



'What's gone wrong – thoughts on creativity, measurement and the nature of the devil'

Vivian Rowden

Neil Doyle

“There are no whole truths; all truths are half- truths. It is trying to treat them as whole truths that plays the devil.” - Alfred North Whitehead (1861 - 1947)

We have all been there; the infuriating, time wasting, soul destroying, unproductive, dysfunctional relationship when advertising agency, researcher and client partners, at best, can't quite connect and at worst can barely conceal their dislike and disrespect for each other.

How can this happen? How can team members (albeit virtual team members) who supposedly have the same end goals, start and end in such different places.

We are all professionals, brought in to help build, nurture and improve brands and their success. How can we do it with such acrimonious behaviour between us?

It was an article in the Sydney Morning Herald where Millward Brown were called the 'Devil Incarnate' responsible for killing creative that was the starting point to this paper. This paper is not meant as a rebuttal however, rather it is an examination of how level-headed professionals (which we would all claim to be) could reach such an impasse.

Because it is so endemic in our business we wanted to try to understand why this might happen. What drives this behaviour? Because, it is only in trying to understand where it comes from might we be able to find a more productive way forward. Drawing upon our experiences from the 'other side of the fence' with advertising agencies and clients, we bring out this philosophical contradiction not as an attempt to solve it but more a case of suggesting new ways of working together. During the writing of this paper we spoke to 35 professionals from the Advertising, Research and Client worlds.

In this paper we share with you our thoughts on some of the more mundane reasons why things don't always work out the way they should. We then go on to explore some ideas about how it is not only that we have different agendas but also there is something more fundamental about the different way a creative looks at the world and the world of measurement. While we don't offer an easy fix to bridge this divide, we go on to suggest some things that might help build more effective relationships between client, ad agency and researcher.

Firstly, let us take a very honest look at these often, quite ugly relationships.



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The Agency Point of View

There is a spectrum of opinion that runs from:

"It can be so useful when it is done right"

To:

'I don't mind research...I just hate researchers'

To:

"It is the greatest destroyer of great brand building and brand thinking that ever existed."

But we found some commonality around the agency opinion:

- 1) Too often research and researchers are simply not accountable.
- 2) Researchers don't understand the process of creation, how one needs to build and create.
- 3) To justify its role, research looks for problems...rather than solutions.

Too often research and researchers are simply not accountable

Whether it is the time that research is engaged, or the methods by which research is engaged, it was unanimously viewed as not being accountable.

'We are the ones that have to start with a blank sheet of paper and make something out of nothing. Then the researchers come in and nail it all. The easiest thing is to say something doesn't work; however understanding why it isn't working is the key. Too many researchers have no idea. They just say that it isn't right or working.'

'Then the bastard's just walk away' or worst yet, say, 'see you next time, see you the next time you need something killed.'

'They feed on things other people build...their next job/project just comes from our hard work.'

Researchers don't understand the process of creation, how one needs to build and create

Agencies are quick to criticise researchers as having no idea of how the process of creation actually takes place. What makes great advertising and what to save, what can go? Therefore, research is seen as being the safe option, the 'arse saver,' thecrippler of great advertising.



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How does one come to terms when advertising is meant to break the rules and change the paradigms, while research is about finding what the majority respond to? Are we not in the classic case of 'new wine in old bottles?'

To justify its role, research looks for problems...rather than solutions.

Whether we admit it or not, it is openly discussed or quite subtle...we all have an agenda. This can be fuelled by politics, the need for revenue growth, and the desire to build empires or reputations.

Because of these agendas we view each other warily. From the agency perspective...too often researchers are seen as having to find problems (why else would they be brought in?). This reputation can build, because too many in the ranks actually see their job in this way. To feel like they are adding value, they have to have something to say. Having something to say rarely means 'this is a great ad...well done...go ahead and put this to air.' It is about finding something that could be improved.

