



## **I'll have one small insight and two large ones please**

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Acacia Avenue

### **The old man and the rubies a fable**

Once upon a time in a country far away, there lived a man with many starving, barefoot and naked children. In despair he told his plight to a wise guru who sat every day in the village square meditating on the sorry nature of the human condition. To his surprise the old man told him about a river of rubies, one or two of which would be enough to change the poor man's destiny forever more.

The poor man set off immediately and after many hard years arrived at the place. But to his sorrow all that lay in the riverbed were pebbles, stones and boulders no sparkling rubies. With a weary heart he returned to complain to the guru about his bad luck.

The guru looked at his sadly and said: 'My friend those stones you kicked away so angrily were uncut rubies. Had you seen them differently you could have polished them and sold them, and you would have been rich beyond your wildest dreams'. (1)

The word insight has reached the 'tipping point', a phrase coined by Malcolm Gladwell in his book of the same name, to describe 'the magic moment when ideas, trends and behaviour cross a threshold, tip and spread like wildfire' (2). Insight has spread like an epidemic through the research and marketing world; it is huge in the public domain of conferences, published books and papers; it is embodied in contemporary job titles and is shaping new behaviours among those who practise, buy and use market research.

What does the language of insight tell us? What are the factors that have led to its tipping point? What is insight? How do you find it and what do you do with it when you have it? How can insight be leveraged through an organisation so that it makes a real difference to brand and business growth?

### **Blah blah insight**

Insight is a word that has had its place in the research and planning lexicon for many years as a leitmotif. Now the crescendo of sound it is making is deafening. A quick scamper through its current usage is illuminating. For example, should we talk about one insight or many insights? There are singular and plural uses, sometimes in the same sentence 'generate true insight' or

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'cultural insights lead to consumer insight'. Is insight a single big idea or a series of little ones? Which is more valuable?

Is insight a business tool? Note the fighting language that qualifies this soft and intangible concept 'leverage insight for competitive advantage', 'using insight to drive profitability', 'consumer insight the path to successful innovation'.

Is insight a new methodology? Most of the conferences held this year suggest that insight methods are more challenging than conventional research 'deeper, more holistic view of research', 'make sure you are using the best methods to extract those gems of insight'.

Insight is nearly always qualified by an evaluative adjective 'fundamental insight', 'good insights', 'deep insight', 'insight mining', 'random insights', 'specific insights'. This implies that already the word is so overused, or perhaps vague, that it needs further substantiation.

Can people do something with insight or is it a curiosity to be collected? There is an increasing urge to find 'insight with consequence', 'actionable insight' and 'to turn insight into action'.

So insight is an idea that is now firmly framed in the language of both business and research. It can be singular or plural and is always qualified but rarely defined.

The growing hold of insight can be detected from the job titles of delegates who attended one or several of six successful insight conferences that have been organised this year:

- Director of Semiotic Insight
- Head of Insight and Planning
- Consumer Insight Manager
- Insight Specialist
- Consumer and Market Insight Department
- Head of Customer Insights
- CI Manager.

We no longer come across the familiar and reassuring Head of Research or Research Manager. But is this a fashion or a sea change? Is insight just a new word for tired and discredited research, or is it something different?

In many companies and in business culture, research or insight departments hold back insight as a dam blocks the water that gives life to the villages and fields below (ie divisions, departments, functions, brands, new initiatives). In a business culture like this the insight job title is simply a cosmetic change, an ambition without implementation, with no real chance of making a difference. Business life over the past 20 years has been full of new 'wonder drug' processes. Remember Total Quality Management, Business Process Re-engineering and Managing For Value? Insight runs the risk of falling into the same camp of new ideas or worse, simply new jargon that fail to make a difference.

### **What has contributed to the insight tipping point?**

All companies are experiencing a huge pressure on the return of shareholder value. Although this has been true before, the pressure just continues to build and this reverberates from the boardroom to the very nerve endings of the organisation.

However, there are only a limited number of profit-growth strategies that companies can adopt: cut costs, improve margins,

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grow the top line organically or grow by making an acquisition.

Most large organisations, in a supreme effort to win competitive advantage, emerged from the 1990s having managed down their costs as far as possible only to find that the competitors had done likewise, leaving a level playing field once again. Most companies have exerted most of the available margin improvements by putting ever more pressure on to their suppliers.

As a result, an alternative strategy to grow new business so as to increase the profitability of 'power' brands and to develop genuinely innovative new products/services has become the *crie de coeur* of the new millennium.

'Insight' has the opportunity to succeed where other management fads have failed because it isn't about internal processes but about people. It is now understood that genuine sales growth, profitability and innovation demand that the brand and the organisation behind the brand understands how to connect its products and services with the real lives of people; people rather than 'the consumer' or 'our customers'. And that is where insight comes in.

People are tantalisingly unpredictable in their behaviour. They do not say what they mean or mean what they say not because they are stupid or uncooperative, but simply because emotion, attitude and behaviour are not always possible to articulate. They happen below the radar of conscious and rational thought.

Human beings 'allow' brands into their lives only if they are relevant. Of the tens of thousands of brands every one of us has stored in our brains, each is only meaningful at a particular moment in time because of a set of circumstances and needs.

Human beings are not islands. Although we are independent psychological beings shaped by environment and nature, we live in a common cultural soup made with global ingredients as well as local variations.

