



Increasingly, quantitative research is proving inadequate in predicting consumer trends. As a result market research companies are drawing on more theoretical approaches to improve the quality of results, says Steve Bell

## THE SIGNS ARE THERE

At the tail-end of the Eighties, Malcolm Evans could have had little idea that a decade later he would be at the commercial cutting-edge of lateral market research methods. At the time Evans was a leading thinker in semiotics – the science of decoding cultural signs – at the University of North London. One of his pupils was a mature student with a background in market research who called on his services when she included semiotics in her newly launched company Added Value (AV). This was a bold move for a methodology that had previously been firmly planted within the walls of academia. Would it successfully cross over?

Applied semiotics has predicted that concepts such as “cynical lad” and wacky surrealism typified by Loaded magazine and the Tango ads would begin to lose ground with consumers. This seems to be borne out by declining sales in the “lad-mag” sector and the sudden fall from grace of archetypal lad Chris Evans.

It has also predicted that this cul-

tural trend will be replaced by the “sense of wonder” and “emotional intelligence” within 18 months, which is evident in the Harry Potter books and the Chinese art house film *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*.

Evans, joining AV as director of semantic insight, Malcolm Evans has witnessed its growth as a research tool to such a degree that illustrative live-chat comparisons such as *Chalover* and *Ford* have come knocking at his door, closely followed by the likes of *Levi Strauss*, all of which claim to have increased customer insight and have subsequently used more tailored marketing as a result.

### Building evidence

This success and endorsement from live-chat comparisons has led to semiotics gaining widespread acceptance as a research method for marketers. Evans says: “Semiotics is big news, a very lateral way of getting into consumers’ minds. You can get into people’s subconscious and predict where consumer trends are going.”

Semiotics enables expert analysis of brand communication by looking at the brand in relation to the whole (what everybody else is doing) and in the context of wider culture.

As an example of how it works, Evans explains that cultural signs can be divided into three categories: natural, dominant and emergent. The natural is drawn from the past. An example of this from pop music would be a band like Status Quo.

Dominant signs would be typified by retail’s pushers of low brands. The emergent, the first point of the sign that give you a glimpse of someone’s needs, would be typified by retail’s pushers of low brands.

Evans argues that by deciphering these signs it is possible to see the cultural codes which can create “handrails and maps” to inform marketers about past, present and, crucially, future trends that can be harnessed. Car advertising is a good illustration. The theme of car ads has recently moved from young independent women and independent relationships (*Renault Clio*) will be able to drive the car as an

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Malcolm Evans, AV

integral feature of the landscape. It is possible to establish that future car ads will follow similar themes, eventually becoming the dominant code as opposed to the current emergent code.

By identifying these dominant codes and by taking one across a variety of other emergent codes, such as the success of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, it is possible to build a picture of what will be of interest to people in the near-to-distant future – allowing marketers to harness these trends.

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At the tail-end of the Eighties, Malcolm Evans could have had little idea that a decade later he would be at the commercial cutting-edge of lateral market research methods. At the time Evans was a leading thinker in semiotics – the science of decoding cultural signs – at the University of North London. One of his pupils was a mature student with a background in market research who called on his services when she included semiotics in her newly launched company Semiotic Solutions. This was a bold move for a methodology that had previously been firmly planted within the walls of academia. Would it successfully cross over?

Applied semiotics has predicted that concepts such as “cynical lad” and wacky surrealism typified by Loaded magazine and the Tango ads would begin to lose ground with consumers. This seems to be borne out by declining sales in the “lad-mag” sector and the sudden fall from grace of archetypal lad Chris Evans.

It has also predicted that this cultural trend will be eclipsed by the “sense of wonder” and “emotional intelligence”, within 18 months, which is evident in the Harry Potter novels and the Chinese art house film Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon.

Since joining AV as director of semiotic insight, Malcolm Evans has witnessed its growth as a research tool to such a degree that illustrious blue-chip companies such as Unilever and Ford have come knocking at his door, closely followed by the likes of Levi Strauss, all of which claim to have increased consumer insight and have subsequently used more informed marketing as a result.

### **Gaining credence**

This success and endorsement from blue-chip companies has led to semiotics gaining widespread acceptance as a research method for marketers. Evans says: “Semiotics is big news, a very lateral way of getting into consumers’ minds. You can get into people’s subconscious and predict where consumer trends are going.”

Semiotics enables expert analysis of brand communication by looking at the brand in relation to the whole (what everybody else is doing) and in the context of wider culture. As an example of how it works, Evans explains that cultural signs can be divided into three categories: residual, dominant and emergent. The residual is drawn from the past. An example of this from pop music would be a band like Status Quo. Dominant signs would be typified by today’s plethora of boy bands. The emergent, the first pieces of the jigsaw that give you a glimpse of tomorrow’s norms, would be typified by and artist such as Eminem.

