The Co-Creation of Meaning Between Marketers and Consumers; Step 1: How Marketing Creatives Interpret Consumer Motivations

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**The Co-Creation of Meaning Between Marketers and Consumers;**

**Step 1: How Marketing Creatives Interpret Consumer Motivations**

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**BACKGROUND**

The goal of this research is to improve our understanding of the “Cultural Meaning” production system as suggested by McCracken (1986). In this system, consumption meanings are co-created by consumers and marketers through a give and take of meanings regarding advertising, product design, and names. The purpose of the present paper is to learn more about the initial phase in this process: the absorption and interpretation of consumer learning on the part of marketing creatives. While marketers today draw on their “inner voices” to come up with creative ideas for new packages, names and ad campaigns, they are also very sensitive to signals and sentiments from their targets. How do they balance their own needs to be independent and creative with needs to be sensitive to their markets? Of all the market information they receive, which helps them the most?

Kover (1995) wrote an important article in which he explored how copywriters sense and understand audience motives, and how they use this understanding to write copy. His research suggests that copywriters empathize with their audiences insofar as they carry on imaginary conversations in which they alternately become audience members, then themselves, and then audience members. Borrowing terminology from symbolic interactionism, they negotiate meaning internally, alternately taking on the roles of what Mead (1934) would call the Self (themselves as acting communicators) and the Significant Other or what Kover calls a prototypic “ideal viewer.” Gobe (2001) touches on this where he talks of the ongoing dialogue between the brand and the user.

Others who have written about meaning formation as a result of one-on-one dialogues include Pierce (1977) and Colapietro (1989). Kover goes on to wonder whether the implicit theories about consumers he found among copywriters were also true of creative workers in other fields such as novelists and product designers. In short, how do creative workers in other fields than copywriting use empathy and market understanding to come up with creative content?

The purpose of this paper is to explore implicit and explicit theories of consumer motivations among workers in five creative fields: interior decoration, architecture, fashion consulting, stand-up comedy and automobile design. Marketers are told to be empathetic (Leonard and Rayport 1997, Hill and Rivkin 1999), but how empathetic are they? Empathy might help copywriters, but does it help car designers? If they are empathetic, how are they empathetic? Based on this empathetic understanding, what are car designers’ theories about how to make emotional connections with their buyers?

Specifically, the questions driving this research include the following:

1. How are marketing empathy and marketing creativity interrelated? How does one area inform the other?
2. Do workers in creative marketing fields use empathy to sense how to engage their audiences and make the emotional connection between audience members and their offerings?
3. What are creative workers’ implicit theories about motivational and behavioral stages buyers go through including initial awareness of the offering and subsequent emotional connection and purchase?

This research represents the first leg of a research project interrelating artistic creativity and marketing creativity. To paraphrase Brown and Patterson (2000), my goal is less to understand what marketing can do for art—and more to understand what art can do for marketing. There is an increasing demand for creativity across all areas of business (see Florida 2002), and an important starting point to help marketers become more creative is to focus on the work of workers in marketing who rely heavily on their creativity, workers, that is, who constantly have to come up with fresh offerings. How do they do it? How do they sense and incorporate audience sensitivities?

**INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN EMPATHY AND CREATIVITY**

Finding intersections between empathy and creativity is not easy.

First, these subjects represent two separate research streams. The empathy literature is grounded in psychotherapy (e.g., Rogers 1957) and deals little with innovation and creativity. Kohut (1977) defined empathy simply as “vicarious introspection.” As Pluth (2002) writes, “empathy involves imaginally and entirely entering another’s point of view in order to illuminate behavioral motivation, participating in another’s conscious existence, ‘becoming’ another’s actual subjectivity and experiencing reality, both affective and cognitive from that perspective” (p. 2). All of these relate to the need for therapists to have a deeper understanding of client psychological problems. The concept “Einfühlung” or German for “in-feeling” is used in connection with works of art but only in terms of empathic involvement with the work of art, or merging with art objects we experience aesthetically (Katz, 1963).

In contrast, creativity is defined as “the imaginatively gifted recombination of known elements into something new” (Ciardi quote in Cougar1994, p. 14). Csikszentmihalyi says that “creativity results from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation” (1996, p. 6).

The latter definition, reflected in other work by Csikszentmihalyi (1999) stresses his interest in the system-like character of creativity inasmuch as an audience is involved in appreciating the creative product. For Csikszentmihalyi, however, the audience is relatively small and consists of peers or fellow experts along with the creator.

