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Book Reviews

The Art and Science of Interpreting Market Research Evidence

D. V. L. Smith and J. H. Fletcher

Wiley, 2004; £24.99; ISBN: 0470844248

On one level this book, and its accompanying training modules, could be described as a creative writing course. But the content is a far cry from the ‘once upon a time’ or ‘I’m going to tell you a story’ genres of literature. The use of ‘story telling’ as a method of presenting complex issues within a corporate context in order to involve and motivate the audience is a growing phenomenon — this book describes how to do it and the underlying rigour that must be present if the audience is to have faith in this method of presenting information.

Perhaps more than any other, this book underlines the sea change that is taking place in market analysis — in particular, the increasing need to synthesise, or blend, information from various sources using different methodologies to do so and then turn the output into a narrative, rather than taking the traditional step-by-step approach (‘first we did this, then we did that. . .’). If you think this all sounds like a dry primer on data integration, then think again. By the time you have finished reading the content you will be familiar and comfortable with the concepts of Bayesian statistics, grounded theory and the Hermeneutic Circle — and why these, and other well-proven theoretical constructs, need to be centre stage when developing a holistic approach to information management. In essence, this is a text about evidence-based decision making, and while the title may suggest that this book is one for the market research community, the principles outlined within many of the chapters can be applied to all aspects of market planning — and other business areas where multi-sourced information needs to be assessed and interpreted.

So, for ‘market research’ read ‘researching markets’.

The Foreword by Professor Nigel Piercy clearly sets the scene by citing two world-leading companies where their success has been built on knowing more than their competitors. As Piercy states:

‘Superiority in learning and sustaining the advantage through the constant search for new insights and better understanding of the drivers of customer value in the marketplace has proved to be one of the most critical corporate competencies.’

This book is how to achieve this goal — and develop a source of competitive advantage that, as Piercy says, does not as yet even have a name!

The key, as Piercy explains, is to interpret ‘the whole array of evidence available’, rather than ‘simply reporting data’ — with the emphasis being on the ‘whole array’, taking the holistic view.

If we have ‘new marketing’ as described by Dr Susan Baker in her recent book (*New Consumer Marketing*, Wiley, 2003), then we also need a new approach to researching markets. So in a sense the Smith and Fletcher book is a response to the changing marketing context. In the new world there is the need to mix orthodox formal statistical and scientific-based data with informal sources such as prior knowledge and intuition. There also need to be ways to compensate for imperfect evidence, but the overall end result must leave management feeling sufficiently confident to assess the relative impact of decision options. The authors’ analogy is that holistic data analysis today is akin to a musical ‘jamming’ session.

The contribution that intuition can make is a core concept within this book; however, as the authors warn, intuition is only of real value if it is informed. The definition of intuition as ‘knowing without knowing why’ needs to be replaced by a viewpoint which recognises that ‘intuition without research is blind, and research without intuition is dumb’ — what the authors call ‘data-rich’ intuitive analysis.

Much of the book is necessarily concerned with discussing different types of data commonly used to develop a picture of a market and the range of analytical processes that can be applied in order to create a holistic picture. This includes a review of market research methodologies, the imperfections that can occur within surveys and survey-based data and how to gain the maximum value from this source. All of this is illustrated with pertinent and detailed examples throughout. Some of this may be viewed as being too detailed for those who see themselves as information users and decision makers rather than data collectors or analysts.

But the real value of this book for most *Interactive Marketing* readers probably emerges within Chapters 13, 14 and 15 that outline how to create this compelling story from the holistic approach and use the outputs as a spur to better-informed decision making. Using two examples as the basis for their argument, the authors make a very convincing case for developing a narrative, or story-telling, approach to presentations based on researching markets rather than using the traditional building-block approach where each stage in the overall data collection process is dealt with sequentially as a series of results.

The importance to marketers of the thinking that underpins this book is the fact that one of the authors, David Smith, recently won the Best Paper award at the prestigious ESOMAR International Congress for a paper based on the content — one of many awards that David has won over many years for his contributions to developing new ways to improve the accessibility of market research and increase its influence and value as a business tool.

As mentioned at the start of this review, purchasers of this book also gain access to a supporting set of training modules that can be used within an organisation to help drive the necessary cultural shift away from traditional, or more orthodox, information analysis and presentation methodologies. So, although the stated objective of this book is to improve the effectiveness of market researchers, it also has immense value in helping those who commission research on markets to

understand how to maximise the return on their investment. . . and improve their decision-making competencies as a result. We can all learn something from this book about the urgent need to review the way we cope with the demands of the information society.

Peter Mouncey, F IDM

Brand Failures

Matt Haig

Kogan Page, 2003; hardback; 299pp; £18.99

ISBN: 0 7494 3927 0

One of the minor joys of being an editor in charge of book reviews lies in being able, just occasionally, to pick out for oneself from among the many monumental tomes that land with deadening thumps on one's desk a title that promises to be an enjoyable read. And, let us admit it, there are few things more enjoyable to read about than other people's failures.

The author, not wishing to trade solely on his readers' *schadenfreude*, maintains, of course, that from this catalogue of failures — some naïve, many comical, some tragic — one can derive useful conclusions about brands and branding, and, at the least, about how not to do things. About this thesis I am much less convinced.

Having laid out in a short introduction his views on the centrality of his subject ('Image is now everything. Consumers make buying decisions based around the perception of the brand rather than the reality of the product') and the seriousness of his project ('to provide "how not to" advice by drawing on some of the largest branding blunders of all time'), the author then groups his succession of 100 case studies under nine main headings.