"I often feel the need to look for things to comment on, I don't feel like I add value otherwise"

Now let us look at how the research industry views those in the ad business. We also spoke to key people in the research business. People running agencies, researchers immersed in the day-to-day business of client servicing to understand their perspective.

Interestingly, there is commonality here as well:

- 1) 'Agency people just care about pushing through their work (and often it sucks!).'
- 2) 'They are arrogant and believe that only agency people could have ideas and be creative.'

Agency people just care about pushing through their work even if it is not so good

In a fascinating paper at last year's MRS conference in the UK, Roddy Glen spoke about this issue from a UK perspective. Based on his take on the workings of agencies in the UK, he highlights some of the political games that can occur within ad agencies around creative development. In his paper he comments on the role of Creative Director:

"It is important here to recognise that the creative director is almost certainly the most powerful individual in the agency. They are the person best placed to determine its fortunes in terms of the quality of its output and its resulting reputation. In theory, they are the 'best' judge of ideas in the agency and it behoves agency management to support this notion by seeming to believe this. So, creative directors more often than not have their way at creative review meetings, leaving account management...to present work which is not necessarily of the best order." (Glen, 2005: 4)



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So what is it that motivates the typical creative?

Some Creatives we spoke to admit that their worth is typically valued by how many awards they can collect. This is more likely to grow the market worth of that individual. Again drawing on Roddy Glen's paper. Here he quotes this year's D&AD awards call for entries:

"Nothing can do more for your career than a D&AD Yellow Pencil. Except the holy of holies, a black one. They earn you untold fame and fortune. More importantly they turn every other creative person on the planet green with envy." (Quoted in Glen, 2005: 6)

This is not to say that these are mutually exclusive objectives. We think the ad we are going to talk about in a few minutes (Carlton Beer – Canoe) is an example of a great creative idea that we would expect to do good things for the client's business.

They are arrogant and believe that only agency people could have ideas and be creative.

What is interesting is that what creatives actually produce in advertising is conceptual. Unlike other artists they rarely execute their work themselves. They then bring in photographers and film directors to add their vision and value. To this point, what actually gets discussed and researched is the idea itself. If it is conceptual why is it viewed as being owned by so few people? While we might not all be creative enough to create original thought, surely more than just a few of us, can work with conceptual ideas, understand them, nurture them and sometimes even build on them?

So if we all had a big group hug would it all be ok? Sure it wouldn't be such a bad thing if we did invest some time into understanding each other's perspective a bit more, but we believe there are some more fundamental issues at stake here. We want to argue that the divisions go to the level of a fundamental difference over how we look at the world differently or more specifically what rules do we use to make sense of the world around us. So we want to argue the debate is not just one of what we should measure and how to measure it, but rather it goes to the very fundamentals of what we mean by measurement, and as such knowledge itself.

The world of creating

We spoke to Creatives about how exactly great ideas come about. We wanted to understand the world Creatives occupy. What are the rules, building blocks of the creative process and how do *they* evaluate whether an idea is any good or not. Are they playing by the same rules? If not how can we find a common language or basis for which evaluating whether an idea is good or not?



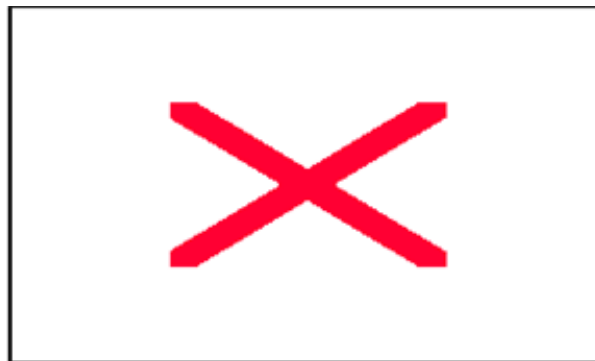
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One thing that is abundantly clear is that typically a Creative's ideas do not originate from the world of rational logic. We are not talking about a process of induction (or deduction for that matter) where an idea is a logical progression or consequence of another. Creatives (if they can) describe a process of linking disparate bits of knowledge ideas in random new and exciting ways. There is no necessary sense of order to this process. Creativity inevitably deals with multiple subjectivities; it is this very interplay of meaning that lies behind many of the greatest ads.