Malcolm Gladwell describes two characteristics that lead to the tipping point. One is contagiousness. There can be few people in the world of marketing who have not caught a bout of insight from a colleague, competitor or supplier! The second is the fact that little causes have big effects. There are many causes that have intersected to cause the insight tipping point. Some of them are:

- business pressures
- brand strategy challenges
- new competitors in converging markets/categories
- innovation hurdles
- sales decline
- global and local influences
- cultural trends
- changing consumer behaviour and contexts
- new demands of marketing, research and R&D departments
- losing connection with customers and consumers ('real people').

### **So what?**

Market research departments often labour under the accusation that they provide too much nice-to-know information that is passive rather than active. In the light of the increasing severity and complexity of business pressures, research departments have had to re-emerge with a more active, driving agenda and new ways of accessing actionable findings. So, at worst, the

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new insight department is a cosmetic renaming exercise, but at best it is a way of meeting contemporary business pressures.

Although insight is not a panacea for the whole list of issues that are contributing to business pressure, it does address the issues of changing consumer behaviour, the impact of competitors, losing connection with customers and sales decline.

This is all very well, but having got this far, we are still left with three big questions. What is insight? How do you get it? What do you do with it when you've got it?

### **What is insight?**

The dictionary defines insight as:

1. the ability to perceive clearly or deeply, penetration
2. a penetrating or sudden understanding as of a complex situation or problem
3. the capacity for understanding one's own or another's mental processes
4. the immediate understanding of the significance of an event or action.

(Collins English Dictionary)

This definition shows why insight is so difficult to define and communicate in the course of everyday business. There is an 'aha' moment a sudden flash of clarity and conviction that a perception is significant. Insight connects different sets of associations that lead to a thought or solution that was not apparent before. This is captured by a definition coined by Fillis and McAuley who define creativity as 'Seeing the same thing as everybody else but thinking something different' (2).

Insight has far more in common with intuition and imagination than it does with deliberate and conscious thinking based on information gathering, articulated explanations and deductive reasoning.

Insights are not facts, people do not tell you insights and statistics do not identify them. Insight has to be discovered and then a great deal of work needs to be done on it before it has any value.

Here lies the problem. Those asking for insight are not sure what it is. Those searching for it do not recognise it when they come across it.

It seems obvious that organisations that have recognised the need for insight should begin with an agreed definition of what it is. There is no right or wrong definition simply one that works for the company or team so that they communicate clearly with one another and with any suppliers that are charged with discovering insight or doing something with it.

### **How do you get insight?**

One of the strategies that explorers, bounty hunters or police investigators use to search for someone or something is to identify possible areas or territories in advance. The same is true for discovering insight. There are six fertile territories for the search.

- Competitor landscape how is it changing?
- Category understanding how is it converging?
- Customer connection who are the customers?
- Consumers as people the reality check of everyday life

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- Contexts how do people encounter brands and products, and how does context determine behaviour?
  - Culture changes, trends and influences.

Connections between any of these can lead to insight but only if two powerful searchlights are used the brand and the future. For example, insight into how consumers behave is not insightful unless it is relevant to the brand. And this is of little value unless it is relevant to the future the direction that people are moving towards rather than the past or present.

When it comes to choosing methodologies to discover insight, companies such as Nestl, Unilever, Coca-Cola and Kraft, and retailers such as Sainsbury's are becoming confident users of bricolage (4) the interlacing and cross-fertilisation of different strands of enquiry.

### **What do you do with it when you've got it?**

The simple answer is this: you share it. An advance search party of explorers finds clues and evidence. It then requires a number of different experts and support resources not only to validate the authenticity and possible value of the discovery but also to provide the implementing skills and experience to create real benefits. Then you talk about its potential value with others to whom it might be relevant. You actively engage with it by asking 'So what?' questions, and enrolling other people with different skills from yourself to help you polish it. You sell it internally so that the organisation understands its relevance and value. You don't hang on to it.

### **Don't hang on to it what to do about insight in your business**

1. Agree a common understanding of insight for your business.
2. Look for it in six different places.
3. Review methodologies
4. Decide how to manage and use insight.
5. Use multi-disciplinary task groups to make insight valuable.
6. Store insight so that the 'stock' is available to many.
7. Develop strategies for internal learning.
8. Define metrics for success.
9. Try doing things differently, and publicise a success.
10. Become a resource for inspiration present insight in interesting ways, develop on-going programmes, take ownership of turning consumers/customers into real people, keep in touch with what's going on 'out there'.

There is no magic procedure for turning insight into something of value for the organisation (or brand). There isn't a process yet invented that leads to the holy grail of actionable insight. Companies like Nestl and Unilever that talk at conferences about an insight process have developed a way of working that is right for that company and portfolio of brands. It has taken time and investment, trial and error, decisions about roster agencies and internal recruitment. It has been sponsored at board level and required a leader with determination and bravery to make it happen. It has meant IT support, so that insight can be shared, and ongoing work with employees so that even those far removed from marketing become ever more aware of how real human beings respond to their service, products and brands.

Turning insight into action in a manner that permeates the whole company is not for the faint-hearted.

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## NOTES

1. From the oral teachings of H.W.L. Poonja some of whose satsangs are published by Pacific Centre Publishing, Hawaii, 1993.
2. M Gladwell: *The Tipping Point*. Little Brown and Company, 2000.
3. I Fillis and A McAuley: 'Modelling and measuring creativity at the interface'. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*. Volume 8, Issue 2, 2000 (available at [http:// search.global.epnet.com](http://search.global.epnet.com)).
4. G Ereault and M Imms: "Bricolage':qualitative market research redefined.' *Admap*, December 2002.

## NOTES & EXHIBITS

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Wendy Gordon is co-founder of Acacia Avenue, a new research and strategy consultancy that offers to turn customer insight in to profitable business decisions.

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