These start with four 'Classic Failures', headed inevitably by New Coke and Ford's Edsel. Then come 'Idea Failures', which include such gems as RJ Reynolds' smokeless cigarette and Clairol's 'Touch of Yoghurt' shampoo. This is followed by a chapter on 'Extension Failures', and here we must make a pause.

Throughout the book, and especially in this chapter, we are repeatedly told that a brand must have 'a narrow focus' on 'core brand values'; that it must not seek to extend itself 'too far' or into 'inappropriate categories'; that with brands 'more is less'. These dicta are rammed home by quotations from sundry brand gurus, and by reference to such hilarious failures as Harley Davidson's short-lived move into perfume, or Bic's attempt to sell women's disposable underwear.

Now, I do not want to quarrel with the general good sense of these near-universally accepted principles, but it does seem to me that if an author wishes to propound as dogma generalised rules of this kind (particularly rather vague ones, which can be called in aid in almost any after-the-event critique) then he ought to test them, not merely by quoting cases which might seem to validate his theme, but against contrary cases which might call in question their universal truth. Scientists, for the most

part, understand this principle: a scientific hypothesis becomes a working principle not merely when its originator is able to produce a series of 'proofs' of its validity, but when his or her peers have made every effort to *disprove* it, and have failed.

In this particular case our author is well aware of at least one outstanding case which contradicts his (and almost everyone else's) views about brand extensions — the case of Virgin. He even produces a case history entitled 'Virgin Cola — A brand too far' in which, after admitting that Virgin 'is one company that seems to be able to apply its brand name to anything', and providing a long list of the anythings, he asserts that Virgin's excursion into cola represented brand overstretch. In fact, as the case history itself demonstrates, it represents nothing of the kind: Branson's failure with Virgin Cola (as Haig himself tells us) was due to his mistaken belief that he could take on Coca-Cola and Pepsi at one and the same time, overlooking their ability to shut him out of shelf space in enough UK supermarkets — nothing to do with narrow focus, or brand values or inappropriate categories. A brand failure, or failure of a brand, certainly — but a branding failure assuredly not.

In his introduction to the chapter on 'Extension Failures', Haig does venture on a too-short discussion of what makes Virgin different, concluding that its core value is its position as the consumer's champion (is that how travellers on Virgin trains see it?), and that the consumer's perception of Virgin is 'unified by the charismatic figure of Richard Branson himself'. But 'most other brands', we are told, 'do not have such versatility'. Why not, you might ask — but that is where this discussion ends. A pity — there is interesting stuff here which, if properly debated, might have thrown some more light on the issue of overextension. As it is, all we have is 18 (other than Virgin Cola) cases of brand failures which we are told, quite believably, are cases of overextension; we are not given any examples of equally unlikely brand extensions which succeeded. Perhaps there are none. We are not told.

Among the other chapters, some are more useful than others. There is a curate's egg of a chapter on 'Culture Failures' arising in some ten different countries, ranging from the instructive (Kellogg's attempt to introduce breakfast cereals to India), to the trivial (an unfortunate Scandinavian motto in the USA: 'Nothing sucks like an Electrolux'). There is a sound chapter on 'Rebranding Failures', from Consignia through Sellafield to British Airways. (As the chapter title implies, these are of course, unlike Virgin Cola, not brand failures at all, but branding failures.)

'Internet and New Technology Failures' is a hotch-potch of cases whose common thread is their dot.com connection rather than any shared reason for failure. 'Tired Brands' is a rather tired ending to the book, since there is not a lot to be learned from cases like Pear's soap or Ovaltine which have simply outlived their time. There are, however, interesting studies of Kodak and Polaroid.

I have left to the end Chapters 5 and 7. Chapter 5 is aptly entitled 'PR Failures', and begins with the notorious cases of Exxon and the *Exxon Valdez*, and McDonald's and the McLibel trial. None of them (with one

exception) is a case of brand failure, since most of the brands in question are very much alive, but all (with the same exception) are cases of appalling PR supposedly inflicting damage on the brand (ie on consumer perception of the product or service concerned). In some cases the effect of this damage is measurable, in others (eg Exxon) not, but we are invited to suppose that damage there was. The exception in this chapter is PanAm — a brand, and an airline, destroyed on one day by one terrorist outrage. Haig does not discuss whether PanAm's processes helped to facilitate this disaster, but a PR failure it certainly was not, and Haig's conclusion that 'some crises are too big to recover from' is not exactly helpful. Quite what this entry is doing in a book dedicated to explaining 'how not to do it' is unclear.

Finally Chapter 7, 'People Failures', headed by Enron, Arthur Andersen and Ratner's. Although each of the seven companies discussed in this chapter possessed a name which had been promoted as a brand, and although each of these brands has now vanished, it really is not useful to describe their demise as brand failures — they are first and foremost business failures. Enron and Arthur Andersen failed through the revelation of unethical, dishonest and illegal business practices emanating from their top managements. Ratner's failed because its eponymous owner made one (probably over-lubricated) speech out of turn. None of these had anything to do with the brand values of the companies concerned.

So, where are we? The whole book, like Chapter 6, is a bit of a curate's egg — sometimes surprising, sometimes funny, sometimes interesting and thought-provoking, sometimes shrewd. But it does not always analyse its categories with sufficient rigour, and the 'lessons' which follow all but the shortest entries too often have the feel of being written with hindsight, and without sufficient attention to possible contradictory examples. Nevertheless, a worthwhile addition to your bookshelf, even if only for its entertainment value.

Robin Fairlie F IDM