For our purposes, a better definition might be to consider one by Arons and Richard: “Creativity involves both originality and meaningfulness. In the simplest terms, a creative project is original, that is, it is new or departs from the conventional in some major aspect. Furthermore, it also communicates; it is meaningful to others” (quote in Schneider, Bugental, and Pierson, 2001 p. 128).

This definition is more interesting as it suggest a broader audience with which the creator is communicating or carrying on a dialogue. In other words, to the extent that the definition includes communication, it includes a sense of the “Other” or the possibility of an empathetic relationship.
Second, the separation between the two fields—marketing research (or empathy)—and marketing action (creating new products, pricing strategies, package designs, etc.) is wide and long-standing. People in these two fields have different orientations and different world views. Researchers are focused on consumer understanding, while marketers succeed based on actions (new products, ads, price plans). In fact, balancing the needs to be empathetic versus creative can be difficult. Based on many conversations I have had with marketers, if one viewpoint dominates the other, there is usually trouble. An excessive focus on satisfying stated buyer needs (usually, with the familiar and comfortable) leads to monotonous, me-too product designs and advertising. While there is not much of a concern that researchers, like Foreign Service personnel who spend excessively long periods in close quarters with foreign populations will “go native” and lose their objectivity, excessive identification with a target population can be troublesome. Qualitative market researchers know, for example, that for many product categories, a little naivete is often helpful. That way, respondents are not surprised by questions that to them are patently obvious (Langer 2002). Conversely, an excessive focus on creativity can produce interesting new products as well as advertising contest winners (see Clio awards in Ogilvy 1985)—but it can also produce notable market failures. Creativity for the sake of creativity or pure self-expression is fine in certain art circles where profits are not the issue (see “Mavericks” in Becker 1982), but can be very detrimental in a business context.

Note, however, that a number of approaches have been suggested in order to heighten marketers’ empathy with target buyers. The most obvious is to hire designers who match the target in terms of as many dimensions as possible: age, sex, education, and particularly, familiarity level with the product or item in question. At Honda, the designers who design cars for a specific age segment must themselves be from that age group.

To date, several researchers have suggested ways to empathize with target audiences through marketing research:

2. Fortini-Campbell (1998) suggests a dramaturgical approaches in which marketers employ devices used by method actors to help them identify more fully with people they are to portray.
3. Keats (in Margulies 1984) describes Shakespeare’s “negative capability”, that is, his ability to subvert his own identity and get more fully into the characters he brings alive in his writings.

To return to our original questions, do designers and developers of creative products and services empathize with their targets? If they do, how do they do it? What are their implicit theories of how their audiences experience their work? How do they envision them becoming aware of it and interacting with it?

METHOD

To explore these questions, an approach similar to Kover’s was used although a broader range of creative people were interviewed. Specifically, the research consisted of 9 in-depth interviews of creative workers. These included two interior designers, one architect, two stand-up comedians, three automobile designers and one fashion consultant. The fashion consultant sold a line of high-end clothing out of her home on a seasonal basis to 260 women clients and had become very good at anticipating which items and combinations of items each client would find appealing based on her knowledge of that client. All respondents were at least 35 years old and had worked for at least 15 years in their respective fields. All were male except the fashion consultant and the architect. All were very successful in their fields and could point to backgrounds which included extensive training, “working their way up”, prizes and recognition. The auto designers were heads of the design departments in the three largest US car companies.

Each interview lasted about an hour and was based on these types of questions:

How did you get into this business?
How do you get ideas?
How did you come up with your last design concept? Your last really successful concept?
How do you know when your ideas will “click”?
Which segments or types of buyers are you most comfortable creating for? Least?
What type of information about buyers do you find most helpful in terms of creating new content they will like?

RESULTS

This research, like Kover’s, is exploratory and therefore suggestive rather than conclusive. There were, however, some interesting insights.

First, in spite of the fact that all of the respondents were creative experts, the nature of their jobs highlighted some differences. In Figure 1, there is a continuum which illustrates these differences.