Here is an example of an ad we really enjoyed not only as consumers but also as professionals. We haven't worked on this ad nor have we had anything to do with the brand or agency. Our observations are very much as independent 'lovers of ads'. But from this perspective we can begin to deconstruct a little about the 'meaning games' that are going on here. Through this we can perhaps begin to guess what the creative process was that brought this idea to life.



Why did we like this ad? Well first of all it made us laugh. Now humour is a notoriously difficult thing to pull apart. It is one of those brilliantly subjective things. But let us think about this ad a bit more. For you to get our understanding of the idea you actually have to be cognisant of several things. It plays about with multiple meanings on a variety of different levels.

Central is the idea that it is 'taking the piss'. This is an important insight of the male beer-drinking psyche. Specifically what we mean by 'taking the piss' means it is destabilizing established norms - in this case by caricaturing on several different levels. This ad nicely caricatures on one level men generally and their concern over the size of their 'canoe' - (It isn't only Groucho Marx who knows what we really mean by canoe). The whole power suit and "a man has got to win" lampoons a certain US corporate ideal. This is supported by all sorts of executional detail, from the swivel chair to the chiselled jaw. And of course in all of this is the slapstick of carrying small boats around the office and banging secretaries on the head. And lastly the style of shooting itself lampoons a genre of film and advertising.

For all of this to work, it implies shared cultural meanings exist between the people who write this idea and those who decode it. You could imagine there are places where you could play this ad and they would not get the irony of what it is setting out to do. It is of course tempting to point to the US as such a pre-ironic society which itself becomes part of the enjoyment of the idea. (We get back to



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the importance of shared cultural understanding later as one of the key reasons research is an absolutely critical part of the creative development process).

So let us try and imagine the creative process that was behind this idea. Surely it must come from a crazy mix of ideas, discourse, meaning and language to come up with such an idea. It playfully turns conventions and norms upside down using different levels of meaning. There is no single truth but rather several different levels of meaning which the viewer can buy into depending on their own perspective.

The Creatives that we spoke to also recommended finding a structure by which ideas can be evaluated, and unanimously, using ones gut was most important. They recalled the amount of over-rationalisation that can take place when often ones first initial reaction to a piece of film is simply positive. Additional key advice was naturally make sure the idea was on strategy, can it be identified and articulated and finally do you think the consumer will notice it? But using ones gut was key.

The world of research

Now we want to contrast this world of multiple subjectivities with the world of quantitative copy testing. There are many such approaches including our own Link test, RI's Publitest, IPSOS's NextTV and other similar measurement methods that we will collectively refer to as quantitative copy testing. Implicit in quantitative copy testing methods with their recourse to norms, scales and traces is the idea that there is a single knowable truth out there waiting to be uncovered.

We believe the origins of these are in the world of natural sciences. It all began with the premise $1+1=2$. We use logic to generalize observations into laws about how the world works and then try to test these laws against our observations. Through this process we give our laws special status as fact grounded in science. Specifically, in the case of Link we have built a model around the three pillars of brand memorability, communication and persuasion. Within this framework we use a series of measures (based on self-reporting) to ascertain how well a given piece of creative works.

In the spirit of the AMSRS conference you will be pleased to know that we are not going to be arguing why our Link test is a better copy test than others, but rather we will talk about quantitative copy testing methods generally. Researchers using other similar methods might disagree about the relative merits of using different methods of collecting data, presenting stimuli or the analytical framework employed, however at the end of the day they can all be characterized together as implicitly based on several foundational tenets.

