

A real in-depth interview wades into the stream of consciousness

BY MARGARET ROLLER

WHAT USE is marketing research unless it seeks to uncover continuity of thought and reveal the subjective links by which consumers accept, reject, or ignore your product or service?

In the classic *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James called the ever-changing subjective life the stream of consciousness. Unfortunately, marketers too easily lose sight of this fundamental aspect of human behavior.

So do marketing researchers, who are relied on to dissect and interpret consumer behavior. They assume the awesome responsibility of unearthing consumers' idiosyncracies, yet often retreat to traditional techniques rather than be more creative in research design and execution.

One example is the classic telephone

Margaret R. Roller is president of Roller Marketing Research, Atlanta.

interview. Although this technique is extremely valuable for many types of research, it fails in other respects. Specifically, it cannot tap important aspects of the psychology of consumer behavior, often relying on "yes" or "no" responses.

Such responses to a research instrument are meaningless if allowed to sit in a vacuum.

FOR THIS REASON, researchers are called upon to use the numerous techniques at their disposal. Creativity and a willingness to probe consumers' thought patterns offer marketing managers honest solutions to research problems.

Regardless of the methods that are

employed, the marketing research goal is always the same: learn not just who your target consumers are, but how they think and live, and how their experiences affect their views of your product or service.

This will lead to an understanding of the stream of consciousness, which, in addition to simple demographics and lifestyle data, helps to explain why consumers accept or reject your goods or services.

One research technique, though not commonly used, addresses this issue and is a basic attempt to provide the in-depth analysis needed to reveal the psychological flow that results in consumer action or inaction.

I call the technique the "extensive, one-on-one professional interview," or EOPI. In contrast to traditional one-on-one interviews, the EOPI method does not use numerous minimum-wage interviewers or restrict interview-

ing to a structured questionnaire.

Neither does it rely on a small number of one-on-ones conducted by a professional interviewer at a central location.

The EOPI technique uses a highly skilled researcher with a background in psychology to conduct 30 or more in-depth, personal interviews using an outline of issues and probes.

AS THE RESEARCHER becomes entrenched in the process, the interview may often differ from one respondent to another. This flexibility allows close examination of unforeseen issues as they emerge, and an interview customized to get candid responses to deep-felt concerns while minimizing time spent in areas of little or no concern to the respondent.

The benefits of EOPI should be obvious. A sole professional sits down face-to-face with a respondent and for 30 minutes, an hour, or as long as two hours probes the issues, unmasking the rational and irrational thought processes that contribute to consumer attitudes and behavior.

Further, imagine one researcher traveling from market to market, staying two to three days in any one city, visiting the respondents at their jobs or at a location where they feel comfortable (instead of forcing them into an unfamiliar central facility), and completing 30 or more interviews in that fashion.

Needless to say, the researcher completes such a project with a wealth of information, conveniently stored not only in a notebook or on audiotapes, but also in the mind of a single professional.

Likewise, analysis of an EOPI study is a continual process. Beginning with the first interview, the interviewer is developing theories that explain research questions.

Also, the analysis is profound, compared with the usual void of information resulting from interview formats that are too strict.

MY COMPANY has completed as many as 80 interviews for one client using the EOPI technique. Although the study is costly in time and money, the outcome far exceeds the relative cost per interview.

As an example, we recently completed the final interview for this client, which was researching its business customers and noncustomers.

During the interview, the respondent gave seemingly trivial reasons for not buying more frequently from the client and, on the surface, had no deep-seated explanation for his disinterest.

After nearly an hour of probing discussion, the respondent lost eye contact with the interviewer and softly mentioned a problem he had had with



Margaret R. Roller

the client's credit policies.

Picking up on this, the interviewer soon realized that a strong resentment toward the local credit manager had been the key to the respondent's taking his business elsewhere.

Although this in itself was not significant, it proved extremely important to the researcher, who had heard similar comments from other respondents in other market areas.

Whether or not this respondent would have answered as he did to a battery of questions in a telephone interview or in a focus group discussion is doubtful.

IN ADDITION to the relatively high costs—marketing managers are used to getting hundreds of phone interviews and many focus groups for the price of an EOPI study—extra time needs to be built into the design because of researcher fatigue.

It is not difficult to imagine how physically and emotionally weary the researcher becomes during long stretches of on-site interviewing. I once became ill while interviewing in the fourth of a five-city nationwide study, requiring a conscious regimen of rest.

Long hours, air travel, the anxieties that arise from scurrying to interview sites in unfamiliar cities, as well as the intensity of the interviews themselves, all contribute to the researcher's exhaustion and the need to self-monitor his well-being.

ON THE OTHER hand, a grass-roots approach to marketing research is not intended to be without inconveniences. Perhaps this is why the EOPI technique is not used more widely.

Remembering that EOPI is meant to be but one piece in the overall research design might generate greater acceptance of this technique.

Together with traditional survey and qualitative information, the EOPI technique can lead to a more complete understanding of consumers, industrial users, and corporate employees.