In Figure 1, workers on the left side are in much more direct contact with buyers, and, very importantly, are initially contacted by the buyers. As one interior designer said, “Hey, they hired me.” This gives them more power, or, as one interior designer said, “It lets us drive the bus.” They have time to educate their buyers, and can form close relationships with them. In fact, in fact, if an interior decorator or fashion consultant is liked personally by a client, this has a big impact on whether the client likes the creative work. As one interior designer said, “this is basically a selling job.” The interior designers and the fashion consultant stressed the importance of buyer trust, that is, that if they had the buyer’s trust, they had a great deal of creative freedom. This issue comes up in a lot of contemporary literature on branding since high trust brands are given more leeway by consumers to come up with more varied offerings (see Kraft foods in Keller 2003). A stand-up comedian knows from his “first hit” or first successful joke if a crowd likes him personally or not. If he is liked, he has a lot of latitude, or as one comedian said, “now you (audience) are mine.”

At the other extreme, the car designers have to be intrusive to get the attention of buyers, they have to initiate the contact. Commitment on the buyers’ part is much lower because the relationship is much less personal. It is therefore harder to know what will click with individual buyers.

There were, however, some interesting commonalities across all creative workers.

All knew from a young age (about 10) that they were headed for creative careers. Even as youngsters, they had special abilities to imagine or see in their minds novel forms and combinations. One of the comedians, for example, was black. As a child in school, he was often in trouble and was assigned to clean the erasers. He could look at the erasers, see the white chalk dust, then see a funny
possible: put the dust on his face, sing an Al Jolson song for his teacher, make her laugh, and then get out of the assignment. (It worked). Similarly, the automobile designers seem to imply that their work was superior to that of artists in so far as artists “make copies of something already there, like they paint a lake” whereas designers “have to imagine a visual form first in their mind, then put it on paper.” One of the interior designers noted that he has a “special ability to see in his mind how a room will look once it is completely furnished and decorated.”

At the same time, all of the creative workers seemed to work in the same sequence. Nearly all of their projects followed three steps:

1. Assess
2. Create
3. Present

All seek first to understand the target, then create, then go through a big moment of truth or the major presentation of the creative work. At each of the three stages, however, there are systematic ways that all workers gather input from their audiences and use this to form theories about what will click.

1. ASSESSMENT

Note first that none of the workers spoke of using empathy with their buyers. Even when told how advertising copywriters will “become” an individual buyer and respond do their work from the buyers’ perspective, none of them said they imagined themselves in the place of their buyers. The writer even spoke with a copywriter once from a large New York City agency who said “I imagine the dumbest guy in my high school class reading my lines back to me.” Still this type of review of one’s work is not true among the creative workers studied here.

Even the comedians, while they were very sensitive to audience responses, did not evaluate joke ideas by deliberately taking the perspective of audience members. Jerry Seinfeld recently noted that many effective stand-up comics tend to be somewhat arrogant, so it is not surprising that they are not interested in “becoming” their audience to evaluate joke reactions.

However, in the assessment phase, all creative workers use methods that are very familiar to market researchers:

Ask about needs:

Interior designers, automobile designers, and architects simply ask buyers what they want.

Use test stimuli:

Interior designers will ask clients to react to swatches of wallpaper and pictures of specific rooms, and comedians have collections of test jokes they throw out at the beginning of a show, mainly in order to see how liberal or conservative the audience will be. Everyone worries about threshold points, that is, the points at which a joke is too anti-conservative, a car design is too radical, or a room plan is too contemporary.

Ask about the past:

Interior designers ask clients to tell them all of the changes in their homes they have made over the years, and auto designers probe the meanings of favorite past cars. This information tells the creative people “where people are headed in their interior decoration” and the car histories tell auto designers what were the emotional hot buttons or archetypal car styles in target owner histories.

Observe:

All creative workers were acute observers of audience reactions. Many reactions are easy to see and understand. If, for example, an audience feels that a joke was too critical of a politician, the audience will go “ooooooooooh.” All creative workers look for changes in audience body language, mood level, and any other signs of interest or disinterest in the material. Comedians feel that different crowds have different personalities, and are loath to work a room where the audience has drank too much or have been up too late. The latter audiences are usually too sluggish and too tired to get many jokes.

In short, most creative workers absorb a great deal of information about their audiences and all the things they are involved with in their daily lives. All people interviewed in this study were very well-read, all used terms from psychology and sociology to speak of their audiences, and the automobile designers were very familiar with all of the latest consumer understanding tools, from ethnographic research to the Zaltman and Higie ZMET technique (1995). Interestingly, they were also very good at remembering bits of learning about audience members and their lives. One interior designer said “I could come to your house and next week remember every piece in your living room”, and one of the comics said that a year from now, he would be able to remember even the smallest bits of the interview. The more they can remember, the more fuel they can call upon to make creative associations.

