
*Insight – it ain't
what you do, it's
how you think*

Wendy Gordon and Nitasha Kapoor
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Introduction

Insight has become almost a cliché in contemporary marketing and research. There are many different definitions and even worse an assumption that the word will mean the same to one individual as it will to the next. This paper aims to cut through the confusion showing that insight is an extremely valuable concept and one that should not be debased by sloppy thinking or methodological over-claim. Instead, a simple model of thinking can be used to ensure that the outcome of a project or process has a powerful influence and is highly valued by the end users.

Insight about Insight

"They say things like "That's a good point, Chris. Is that a consumer insight or a product insight?" You reply "thanks, I suppose it can be either". This was the wrong answer. They look at you with disappointment. They say things like "I'm afraid we're going to have to push back on that insight classification to enhance its usability"

Chris Forrest: APG Battle of Big Thinking, 2006

Poor old insight, so misunderstood. The term is either used too loosely (many of us are guilty of calling an interesting observation or a point of view an insight), or it is too tightly defined (insight taxonomy, insight hierarchies, insight processes, insight methodologies, insight job titles and functions etc.).⁽¹⁾

As a result definitions of insight proliferate and indeed are often given 'TM' status by organisations (both client-side and agency) to create competitive advantage.

In 2006 Mediaedge:cia interviewed a range of leading practitioners across different sectors of the research, advertising, design and marketing, to explore working definitions of insight, how to discover it and what to do with it once it has been found.⁽²⁾

At the 50th anniversary conference of the MRS in March 2007, the word insight was used at almost every session in various contexts - increasing professionalism,

improving methodologies, training young researchers, searching for innovation or simply in descriptions of successful case histories.

One of the ideas around which there is strong agreement is that an insight only has value when it can be directly related to brand or business growth.

'Insight must powerfully impact on client business'
(David Lowden, TNS)

'Fresh understanding, which unlocks the opportunity for growth' (Abigail Bray, Added Value)

'It doesn't become an insight until you know what you can do with it – it's not good enough to just be observed'
(Marian Salzman, JWT)

The idea that insight and business strategy are linked is important and certainly helps to differentiate between insights that are merely interesting (especially to the individual who has observed them) versus those that lead to a more fundamental change of thinking ('strategic actions' and 'opportunities for growth').

The limitation of this model of thinking about insight is that it considers that *reaching the destination* is more important than the *journey itself*. The end goal is kept firmly in sight with the result that the emotional highs and lows together with the tensions and resolutions that occur during an adventure into the unknown are ignored

if they are not immediately and obviously relevant to 'profitable growth'.

Another widely held definition of insight is the 'aha moment' – a sudden flash of clarity and conviction that a perception or observation is significant. Aha insights carry with them an inherent charge of emotion – surprise, delight, satisfaction, reward and completion are some of the feelings that people claim to experience.

Jeremy Bullmore has a point of view about insight that combines the value of the first set of definitions with the emotional charge of the second. From his perspective it is not 'the what' of insight but 'the how' that makes it valuable.

He differentiates between low and high potency insights:

'The low-potency version, with its reference to 'customers' 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!' (3)

A look at common synonyms for the word 'potency' builds on Jeremy's point:

Potency: authority, energy, force, influence, juice, kick, might, muscle, pep, power, punch, snap, strength, vigour (4)

A high potency insight therefore has wings and will fly; a low potency one lives forever in a deck of charts. A high potency insight has emotional and social currency – it is accessible, has energy, kick, snap. It is passed from person to person, becoming more powerful with the passage of time. It is applicable to many different people in an organisation or across multi-disciplinary teams. It becomes a guiding principle.

A low potency insight remains the property of the person(s) who discovered it. It has no life of its own. Without an advocate to stand up for it, it will die (no matter how potentially valuable it might be).

The idea that insight must be related to business growth is a low potency insight into insight! True it may be, but it fails to inspire. The 'aha' idea of insight on the other hand, carries an emotional resonance but because it fails to connect with the business goals, it can often be anticlimactic – the energy generated can quickly fizzle away.

So how can we develop new thinking about insight that embraces this idea of potency?

The concept of memes provides an interesting start point.

A meme is the term coined in 1976 by the biologist Richard Dawkins to refer to a "unit of cultural information" which can propagate from one mind to another. Examples of memes are tunes, catch phrases, beliefs, fashions and 'how to's' such as how to make pots or how to build arches.

'Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passed it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain.' (5)

It is rare that scientific principles or terms gain traction in popular culture – a good example of a meme is the 'meme' itself! And inherent in the definition of meme is the ability to replicate the exact phrase, expression, tune etc. or it mutates into something else.