Evans argues that by deciphering these signs it is possible to see the cultural codes which can create “handrails and maps” to inform marketers about past, present and, crucially, future trends that can be harnessed. Car advertising is a good illustration. The theme of car ads has steadily moved from young independent women and important relationships (Renault Clio ads) to ads that show the car as an integral feature of the landscape. So it is possible to establish that future car ads will follow similar themes, eventually becoming the dominant code as opposed to the current emergent code.

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By identifying these dominant codes and by taking into account a variety of other emergent codes, such as the success of Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, it is possible to build a picture of what will be of interest to people in the not-too-distant future – allowing marketers to harness these trends.

While to some degree this may seem obvious, human memory is very fallible. For instance, when Guinness marketers were asked to recall features about rival drinks ads, they came up with straplines that were three-years-old, which they thought were still current.

Evans mapped out the codes of beer ads worldwide by looking at the themes – some of which were refreshment, freedom and heritage – that had been used and which ones were dominant. He distilled the findings into a decoding kit – a pack of cards, highlighting the themes of past present and future. The cards provide the means to read where ads had been in the past and which emerging cultural trends could be used in the future. Evans says: “Big decisions are made by global brands and they need accurate information about what is really happening.” The Guinness project was considered to be so accurate it scooped the MRS Paper of the Year Award.

### **Qualitative jargon**

To use the jargon of semiotics, its increasingly widespread use and acceptance is in itself a signifier (the word/image – visual or acoustic – that represents the signified – the mental image created) of the changing shape and methods used in market research.

But it is not the only academic discipline that has crossed into the commercial realm. Disciplines such as psychology, sociology and even counselling are being used to tap into consumers’ minds. While it may seem sacrosanct for counselling techniques to be designed to deal with personal traumas, there is a willing body of consumers who receive payment for putting themselves forward.

### **Drawing on personal experience**

And while these methods may draw on techniques developed for personal use – such as building mental pictures, applying positive thoughts and free association thinking – the techniques are not used in an invasive manner and only centre on products or services, rather than personal issues. Tamsin Anderson, managing director of Decision Science, which draws from these resources to carry out market research, claims that the use of new tools is crucial to glean new information. She says: “Is you are always applying the same research techniques you are always going to get the same answers.”

Anderson says that employing techniques found in counselling for market research can elicit so much unexpected information that the results can be radical. She points to one client who wanted information about consumer perceptions of a particular product. Decision Science set to it and received much more information than expected – so much that the client realised there was demand for another type of product, which was subsequently launched.

Mark Williams, creative director of The Research Business, a company that uses similar methodologies, says: “We find it important to spend longer researching people’s habits because it can be particularly revealing. |In the past 18 months we have been sitting in bathrooms watching people clean their teeth and carry out personal hygiene. The sorts of things people do can provide vital information when developing products.”

Dragon brand consultant Nina “Cooper argues that new methods are needed because consumers have become increasingly jaded and cynical. She says: “We need to be much more lateral in our thinking because people have become much more discriminating, you need new types of research to spark their imagination.”

The driving force behind the expansion into more revealing research methods is the increasing economic pressure on companies. How many annual company report preambles carry the “innovate or die” message from the chairman? This has led to market research gaining greater recognition in the drive to increase profits.

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Marketing consultancy Value Engineers consultant Richard Oldham says: “Many large companies are rebranding their research managers as ‘consumer insight managers’ as recognition grows that traditional quantitative research has not been put to the best use. Consumer insight is now becoming the new battleground.”

But does this move towards lateral market research mean the end of the time-honoured focus group? Well not quite, it’s just that its limitations have been sharply highlighted in the climate of increasing competitive pressure.

Turnstone director Philly Desai says: “Focus groups are good at evaluating ideas, but not very good at coming up with ideas. People in the groups are responding to stimuli, but research workshops that are task-based can be judged by the usefulness of the information thrown up and ideas generated. There is a greater trend towards this. Focus group research trends to be prosaic.”

### **Text research**

There is an irony about the emergence of new research techniques usurping the traditional focus group; some of the techniques are not new at all. Both Desai and Oldham say that many are old techniques reinvented using new channels and new technologies, but billed as new methodologies.

Research company 2CV, has parented a product called Txt.survey, which is based on the popularity of mobile phone text messaging. Advertising agency Claydon Heely Jones Mason used the product and developed the methodology to carry out research into the soft drinks market. A group of consumers were asked to send a text message when they were about to quaff a soft drink. In response, a series of questions were sent back asking behavioural-related questions.

While the project was ethnographic in nature, by using text messaging it was able to capture both accurate quantitative and follow-up qualitative information. And it was a lot cheaper than carrying out a full-blown ethnographic study.

Claydon account planning director Fiona Blades adds that traditionally the effectiveness of sales and promotion is notoriously difficult to track, but using Txt.survey effectiveness is a lot easier to gauge.

As pressure to improve sales continues to mount, more ingenious methods of research will be used.

Semiotics has made its mark but is generally considered to be expensive. This has led to a wider uptake of ethnographic research group sessions in which people are expected to express their thoughts about a product without using words; and inevitably the harnessing of technology to carry out already established research methods, but which can provide even more accurate information.