

A future-centric way of thinking

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At the end of a jam-packed trip to South Africa, Rosie Hawkins, global head of Brand and Communication at TNS, spent some time sharing some deeper insight into what it means to be of the mindset that the future is now, and how this can and should be applied.

Beginning with research, Hawkins discussed that while the tradition in this field has been to apply consistent methodologies everywhere, meaning that a global study will employ a single approach across the board, a future-thinking research firm might change this outlook. She explained that while certainly a global approach to research, such as the use of interviews, has always been modified to suit the various markets being surveyed, with some being better suited to face-to-face format and others working better as online interviews, the challenge going forward is to go a step beyond this. This is because the rate of change in each market differs considerably, and as such, different combinations of research methods, along with greater flexibility, might result in a superior end result, more in line with the end goal.

Once this end goal is reached from a research point of view, comes the challenge for marketers to use the information gleaned in an optimal way. With reference to the idea that when considering mobile, marketers should determine when and how their target market is most likely to be using their mobile phones, the question must be asked whether this market wants to interact with brands and campaigns during this time, even if they are 'online'.

Hawkins acknowledged that this is a challenge, commenting that when an interruption is unwelcome, it is intrusive. However, she added that if it is welcome because its timing and message is right, then it might be valuable. She noted that with a study such as Mobile Life, it is possible to build a clearer picture of what people are doing with their mobile phones and for what purpose, but this is still only a starting point. The biggest challenge for brands, she feels, is to find relevant ways and places to get their messages out there in a valuable way, so it becomes less of a push and more of a pull. However, with technology such as geo-location, it is possible to push messages that are as relevant as possible to consumers, simply because they are already in the most relevant space to receive and act on the message, so it becomes more useful than a distraction. Hawkins shared the example of a promotion conducted by a company in Guatemala called Meat Pack, which sells sports shoes. It is known for selling limited editions of certain branded shoes, as well as its youth cult following, which the company brought together in an online community. Using geolocation, it was then possible for Meat Pack to track when one of its community members was in a competitor's store, at which time the member would receive a voucher sent to his or her phone giving him or her 99% off the same purchase at Meat Pack. The challenge for the community member, however, was to get to the store as soon as possible, because the discount decreased by 1% each second. Not only did this get the member out of the competitor store as quickly as possible, but added to the brand's fun personality and added real value and incentive to the community member.

Of course, South Africa is still lagging a bit when it comes to geo-location, with the additional problem of expensive data and little free Wi-Fi available, so this is an area that Hawkins hopes will be improved over time.

There is no doubt that with the prevalence of communities such as Meat Pack's community, as well as broader social media and forums, the amount of data available is significant. This is useful in adding to the research and subsequent information marketers can make use of. However, it is also important to consider not only the restrictions involved in making use of information gathered from the likes of social media, but also the reliability and validity of such information.

Hawkins acknowledged the massive restrictions on what can and cannot be shared and used, and added that social media platforms in particular are faced with several challenges regarding what information is available and where.

From a research perspective, Hawkins noted that the more data available, the more accurate the model, with the caveat that

the data must also be relevant and reflect the purpose of the research. With this in mind, data quality is a huge element of the process when it comes to using new media as research tools. She commented that there is a lot of noise that needs to be sifted out, and even an element like language needs to be carefully considered, given that meaning can be quite different given the context in which certain phrases or words are used. There are certain computer systems that are able to learn human language, however, which is helpful in gauging positive and negative sentiment.

That said, Hawkins continued that more traditional approaches to research still provide more context and more of the 'why' behind what is said, which is important in interpreting the data. As a result, she believes there is still a need for good qualitative and quantitative questioning, although traditional methods can evolve in order to incorporate modern technology. For example, where relevant, 'focus groups' could be conducted in an online forum, meaning that respondents no longer need to be in the same location in order to take part in a survey.

What it comes down to is the need for both researchers and marketers to take a risk at some level, which can be quite daunting. Hawkins discussed that across the board, there is a breadth of attitude and opinion when it comes to trying something new. Some are open to pushing boundaries and being first to market, while others are happy with the status quo - and most are somewhere in between. However, she doesn't necessarily see a positive or negative to either way of thinking. What she believes is key is for researchers and their marketing clients to establish where they are on the continuum and work at the same pace to achieve the end goal. It is important, nevertheless, to find ways of streamlining traditional research methods, such as tracking studies, so that when marketers do want to try new things, there is room in the budget to do so.

As Hawkins' trip to South Africa drew to a close, she shared that clients in this market, and other rapid growth and developing economies in Africa and Asia, are often more open to change, and she sees massive potential for growth. With that said, she noted the need to develop thinking that encompasses all people in all markets, for example rolling out campaigns compatible not only with smart phones, but with simpler feature phones, and understanding that rapid growth economies will likely leap frog a lot of what developed economies have become accustomed to.

Hawkins' key tip for those wanting to adopt a future-centric way of thinking is to embrace mobile from a marketing and research perspective and to focus on what makes people tick, in order to add as much relevance and value to their lives as possible.

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