A practical guide by Michel Dubery

‘Solution’ and ‘innovation’ have got to be the two most abused words in marketing. Tragically ‘insight’ is travelling the same path and will surely join the others to make a new triumvirate of words that inspire, at best, a shrug of ennui. And yet, treated with respect, it needn’t be like this. Properly used insight can give rise to some of the most powerful communications ever created. At the very least, the use of insightful communication can buy the hair’s breadth of differentiation that may be all that is required to make our communication stand out from the competition.
The drive for communications to be based on insight means that the bar on what actually constitutes an insight can be set lower than strictly necessary. Often, if we are not careful, we can end up with insights based on our own need/wish fulfilment rather than anything that exists in our customers’ minds.

In order to start an article on improving the use of insights we should really have a definition with which we can work. Going back to basics, we find the following definitions listed at dictionary.com:

• an instance of apprehending the true nature of a thing, especially through intuitive understanding
• penetrating mental vision or discernment; faculty of seeing into inner character or underlying truth
• psychology, an understanding of the motivational forces behind one’s actions, thoughts, or behaviour; self-knowledge.

For less technical definitions that are, perhaps, of more practical value, I think almost everyone working in the communications industry has a personal, working interpretation. Of these various and varied versions, my favourite is the simplest definition I have ever heard: ‘An insight is a helpful, human truth.’

I first heard this definition from a planner, friend, ex-colleague and competitor, Matt Hunt. A working definition to which I think there is little to add in content and nothing in elegance and simplicity. It captures the essence of deep understanding together with the fact the insights we need have a purpose.

This definition is the one that I currently use and will use for the sake of this 10-step article. So, if an insight is a helpful, human truth, what are the ways to improve the way we attain this truth and use it? Here are my thoughts.

1. BE CLEAR AND SPECIFIC ABOUT WHAT INSIGHTS ARE AND AREN’T

An insight isn’t a tick box necessity, which forms a part of the process of creating a communication. Rather it should form the basis for the communication itself. That may be the content of the communication; the creative that expresses it; or even the medium through which it is sent.

Not all insights are necessarily of the eureka, blinding flash of revelation type and that’s not always what’s required. Often something that provokes the merest flicker of interest or intrigue is enough to buy time from our desired target audience’s consciousness. It really depends on the market we operate in and the audience with whom we are wishing to communicate.

One of the greatest secrets to insight mining is to start with an open mind. When we are working with the fifth molecule in the market it is easy for us to lead the process to where we want it to be, rather than where our audience actually is.

For example:
“So doctor, how important is patient safety and tolerability in indication X?”
“Well, patient safety is always important and less-than-ideal tolerability often contributes towards adherence failures but we are pretty well served by existing options.”

“But if there was another option with even a minute tolerability advantage it would be of value?”

“I guess that improved tolerability is always welcome, but it would be difficult to see where that would come from as existing options are very well tolerated.”

“So what you are saying is that although the existing options are very well tolerated, you would be happy if another option provided an improvement no matter how small?”

“I am.”

“Thank you doctor.”

When faced with a difficult market it is easy to confuse real lack of interest as a latent need. So the result from the example becomes: “There is a latent need in the market for a product with improved tolerability profile”. When the market researcher says that this was marginal at best, it is often easier to focus on what it is that we need to hear.

2. EXPECT TO HAVE TO USE SIGNIFICANT BRAIN POWER AND INTUITION

Insights rarely fall fully formed from market research. In many ways looking for insights is the diametric opposite of clinical research, which may be the reason that organisations driven by science sometimes struggle. In the case of clinical research we have a hypothesis, even down to the size of the effect we are expecting, which we then set out to prove or not.

In many cases we set off looking for insights with a rough idea of what we are seeking but are uncertain about exactly what it is until we find it. This is entirely appropriate: we human beings with our emotions, opinions, attitudes and beliefs are messy creatures whose motivations for doing anything often stray far from the rational.

Designing a neat, rational, stepwise process that neatly distills out the insights from this most unpromising raw data is not only pretty much undoable; we may lose much of what we seek in the attempt.

Attempting to gain the best insights is a fuzzy, analogue process in which intuition, experience and educated guesswork all form a part.

Market research obviously has a major role in providing the material to be mined for insights, to test the insights we find and the communications based on those finds.

It is crucial to add to the material gained from the market research conducted with the target audience. Review market research on other groups who have contact with the target audience. What

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The definition of an insight as “a helpful human truth” best captures the essence of deep understanding with a sense of purpose.

Not all insights are of the eureka kind. It rather depends on the market and audience with whom we wish to communicate.

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do they believe, feel and think about them and their interaction? Go online and seek out conversations between targets. What is bothering them? What are they doing in relation to our field of interest but also just as human beings?

Looking at our desired audience in this messier, more human way can reduce the chances of being blinded by mechanistic segmentation methodologies. Once we have gleaned some insight into our audience as human beings we can then take a look at how that varies across the segments. Some insights are deeply founded and will not vary across segments; these should not be dismissed as being “too general” but should be closely examined as they are often powerful motivators to act.

A few years ago, a disease awareness campaign in several European and non-European markets used the word “fat” in the headline. This word was chosen because a subgroup of the audience was found that recognised they had a problem to which they needed a solution. They identified themselves as “fat”, interestingly there was no other factor either demographic or attitudinal that identified them as a segment. In this case the insight actually drove the segmentation and played its part in catching the target segment’s attention.

3. LOOK EVERYWHERE
The list of potential source of insights is long: product insights, market insights, patient insights, carer insights, physician insights and so on.

When looking we may have to adopt different techniques. As previously discussed, humans can be messy in terms of their motivations, beliefs, feelings and so on. Many audiences, particularly professional ones, like to hide this in order to project a rational exterior. This rational exterior can be very hard to crack so, talk to our market research vendors about alternative approaches.