Thinking about insight as a meme – an influential unit of understanding – gets us closer to what 'high potency' means. Insight is a guiding idea that excites and inspires. Many different people across different specialist functions understand and are lifted by it. It is an idea that people can talk about fluently with others (even those who are removed from the original source of insight) and bring their own knowledge and experience to add to it. It has face validity and re-frames what people know so that they feel personally empowered to transform the insight into action that will change the course of a brand or business.

A client of a successful brand once said something very wise – What he meant was that when a business trusts its instincts to do the things that it knows in its heart are right for customers, then profit will inevitably follow. Insight is similar in nature – profit flows from it rather than being its *raison d'être*.

High potency insights ring true, they give an emotional charge, they feel right from the customer point of view, they match the values of the organisation and so they are taken up, gain support, get translated into strategic action and end up generating profitable growth.

A high potency insight does not emerge fully formed. It is often born as low potency insight because it is expressed in a way that is academic, esoteric or explained in 'research-ese'. Even in this form it often has an emotional charge that ensures its survival until

it can be expressed more powerfully and linked in with embedded knowledge that validates it.

Principles:

- Release insight from rigidity – it is a creative tool. The end goal of profitable growth is kept in sight but should not constrain insight gathering.
- Release insight from laziness – how the insight is expressed is as important as the insight itself. This discipline is necessary in order to produce quality over quantity of insights.
- Release insight from being relevant to a moment in time – think of them as memes. Are they highly potent, simple and create an 'aha' moment to be passed along?

If you dig in the same hole, you get the same dirt

Qualitative research has always been thought of as the best approach to generate insight 'to get under the skin' of the consumer, product, category, brand or trend and as a result qualitative researchers have continuously sought ever better methodologies.

Each new methodology has been heralded as the answer. In the late 60's and 70's motivational depth interviews were the tool of choice followed over the decades by a series of new improved tools such as focus groups, participant observation (accompanied activities), semiotics, ethnography, story-telling, metaphor elicitation and co-creation through interactive workshops.

Despite the excitement and interest in other research methods when push comes to shove focus groups are the current tool of choice across the world. Focus groups are like the default font setting on a computer – Times New Roman – always the preferred choice by the system no matter what its faults!

But times are changing and today more and more client companies are embracing the idea of bricolage as a way to increase the chance of learning something fresh and new:

'The qualitative researcher...uses the tools of his or her methodological trade, deploying whatever strategies, methods, or empirical materials are at hand. If new tools have to be invented, or pieced together, the researcher will do this. The 'choice' of which tools to use, which research practices to employ, is not set in advance. The choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context' ⁽⁶⁾

Bricolage is not only about research design e.g. combining three different methodologies in one study to dig in three different holes. It is also about hunches and hypotheses – creating an approach and using techniques and exercises that will prove or disprove their validity i.e. digging in different holes with tools that are fit for purpose. These tools may have to be invented rather than found.

An example of using a tool fit for purpose is the case study of how the Got Milk advertising campaign came to be. The advertising agency was tasked with reviving declining milk consumption in California. Market research regularly said that people thought of milk as an accompaniment to sweet and sticky foods – a 'blank and milk' notion. Pushing this further, the researchers flipped the question and developed an approach based on a hunch – how do people feel when they're eating something that demands milk to wash it down, but they do not have milk in the house? Participants in the study were visibly 'upset' and claimed to feel 'deprived'. And so the campaign evolved to remind people of the disappointment and anxiety experienced when milk is not available at certain moments – a strategy that was derived directly from the insight generated by using the deprivation tool. The result was a shift in perception of milk and an increase in sales for the first time in over a decade. ⁽⁷⁾

Principles

- Insights aren't lying around waiting for you to find them
- Brainstorm hypotheses first and incorporate these into the research design and approach
- Behave differently – try something new and your frame of reference will change

Why do we need a model?

The previous sections have shown that no such thing as a golden insight bullet exists and nor is there guaranteed magic insight methodology or probability that an insight 'aha' moment will occur on every project. Instead it seems that generating potent and effective insights, according to the definition we have adopted for this paper, is a somewhat unpredictable process. It is highly likely to create intellectual or emotional discomfort because thinking and doing things differently is for many individuals and organisations too risky.

Lack of certainty and fear of risk are barriers that make it almost impossible to generate powerful insights that can change a course of action for a brand or business.

In order to make research buyers better able to manage their internal stakeholders and confidently share the objectives, approach and desired outcome of the research study, we have developed an Insight model of thinking that has proved flexible enough to evolve and change over time.

