

If you don't have a better mouse trap...

With all due respect to product development professionals, industrial designers and research and development technicians everywhere, product breakthroughs are becoming increasingly difficult to come by. In a business environment which is characterized as a “surplus economy” and rewards “speed to market,” differences that do exist are often quickly copied. Where does this leave the marketer in search of product or service differentiation?

If the answer to that question bothers you, there are solutions. When faced with products, product classes or entire industries that are dominated by “product parity,” differentiation can be achieved through *consumer information* rather than *within the product*.

Our premise is that the marketer with the best information often wins. So how do we define “best?” Best is the result of capturing that *kernel of insight into human behavior* that creates a competitive advantage. In our experience, it is virtually impossible to predict but obvious when it happens.

It follows that better information is a function of a better information collection process or technique. This white paper will share several techniques that have proved productive in the development of branding strategy, brand creation and the development of marketing campaign ideas.

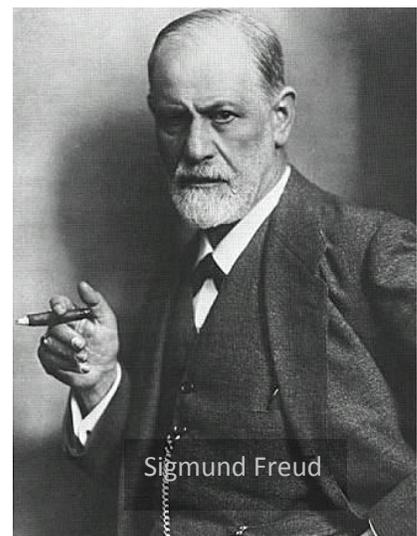
Projective Techniques

The first technique is borrowed from the pioneers in clinical psychology, in particular from the practice of psychoanalysis. The most well known technique being the Rorschach Test or “ink blot” test. Like other projective techniques, an “ambiguous stimulus” is used to discover or tease out hidden feelings, emotions or conflicts. Rather than using direct questioning of a patient, a psychiatrist may use a projective technique to get below the surface and uncover issues that can then be addressed.

Other clinical techniques such as the “Thematic Apperception Test” ask the subject to describe a picture or make-up a story by looking at a thematic scene. Some tests use a “Complete the Sentence” construct to excite the respondent’s imagination or association of one thing to another.

What projective techniques have in common is that they utilize indirect stimulus to avoid superficial thought patterns. When applied to marketing, they can be used to circumvent many of the problems inherent in a typical qualitative research setting. For instance projective techniques can be used to mitigate:

- “Safe answers” to questions to products that are highly personal;
- Overly rehearsed answers often used to appear socially acceptable;
- Peer pressure which often occurs in a focus group or group research environment;
- Attempts by respondents to appear knowledgeable, intelligent or as an “expert” in a product class;
- Superficial thinking about a product category that may lack inherent interest or “centrality”;
- Respondent fatigue from too many direct questions or discussion.

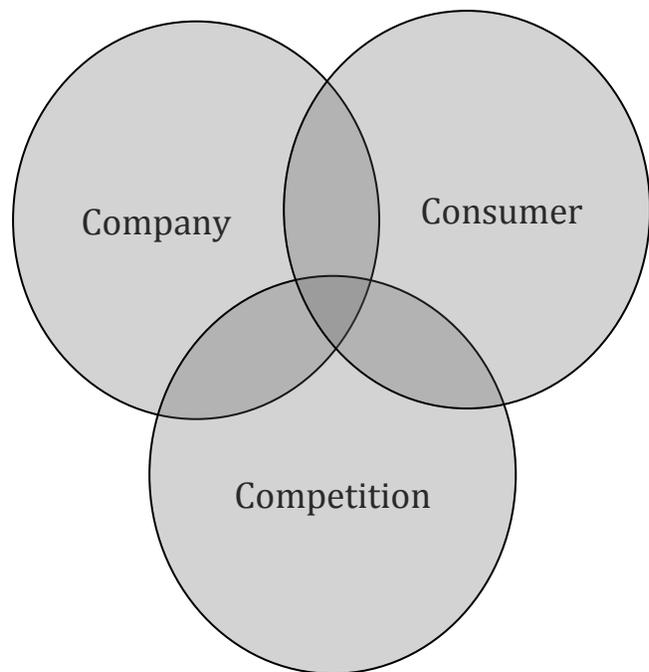


We make extensive use of projective techniques in qualitative research and in client workshop environments. They allow us, in cooperation with consumers, power users or clients, to get below the surface and to “re-imagine” the possibilities within an industry or product class.

