with Arthur Koestler when he says that "Words in themselves are never completely explicit; they are merely stepping stones for thought." (It's a wonderful sentence that; not only an important insight, but an elegant example, in itself, of the very truth it contains.)

High-potency insights, because of their immediacy - because they evoke as well as inform - behave like the best viral ads on the internet. They are infectious; we only have to hear them once to remember them, to apply them, to pass them on to others. By contrast, the low-potency insight sits there sullenly on its PowerPoint slide, moving absolutely nobody to enlightenment, let alone action.

Insights framed in high-potency terms invariably avoid the direct and the explicit. They stay close to the original meaning of wit: communications of great economy achieved through the use of unexpected associations between contrasting or disparate words or ideas. Koestler calls it bisociation.

Metaphors, analogies and similes invite the receivers' participation, as in a joke; so that the point is not rifled relentlessly home but is "seen" Examined forensically, most high-potency insights won't even be semantically accurate. That's because they work not through description but through allusion. They should, however, convey a greater truth.

Giving high potency to an insight is an intensely creative act: it requires a massive injection of imagination. As with any other creative act, it also demands an understanding of what is already in the receiver's mind; and just as importantly, what is not already in the receiver's mind. Metaphors, similes and analogies work only when the reference points are already familiar to their audience. Levitt's audience already knew about drills and holes.

Poets, of course, do it instinctively. That's why the works of Shakespeare contain so many quotations. For a short, cheap course in evocative communication, the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* can be highly recommended.

The origins of an insight are usually to be found in numbers. That's how we know an insight to be more than airy whim; that's how we know it has substance; that it can be tested and replicated. But, except to the supernaturally numerate, numbers seldom sing spontaneously. For the rest of us, numbers conceal enlightenment at least as effectively as jargon. That's when we need to call on words - provocative, allegorical words - to let in fresh air; to liberate the insight and give it immediate, self-evident potency. In both research companies and creative agencies, there are people we know who can effect this alchemy. They do it every time they turn dry, mechanistic market analysis, first into creative strategy and then (occasionally) into sublime creative execution. We should use them more often, consciously and deliberately, to cast the same spell on recalcitrant data.

It's no new thought to suggest that the value of an insight, the utility of an insight, is dependent not only on the originality and accuracy of that insight but at least as much on the potency of its expression. It's exactly what Alexander Pope was getting at:

"True wit is nature to advantage dress'd, What oft was thought but ne'er so well express'd."

It is almost certainly the case that, already paid for, there's a great Aladdin's cave of knowledge out there: but as yet unlocked by consummate expression. It's as if great quantities of rough and unappealing diamonds had already been mined - and then left to moulder in a warehouse. In the real world of diamonds, of course, that would never be allowed to happen. If diamonds are to deliver their real value, they need to be cut and polished.

We mine for insights, too. And we should be as insistent as the diamond trade that, once unearthed, they be cut and polished - and made to glitter and inspire.

So to return to the beginning:

Why is a Good Insight Like a Refrigerator?

Because the moment you look into it, a light comes on.

Jeremy Bullmore
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WPP Advisory Board

Acknowledgements

* The low-potency versions of Levitt's drill and my bird's nest aphorisms were written by Stephen King. A lifelong enemy of marketing jargon, he can parody it with devastating effect and I'm extremely grateful to him. I also invited him to produce a low-potency version of anything from Shakespeare. He chose the Polonius speech from Hamlet, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be..." "In overseas assignments it is essential to keep an appropriate and sustainably balanced credit/debit ratio. Unsecured loans may be irrecoverable and can endanger potentially profitable relationships, while sporadic borrowing inflows can conceal the underlying reality of cash flow projections."

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