- They rely upon the collection and statistical analysis of quantitative data about peoples' reactions to the creative ideas presented to them.
- There is a 'science' of copy evaluation that lies behind each approach based on generalized observations. As such, they claim a privileged understanding of how advertising works.
- They claim the ability to both explain and predict marketing (i.e. social) phenomena.



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Comparing these implicit assumptions to how the typical Creative thinks and creates, we can begin to understand where some of the conflicts originate. How easy is it to measure the subtle interplay of meaning that is often at the heart of great advertising? It is the very thing that makes a great advert that defies easy measurement. This is even more so at the earlier stages of creative development where we are dealing with ideas rather than finished pieces of film.

We are not the first to highlight the potential conflict between creativity and measurement. Virginia Valentine of Semiotic Solutions in the UK has written that:

“Market Research inhabits a world of polar opposites. On the one hand, the measurable, quantifiable, systematically collected facts of statistical data. On the other, the inexplicable, intuitive, mad-connection leap into ideas that is the creative world we service.” V. Valentine

However we would take it a step further and locate this division in a broader context. The divide we are dealing with here in the world of marketing parallels some of the debates that have been raging in the social sciences in recent decades. Far too often we as market researchers are blind to developments in other disciplines. Even business studies do not concern themselves with some of the more interesting debates that are going on within the social sciences. Wendy Gordon describes the worlds of academia and commercial marketing research as being as separate as “two planets in different galaxies” (1999: 19).

There has been much debate in the social science sector on what constitutes ‘authentic knowledge’. The Western tradition has been one where we have looked to rationalism and science as the yardstick for evaluating what is good or bad.

“Much contemporary philosophical thought, especially that which affects the social sciences, revolves around the question on whether ‘science’ occupies a special, privileged place in human thought about reality,.” (Hughes et al 1997: 3)

The attack on applying scientific principles to looking at social life has come from a variety of quarters, but many have centred on the role of language and meaning in mediating thought. Post-modernists argue that knowledge is produced in a shared cultural context and within a definite historical circumstance. It is all a bit abstract, but the idea is that the language and meaning we inherit from our lived experiences regulate how we think and so the kind of knowledge we produce. So applying such post-modernists ideas to advertising research you could argue that by accepting the tenets underpinning a quant copy test you are already defining the kind of knowledge that can be produced. It is as if by the act of choosing one research methodology over another you are already pre-judging where you end up. As such you can challenge the notion that one approach and its conclusions deserve any greater claim to representing a reality than another. All a bit relativist and not the kind of thing a typical CFO thinking about ROI will want to hear!



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We are not necessarily trying to resolve these debates but rather trying to point out how we can see the world of Creatives fitting in with one side of the argument, whereas the world of quantitative copy tests sits very comfortably with the other.

Creatives are continually challenging and re-creating the rules of the game – how meaning is used and represented. They operate in a world where meanings are flexible and fluid; this very fluidity can often be the very essence of what makes great creative. Quantitative methods are about standardising the research approach – meanings are assumed to be fixed and knowable. Not surprisingly we don't always get on too well!

So are we a couple of subversives from the world of Millward Brown now saying that we give up on evaluating creative? Most certainly not! Indeed, we look to some of the post-modernist thinkers for a justification of why research (including our very own Link test) is a crucial part of the process. Our concern centres on the appropriate method being used at the appropriate time so that research can become a positive element of the creative development embraced by all rather than a bogeyman. Seeing the creative process as one that begins with subjectivity we need approaches that can take this into account. At the early stages, the role of research should be to nurture ideas and suggest ways of keeping them alive. As ideas develop into defined executions and those with fiscal responsibility are investing large amounts of money, research needs to seek a more objective understanding of the likely outcomes in the real world.