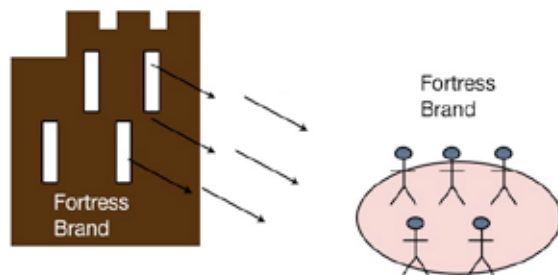
De Bono in his many books on creative and lateral thinking describes a model in the following way:

You can never prove that your model is the actual one or only possible one. At best the model is comparable with what we know about the subject and the model provides useful results. The ultimate value arises from the practical use value.

One of the strongest arguments to having an Insight model of thinking is that it unites a core project team (agencies, client and end users) such that everyone is aligned and will be prepared to help craft the insights that emerge ensuring that they are relevant and inspiring for others in the business.

A traditional model

Until the early to middle 90s, brand marketing and communications (and therefore the model of thinking about the relationship between brands and consumers) were believed to be quite simple - something like this:



The owners of the brand believe themselves to be in control of creating brand meaning through communications, marketing activity, positioning and re-positioning. Consumers, although not all the same (segmented by brand/category behaviour or typologies) are nonetheless sitting duck targets waiting to be consciously persuaded to buy the brand.

The insight model of thinking is binary – by comparing consumer perceptions of the brand (brand awareness, brand associations, brand image, brand personality, brand essence) with claimed buying and consumption behaviour, strategic or tactical possibilities become obvious.

The problem with this model is that nowadays it is too simplistic.

New challenges to traditional models

Over the past decade there have been seismic shifts in two significant areas:

1. **Engagement - how organisations/brands have to behave nowadays in order to communicate with consumers and encourage their interaction and support.**
2. **Understanding 'what it means to be human'.**

The ARF recently dedicated a conference to the concept of engagement and defined it as:

'Turning someone onto a brand idea enhanced by surrounding context' ⁽⁸⁾

The phrase 'turning on' assumes that *emotion rather than reason is the underlying dynamic*. 'Surrounding context' recognises that brands have become multi-dimensional *experiences* through multiple touch points across traditional and new channels e.g. branded content, viral marketing, blogs, on-line communities, sponsorship, innovative interactive retail and merchandising and so on.

What the definition omits is the idea of social connectivity and co-creation. A strong new theme ran through the UK Market Research Society Conference held recently (March 2007) – namely that some behaviour is better understood from the perspective of culture and 'crowd' behaviour than from the point of view of individual psychology and personal motivation. ^{(9) (10) (11) (12)}

A new insight model has to take this into account.

In relation to the second point – understanding what it means to be human - challenge to traditional models of thinking about the human condition have come from many quarters – neuroscience, contemporary anthropology, cognitive psychology, linguistics, social theory, postmodernism, evolutionary biology, experimental economics, etc.

There are key themes that have now forced the binary model into extinction. All of these themes have been the subject of many papers, books and documentaries both within the discipline of research and marketing as well as outside it. In the appendix to this paper we have identified key sources and reading that are relevant to each theme.

The key themes:

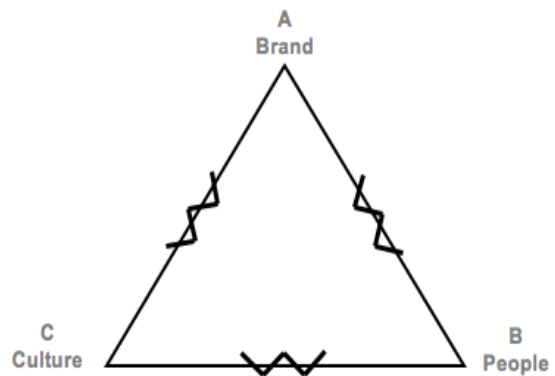
- Brands and communications are absorbed, stored and retrieved in our brains *and bodies unconsciously*. *Most brand communication occurs at low attention*

levels and is stored in long term memory without our conscious intervention

- *Emotions* (spontaneous, uncontrolled, not specifically named, lower order) determine behaviour, and higher order cognition (reason, specifically named emotions) is used to articulate and justify why we do what we do. Humans feel-do-think rather than think-feel-do. Decision-making is primarily emotional
- *Brand meaning is dynamic* – a brand means different things to different people in different situations and circumstances. Context determines meaning
- *Memory is a process of reconstruction rather than reproduction.* We never experience the same memory in exactly the same way – hence memory is selective, distorts, omits and changes. Time collapses, sources of experience merge and we are unaware of the processes that internalise external information and combine this with existing belief structures
- Human beings are social creatures and are influenced not only by their individual predispositions but also by what other people are saying, doing and feeling
- Culture is the invisible water that we all swim in. Like fish in a glass bowl we think that everyone else breathes water like we do. We are all locked into a wider cultural context and are able to read the discourses (visual, symbolic, tonal, etc) without realizing that we are doing so. The 'how' of brand communication is as important as the 'what'
- Co-creation is a new concept that explains the shift in ownership of brand meaning. Brand owners no longer have 100% control of what the brand means and even how, where and when people interact with it. Once 'out there', it begins to have a life of its own.