Of all the information they valued in order to understand buyer motivations and sense “where they could take their audiences”
through their creativity, the most useful information seemed to deal with target self-images. Each creative worker develops creative content mainly in terms of how it will impact individual audience member self-images or perceptions. If they could rely on any piece of information about their audience—everything from demographics to values to socioeconomic levels—this seems to be the most important information.

The designer of the PT Cruiser automobile said that it was designed to enhance small car drivers’ self-perceptions:

“(being) in the small car market is very defeating to a customer. Every time you come to a red light, because the culture is really defining you by scale, where it is status to have something larger, a large home, a larger office, large TV—all of that is defining where your position is…(so, with the PT Cruiser).…Why not create a product that’s judged on a completely different rulebook…where somebody looking at it, instead of saying ‘That’s a small car’ they say, ‘That’s a neat car’.”

The fashion consultant said her job is mainly to make women “feel good about themselves.” She said, “You are helping them feel good, and when a woman puts on an outfit and she feels good, she’s on top of the world.”

The comedians said they have to be constantly aware of who they are addressing and how that audience views itself. One comic said simply, “people like to laugh at themselves.” When telling funny stories to Jewish audiences, you are not going to get laughs unless you are telling jokes about Jewish people. Both of the comics were in their 40s and were generally reluctant to perform for college audiences. This is because college students, as one comic said, “do not like being hit too much with the adult world and what it’s (going to be) like when their parents stop paying for this (college life).” College students like comics that push simple prop-oriented humor (wigs, funny hats) much more than stories about adults. Black audiences prefer jokes about black people and black neighborhoods (as opposed to the “white” black humor of people like Bill Cosby). The worst audience to perform in front of would be an audience of male politicians and their wives, all in formal attire. An audience of this type, the comics said, would be too self-conscious to laugh at anything and would be a comic’s nightmare.

2. CREATIVITY

All the creative workers said they do a wide range of creative work, from routine, mundane, direct customer-oriented innovations to breakthrough, “out there”, one-of-a-kind creations. For the interior designers, working in traditional design areas (Queen Anne, Georgian) tended to be the routine, less challenging, more formulaic work. They said this work was OK, but they most enjoyed contemporary interior designs.

The car designers say their work ranges from simple redesigns of current models to completely free designs where their bosses say, “come up with a design for any type of car that you personally would want”. The latter designs are the concept cars, designs which can lead to one-off prototypes which are shown at auto shows to gauge public reactions. The comics have standard jokes—but envy famous comics such as George Carlin who can do extreme material from a very biased political viewpoint and get away with it.

As Csikszentmihalyi (1996) would say, this is when creative people get into the flow or zone. For many, this is a retreat to someplace inside themselves. One of the car designers noted how Mozart could hear music in his mind, then write it down. This designer said he can “see” new car designs in his mind which he then puts on paper. One of the interior designers said he likes contemporary designs because “it’s more cerebral…more challenging…and I enjoy the challenge.” Oddly, the comics are most in the flow when they are on stage, performing. Many admit they do not write much material beforehand but rather make it up as much as half of it on stage. Apparently, improvisational comedy is a major part of many of their acts.

How does a sense of their market enter into this stage?

All creative workers rely on a set of aesthetic criteria, or, put differently, a set of criteria of well-formedness which is fundamental in their field. These criteria relate to natural human predispositions, to universal human desires for things like balance, harmony, and proportion. In a joke, the proportion of the time spent leading to the punch line must be in direct proportion to the funniness of the punch line itself. One of the car designers said,

“There are excellent proportions in the beauty of the human form. We are all sensitized (to this) because we grow up with humans…and see them all the time (so). It is more of a subconscious recognition. There is an instant recognition of what is out of proportion (versus) there is a subconscious recognition of harmony. In the car business, there are some rules. You have to play with proportions. The market will accept very very new stuff as long as the proportions are quantified, as long as there is a harmony to the vehicle.”

One of the interior designers spoke of design “logic”:

“When you are designing a home or a room for a client—yes, it’s creative in that you have the option of selecting (from) all these different options—but there is a logic to it. Like, in western music, there are certain ways to write the sonata form. There is a basic structure…like the colors…the proportions of the furniture. That’s where the fun is.”