The post-modernist thinker Roland Barthes describes those who 'read texts' (in our case watching advertising) actually play an active role in the reproduction of its meaning. We are not necessarily passive vessels waiting to be filled by advertising messages. We can take these messages and rearrange them in the context of whom we are and the individual meaning system we use to make sense of the world. He concludes it is "*the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author*" (Barthes, 1977: 148). Or to put it another way - once an idea leaves the tender care of those who gave birth to it, it goes on out into the world and is interpreted in a variety of ways by different people. It is located in a wide range of meaning systems which are themselves the result of the interrelation of a wide variety of social factors, be they race, gender, class not to mention marketing-specific factors as category and brand experience.

As marketers we are interested in what reaction an idea elicits, be it rational and emotional and the linkage between these reactions and the brand. Through this we are attempting to alter the meanings associated with our clients' products and services. Therefore it is critical to understand not necessarily the merits of a creative idea, but rather how this idea will be interpreted by a variety of actors and what is the resultant impact on perceptions. As anyone who has spent time in groups discussing creative knows; what plays well in Paddington does not necessarily play out well with Parramatta.

Going back to the people who are putting up the money for all this fun and games – our clients. Surely a CFO does have the right to ask what is the likely impact of this idea on their business. It is



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not up to clients to fund the careers of Creatives and Researchers. How can we help answer this legitimate question without killing the very thing we are trying to evaluate?

One way out of this impasse is re-stating what the actual purpose of copy testing is. We are not judging whether it is a good or bad idea. From a post-modernist perspective this would be a meaningless conceit. But rather can this idea do its intended job? As such perhaps it is fairer to say that our mission is to measure and evaluate people's reactions to creative rather than the creative itself. This could well be what many researchers already claim, however somehow this crucial difference seems to get lost in the small print of what we offer our colleagues in Ad-land.

Again building on the idea that the creator and consumer of advertising are often very different people using quite different meaning systems to make sense of the world, research therefore has another critical function in bringing to life in a real and accessible way different consumer lives. We should be able to deliver an understanding of diverse meaning systems to a creative so they can create with this target in mind.

So where do we stand regarding research and particularly quant copy testing in regards to the creative development process?

We are passionate about the role of research in creative development. However we realize that there are real fears and concerns on the part of ad people, particularly creatives. Some of these are based on misunderstandings; some are grounded in conflicting agendas. And as we hope we have shown there is a fundamental difference between the multiple subjectivities that great creative works with and the origins of research, particularly quant copy testing methods. To an extent researchers should accept an element of blame. Perhaps at times we have been judgmental, maybe even insensitive to the creative process. However these concerns must be balanced with what is right for our clients' business. This is where ultimate loyalty must lie. It is just that their interests would be best served if the world of creative development and research had a better understanding of each other. We all have agendas and in the same way a creative might hide behind the arrogance of blind faith in the brilliance of their own creativity we are also to blame for lying behind the technicalities of our own products.

So moving forward, what might become ways to bridge this divide?

- Getting more involved in the creative process earlier – a different agenda of not necessarily 'testing' or even evaluating an idea but rather as a collaborative partner. Going back to the thought that perhaps we are all capable of nurturing and building on conceptual thought.
- We need to demand more explicit research briefs that clearly have the creative's explanation of what exactly is the idea expected to deliver, how is it going to do this, what exact part of the drama is going to elicit the desired kind of reaction?



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- Deliberately sourcing a wider range of talents from outside of the traditional research world. By having a shared set of experiences we can then be much closer to understanding the stresses, strains and agendas that we all work under.
- A suite of products and approaches that can work across the whole creative development process. We need methods that can deal with the subjectivity of idea generation and at the other end an objective (as possible) measure of the likelihood of an ad having the desired effect upon the intended audience. And with this suite of products, be absolutely diligent about which tool is used at which time.
- To be much more familiar to the creative community, increasingly trying to position research as their eyes and ears to people and places they might not normally be part of. Alongside this point being absolutely sure as to whom the work is targeted and clearly understanding what they are trying to achieve with the work.

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