The gap model

This model involves looking for consonance or dissonance (matches or gaps) between three separate and distinctive players – the brand, people and culture.



Step One is to describe and define each point in the triangle.

In order to explain the model we have given a few examples of the kinds of questions that can be asked and which define the nature and extent of the enquiry. The list of questions is not complete but merely serve to illustrate the territory of each point of the triangle.

The Brand

The key challenge is to establish what the brand stands for amongst different stakeholders – both inside the organisation as well as outside it.

It is also essential to understand the historical context – how has the brand evolved its communication and brand values over time?

What has it been communicating in the past? What is it communicating now?

- How is has it been communicating in the past and how is it communicating now?
- Joined up or inconsistent – is the brand saying one thing in certain places/contexts and behaving differently in others?
- How is the brand experience being constructed? How complex is it? Which elements are controlled by the brand owners and which are unmanaged?

People

The key challenge here is to understand how people engage with the brand in the context of their everyday lives.

It is also essential to understand the individual and social contexts in which people interact with the brand.

- What meaning does the brand have in every day life? How is the brand emotionally anchored? Who is emotionally warm to the brand and who is not?

- If the brand is well established, which associations are hardwired and what are the implications of this? How does this effect brand usage?
- What are the most frequent touch points (contexts in which the brand is experienced) and how do these change brand meaning?
- What currency does the brand have – is it a brand that is talked about? Do others influence behaviour?

Culture

The most important challenge here is to understand contemporary culture in terms of what is or will be relevant to the brand/organisation both now and in the future.

- How are the values that the brand stands for being expressed in popular culture e.g. TV, films, magazines, events and experiences
- What are the emerging trends that will change the meaning of the brand?
- What social groups and tribes are important in relation to the brand?

Step two is to search for alignment or misalignment (gaps) between the three points.

Let's look at an example. In 2004, The London Underground wanted to know why the actual experience of taking a Tube journey was rated far more highly than was the overall brand. People were far more critical of the brand (when asked to rate it in a conventional brand tracker) than they were when asked to rate a journey that had just been completed. Acacia Avenue developed an ethnographic approach that involved accompanying customers on journeys, collecting unmediated photo diaries that illustrated perceptions of the London Underground and conducting intercepts on the platform.

The result was a set of deep insights, found by analysing the gaps between the points. A few examples:

- Gap Brand – People: The Tube touch points that matter changes depending on the journey mindset you are in (i.e. how aspects of the built environment, other people, staff behaviour, information and advertising affect you during a journey)

Insight: Addressing the 'moment of truth' touch points by mindset provides the starting point for improving brand image

- Gap Brand – Culture: The brand is split into above the ground and under the ground associations. Above the ground, the brand is admired because it

is iconic and a London landmark. Under the ground, the brand is functional, and perceived in terms of service efficiency and staff behaviour

Insight: Link the London Underground to famous buildings and areas of London that are above the stations

- Gap People – Culture: The language used to describe the Tube and the experience consists of words that begin with the letter 'D': 'dirty, dingy, dark, depressing, dim, dusty, and dangerous'. These words are unconscious clues to one of the key emotional resistances to the Tube – namely the unconscious fear of death, darkness and being buried alive. This cultural meaning of 'being underground' helped to explain the gap between people's journeys and the image of the brand

Insight: Combat negative D-psychology with Distraction – stimulating material to take one's mind off being underground (e.g. Poems on the Underground, buskers, colourful station design, reassuring announcements, the role of friendly and helpful staff, etc.)

The London Underground incorporated the insights and recommendations into a brand plan for the 'softer' elements of the service, and this has helped contribute to a gradual increase in advocacy and other brand metrics. More importantly, the insight has been incorporated into the company's established thinking, as a meme.

Obviously every research or marketing problem is different but the model we have developed and worked with over time has inherent rigour and discipline. This creates the real possibility that a high potency insight(s) will emerge that will ultimately lead to a change of fortune for the brand, company or organisation.

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Recommended Reading List

The following list of papers is included for those who wish to read some of the source material that has informed our approach over the past 10 years.

Alexander, Monty and Valentine, Virginia (2002). *Why We Have to Change the Language of Market Research*. Esomar, Consumer Insight Congress, Barcelona, Sept 2002

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Acacia Avenue
353 City Road
London N1 2HH
T 02070149500
F 02078373988

wendy@acacia-avenue.com
www.acacia-avenue.com

ACACIA AVENUE