A company in the US called Shrink Wrap does some interesting techniques whereby indepth interviews are carried out by a pair of researchers – one of whom is a market researcher and, the other, a psychologist. This pairing produces some interesting results in terms of motivation.

Excellent results can also be gained using projective techniques. Respondents are shown material from their peers, including interviews, opinions and so on, which they are then asked to interpret. This approach is very useful in de-personalising the responses allowing the interviewee to be more honest without feeling that they are giving themselves away.

4. DON’T IGNORE THE OBVIOUS
If we keep coming back to the same thing again and again, then it is probably what we are looking for. That is unless we have allowed our own prejudices to restrict our view or we have narrowed our options too early.

If a cure for non small cell lung carcinoma is ever developed it would be a brave person who ignored the insight that the market is desperate for a cure. Obvious, sure, but highly motivating none the less. The person launching the fourth cure for non small cell lung carcinoma may have to look a little harder.

5. DON’T BE SURPRISED TO BE SURPRISED BY THE FINDINGS
Being surprised or unmoved by the insights we find is not unusual because we are not normally the audience for whom the insight holds true. We need to be careful that our projection of what we believe to be true does not blind us to what our target audience thinks, believes, wishes or hopes to be the case.

It can be too easy to reject an insight on the basis that we don't buy it. We are not meant to. Looking at the world through the eyes of the target is not easy to do but is an essential skill to develop. Only by putting aside our own views albeit temporarily are we really in a position to judge whether the insight is true or not.

6. DON’T ALWAYS EXPECT TO FIND SOMETHING EARTH SHATTERING
Setting unrealistic expectations of the type of insight that we are seeking may mean that we trip over exactly what we need without ever seeing it. Set some level of expectations based on the market that we are working in. We are significantly less likely to score an insight that triggers off a survival instinct level of visceral response working with GPs in hypertension than with patients in an oncology setting.

Cialis had a product attribute that could have been perceived as a disadvantage had it not been aligned with the way people’s sex lives actually work. This attribute was the duration of action, up to 36 hours, several times longer than its entrenched competitor. Presented purely as an attribute, this could easily conjure up the image of men being embarrassed as they walked along the high street.

When used in the context of the way people have sex it became a facilitator of spontaneity. Take it now and you can take the opportunity when it arises. This was pitched against the “preparation and planning” needed with the competitors. In many markets this was a highly successful approach, in France it became “le weekend”.

7. TEST COMMUNICATIONS AGAINST THE INSIGHT ON WHICH THEY ARE BASED
Testing creative work and so on against a communication objective is normal in qualitative and quantitative testing. It can, however, give extremely shallow results if not carried properly. How many of us have been in research presentations where the winning concept is the one that simply states the communication objective in the headline or prominently in the copy?
Clearly we need to ensure that the communications we create meet their objective but rather than simply asking the audience what they are seeing, we can create a broad range of communications based on the candidate insight and see how they react.

We should push the boundaries during this testing phase to really test the reactions of the audience. Over filtering the stimulus material, eg, on the basis that this is not something that we would run can leave a range of stimulus so narrow that we may not see any variation in reaction - a less than informative conclusion that has not really explored the limits of expression and the potential to throw up new insights based on unexpected audience reactions.

Using a broader approach means that even if the tested communications ultimately fail, we may well have uncovered further insight into our audience.

We shouldn’t be tempted to rush into quantitative work at this stage as it is much better suited to an exploratory, qualitative approach.

8. WHEN WE HAVE INSIGHT INTO OUR AUDIENCE, USE IT
Constantly come back to the insight and check how we are delivering against it.

Over a period of development it is easy to lose sight of where we started. This is particularly the case when in an iterative process with minor tweaks at each stage. Each tweak can seem very minor but cumulatively we end up a long way from the original insight.

What was the insight and what did it tell us? How did we intend to use it and are we still using it that way?

If our original insight allowed us to reach our audience when they are more receptive, eg, trying to reach a man with sexual problems is best done when he is alone using media through which communication can be discreetly delivered and responded, does our media schedule reflect that insight? Have we incorporated late-night interventions on the internet rather than TV spots during Coronation Street when he is watching with his partner?

9. KEEP LOOKING, THEY DON’T STAY FRESH FOR EVER
The search for insight is a constant one, as well as being messy, we humans are fluid and changeable in our attitudes, feelings, behaviours and thinking. Many factors can have an impact, not least of which is the fact that the success of our own activities can have a significant effect on the insights that originated them. Be prepared to revisit our insights to ensure that they are still valid and relevant.

10. BEWARE OF LONG LISTS OF INSIGHTS
We should be wary of long lists of insights, rarely are they all true and even if they are it is difficult to act on them all. Having long lists of candidate insights is a fortunate position to be in but when testing them we should be very careful of choosing the ones that are the most advantageous to our brand if they were true over the ones that actually hold true.

SUMMARY: EMBRACE THE MESSY NATURE OF HUMANITY
The 10 ways in which to improve our use of insights can be summed up in one.

Insights are powerful enablers of human communication but the search for them can be as fuzzy, messy and non linear as is our very nature. Accepting that and adopting an approach that matches that fact will make the search appear more difficult but ultimately more successful. Insight is an elusive and fragile thing, adopting an over-mechanistic approach to finding them will more likely than not crush the very thing that we are seeking.

Experimentation is the key, if we want to find something new in an old market we need to search in a different way. This isn’t risky, it will actually increase our chances of success.

Happy hunting.

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Conversations that matter

Is a communication still a communication if the right people don’t hear it?

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By Michel Dubery

10 ways to improve our use of insight