All designers, of course, have systems of overlays where they can sketch a new design on transparent paper, lay over a new sheet to make changes, then another new sheet, etc. to get the proportions they want (all mostly done by computer today). Interestingly, it took a long time to transcribe the interviews of the comics because of the way they spoke. They don’t speak in broken sentences but rather will start to say something, then start to say it again in a different way, and then a different way altogether. What they are doing is fine tuning, trying to get just the right words to communicate the best pattern of images in their story-telling.

Research by Veryzer (1993) has probed consumers’ desires for ideal forms and universal proportions. Further research in this area might be very beneficial to creative workers. Some of the car designers and the interior designers deliberately research target buyers’ feelings about proportions and aesthetics. In studying Buick buyers, for example, one car designer said he likes to look in their homes:

I find it very valuable (that) when you do in someone’s house, and the couch is always centered with the wall, and the end tables are centered to the couch, and the hierarchy of the lamp to the couch to the wall to the frame on the picture is so symmetrical and hierarchical. That is good information about a Buick customer.”

One way creative workers learn about ideal forms and proportions is, of course, through their artistic training. Also, all of the creative workers interviewed in this study spent a lot of time comparing notes with other creative workers in their fields.
3. PRESENTATION

According to all the workers interviewed, this stage is absolutely crucial in the success of a new design, joke, or clothing outfit. Like flying a plane, design work is full of tension, and car designers say that when their design is a hit with the public “this plane has really landed.” This is the goal for car designs, room designs, and all kinds of jokes. One of the car designers said that he does not like predictable car design evolutions but rather wants to surprise and delight:

“I call that (predictable car designs) ‘playing checkers’. In other words, the moves are very simple. (Whereas) What you really want is chess….where the moves are not so predictable….and you (viewer or opponent) think, ‘Jeez, where did that come from?’”

One of the interior designers did a project and got the reaction from his clients: “Wow! We can’t believe you came up with that!” When the other interior designer told a client “Let’s move the grand piano away from that window”, the client resisted saying, “My mother played that piano there in 1947.” After the piano was moved, the designer said, “It was like a revelation, it was hysterical…Out of nowhere, their home was reborn.”

In fact, the interior designers know they are trusting them to move them pleasantly into the “moment of presentation” (or “truth”), so these designers call this a “leap of faith” on the part of the clients. They report that clients call them and say, “I can not believe this is my living room…It’s beautiful….I’m thrilled to pieces!” If they are designing something radical for a client, these designers will “bring them along” slowing showing them each piece of furniture over a period of days, getting their agreement, so the final result is pleasing. When a piece of furniture is too different from expectations, they say clients experience “furniture shock.”

The comedians were scrupulous about room layout and about observing audience reactions. One was fanatical about the room he would be working in: “I can almost sense going into a room if I am going to do well that night. The biggest thing..is the physical layout.” He had a long list of requirements about which he was fanatical: the audience had to be at least 2 feet away from him, the room very dark, bright spotlight on him, everyone seated (no one up on chairs), excellent sound system, tables cleared, no food, no a lot of alcohol, no distractions.” In order for him to make his “connection” he had to have the complete attention of the audience– as opposed to music, he said, which can get by with just being “background.” He said he can tell in the first 3 minutes of his routine if the audience will like him and his jokes. The first successful joke is called “the first hit” and sets the stage for the rest of the routine. In spite of the difficulty in seeing beyond bright spotlights, all comedians monitor audience sounds, body language, and of course laughter very carefully.

SUMMARY

This project is the first part of a large scale study of how creative workers co-create meaning with consumers. It focuses on the first step: how creatives interpret consumer motivations. If it is possible to understand how these people conceptualize audience wants and needs and reactions regarding creative offerings, this would facilitate many things:

Researchers who study consumer needs regarding creative products would have clearer direction regarding issues and information which are most helpful to creatives.

These researchers might also be better equipped to come up with creative content themselves, that is, be able to highlight findings which have leverageable creative implications.

This is an area of considerable opportunity. The heart of marketing is about correctly identifying consumer issues which creative people can leverage in creative, new advertising, package designs, pricing plans, distribution plans, and sales plans.

Based on the this research, researchers will be able to help creative workers in these areas if they help them get a deeper understanding of (1) consumer self-concept definitions and how these change, (2) universal consumer definitions of aesthetics, proportions and “well-formedness”, and (3) consumer reactions at initial “moment of truth” presentations of creative offerings.

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