Triangulation

Triangulation is both a theoretical premise and a useful organizational construct in a marketing discovery process. The approach is to triangulate a value proposition by drawing insight from three information domains: the consumer, the company and the competition. To each information domain, we apply one of three strategic criteria:

- What is the most valid claim we can make relative of the company/product/service? By valid, we mean “truth.” There are typically many truths that can be told. We are seeking the most enduring, transcending and universal truth.
- What is the most motivating claim we can make to the consumer? By motivation, we are meaning behavioral reaction. More than awareness, attitude change or “feel good” communication, we aspire to really make something happen...to engage in a way that creates a reaction.
- What is the most differentiating claim we can make relative to the competition? In other words, how can we separate the brand from other brands or alternatives? In a “surplus economy” this is critical.



Through use of these three “strategic criteria,” we solve for a value proposition. The implication is that we begin with a large number of alternatives. There are many truths, consumer need states and competitive points-of-difference. Which combination satisfies the criteria in the most elegant way? That solution, defines the value proposition. This then, is the genesis of a branding insight that can spark campaign ideas upon which a brand campaign can be built.

The process of triangulation is dependent on two factors. The first is that there is sufficient subject matter expertise within the organization with respect to the company’s product lines, services, culture and other attributes that could contribute to a branding idea. So, we are dependent on the cooperation of our client colleagues. The second is that there is the desire and resources available to study the market.

In our experience, most marketers do not actively engage in triangulation. There is a tendency to “over-study” one of the domains, typically at the expense of one or two of the others. The CEO who does not invite collegial participation because he “knows the answer;” corporate hubris that insists that “we have no real competition;” the tendency to skip formative or evaluative research because we value speed to market over

analysis. Ready, Fire, Aim. The experienced practitioner knows that brand building without the foundation of a value proposition is a house of cards.

Ideation

A third area we will explore is marketing “ideation.” We define marketing ideation as *a set of creative techniques that are used systematically to generate new, commercially viable ideas*. The concept is to disrupt or disturb normal thought processes. How often have we attended the “offsite brainstorming meeting.” Rather than participating in a *storm* of ideas, you witness a *drizzle*. There is a “round up the usual suspects” from the various corporate functions. All are allowed to dress casually and meet on Saturday at the boss’s lake house. There is an easel, some fat markers and several bowls of M&Ms. It’s a long day.

A competitive edge is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to maintain. Most organizations do not have an institutionalized, systematic means of generating new ideas. To the extent they do, it is often haphazard, infrequent and can often invite dissention. Organizational psychology strongly suggests that workers avoid and dislike change. New ideas often require change.

Years of observation in the new product realm has taught us that:

- Successful organizations are creative organizations;
- People want to create, innovate and improve;
- Innovation improves esprit de corps;
- Ideas are transcending...ideation can be applied to all business tactics (product development, services, pricing strategy, channel management, customer relationship management, etc.);
- Sometimes ideas just happen; sometimes they don’t.

But also that companies can become frustrated in their purpose because:

- Every organization has sink holes (places where new thinking gets buried);
- Fears abound:
 - Cannibalization
 - Cult of customer
 - Myth of continuity
- There is often near-term pressure to perform such as quarterly earnings;
- The status quo can dampen motivation;
- Organizational politics adversely impact new idea production;
- “Group Think” can lead to bad decisions or no decisions.



Summary

To the extent a marketer can gain better insight into human thought, desire or behavior she can create a competitive advantage. This requires a commitment to find out or discover something that others assume does not exist. Once discovered, that insight can become the basis for brand building.