



Research Data Drives Effective Creative Strategy

It's that time again . . . time to get the ball rolling on your new membership recruitment campaign, or your seasonal ad campaign, or your annual meeting promotion. You need an idea, a direction, an inspiration to guide your creative mind to a result that will be executable, will reach and resonate with the intended audience, and come in within budget. Where do you turn? Hopefully, you turn to the potential customer, in the form of primary research.

The more you know about the audience for any marketing effort, the more effective that effort will likely be. You know the challenges they face, you know the mindset they use on a daily basis, you know what they need, and can make your concepts, copy and offers sing to the audience in a way that creates action, but only if you have the information you need. The way to get that information, in a reliable way that you can use to make decisions, is to be in regular contact with the audience. One of the most effective ways to do that is with periodic in-depth phone research.

Get a Reality Check

In-depth phone research, when combined with some written survey work on a periodic basis, can help you get an accurate feel for your members or target audience on an ongoing basis, unfiltered by the “pick the middle choice” phenomenon of printed surveys. Done in a truly blind fashion, where the audience has no idea your organization is behind the questions, customers feel secure enough to answer honestly and directly. Even so, most respondents in a small, highly specific prospect pool, especially in a member-based organization, figure out that the word will filter back to your organization eventually, so they feel that this may be an opportunity to air their gripes and get something done on their behalf without complaining directly to you. You can also gather information on the positive side as well, as compliments are far more rare than complaints from customers or members of the organization.

Customer service benefits aside, true primary research generates not only anecdotal information on your current customers or members, but if you include ex-customers or former members in your scheme, there is quantitative data generated that can be projected accurately over the entire audience or prospect pool. And in that data is where the creative inspiration hides.

Draw Comparisons

Inspirational data often comes from the most unexpected numerical comparisons. Most marketing data mirrors the expectations that were built into the questions in the phone survey. In the face of that effect, there is often one set of data that stands out as an unexpected result, either very positive, or extremely negative compared to your own “feel” for that issue.

The other comparison that lends itself to driving a creative “hook” is the comparison between the data from your current constituents and your former constituents. Not only will this comparison show you what facets of your organization are working well and

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retaining customers, but it will also show some of the reasons why the ex-customers left. Those are the things you can address in your creative strategy to shore up those perceptions that could be discouraging potential customers from doing business with you.

Often an issue you feel is of little consequence turns out to mean an awful lot to the constituent audience. If you find that unexpected “key to their heart”, that should inspire a creative approach that will yield considerable success. Both in the concept and in the copy, hitting that high note repeatedly based on solid research is usually a home run. Careful reading and interpretation of that collected data is key to going in the correct direction. Sometimes some additional follow-up research with a small but representative audience to drill down on that unexpected issue can generate some additional, more leading data. That clarification can mean the difference between a home run and a wiff.

Occasionally, the opposite scenario plays out, and something you’ve been promoting as a benefit all along turns out to have little importance to the audience. That lack of “resonance” is a disconnect that you now know you can avoid in your copy. That frees up some room to play up the positive aspects you’ve verified with the research data.

Use The Data You Gather

Without the underpinnings of that research, there is little basis for decision-making in the creative process. The data can give you a more sturdy brand profile, it let’s you make a persuasive case to senior management, and gives you something to backstop your creative direction. The temptation is often to take the data and twist it to meet the “gut feel” that exists in the collective mind of the organization. Ignore the data at your own peril. If the study is conducted by professional researchers, and there are no clear flaws in the list of respondents and its reflection of the audience is accurate, then let the data drive your decisions.

The data doesn’t lie. It’s very easy to discount research data when you compare it to your own perceptions, or the preferred perception of the organization, and it doesn’t match. It’s tougher to stick to your guns, believe the data and act upon it. Once you see it work predictably and successfully, you learn to trust the numbers.

Prioritize the Issues

Once you have the data collected, and the analysis done, how do you make the leap to a creative direction? The secret is in the numbers. The basic strategy is that you determine the type of approach based on the read of the top 5 factors in the survey in order of importance. If the top three involve emotional issues, rather than the rational, or intellectual, then the creative approach leans toward a more emotional appeal.

For example, if the survey indicates that your organization is not producing results for customers in a particular area, maybe customer service or responsiveness – those are largely emotional issues, as no one likes to feel ignored or not served adequately, but they are not functional issues or operational issues within the organization’s functional mission. The creative approach in that case might involve imagery and copy that plays upon the warm, service-oriented nature of the organization, a one to one approach that is

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more welcoming and almost apologetic. Of course, you can also pass the info on to the customer service department and improve there operationally as well.

If you uncover among your top five factors that numerically your satisfaction level among customers is 3 times higher than your ex-customer dissatisfaction ratio, there's a set of numbers to crow about, and you can take a more rational, numerical approach to the concept and the copy – show you're keeping customers happy and keeping them longer than ever before. The data still drives the point home, and works to provide you with a creative direction, a springboard toward a winning concept that resonates with the audience.

Use A Metaphor

One of the simplest ways to make the leap from data to concept is to use a metaphor that explains what the data reveals. If you're trying to illustrate that your company grew its customer base by 200% in the last quarter, or that your customer satisfaction rating improved by 3x over the last year based on some changes you've put in place, showing images of outrageous growth – beanstalks, elephants, Cyclops giants, etc.; or show images of size disparity – big bones with little dogs, big sandwiches with little kids, an Oreo cookie so large it won't go in the glass of milk. The metaphor gives you a way to explain the concept that the data revealed in a way the audience can relate to easily.

Now, on to those meeting ads, or those membership recruitment ads. Let the data be your guide in these cases as well. If your data shows that 80% of your members don't go to your annual meeting because it's too expensive, takes too much time away from the office and the same people go every year and it's turned into a good ole' boys club, its time to break out the big guns. They are not finding the value in your meetings. Time to fight the perceptions with your own reality and show the members in your ad or brochure that there are benefits to spending the money, taking time away and meeting those good ole' boys face to face. Imagery in this case should be very rational, practical, businesslike, and copy should be extremely benefit-laden, addressing those concerns head on in a way the audience can relate to. In many cases, if you get one good lead, one good tip, meet one solid useful connection at a meeting, you've made the trip a worthwhile endeavor. Now multiply that by the “possibilities” of the number of typical attendees (some latitude allowed here, no accountants in the wings), and show how the value multiplies with the number of participants – sort of a “you have to show up to win type of approach”.

Destination “X”

Ads focused on the destination are destined to fail for at least a portion of the audience, yet they persist and even proliferate in the member organization landscape. Everyone knows it's great to go to a meeting in “X” city, if you like that city, and if it has something inherently beneficial or relevant to the meeting's purpose. If not, you'll lose the folks who are farthest away and those that are the most cost conscious, almost automatically. No matter what city you pick, those two audiences are lost if the content isn't up to snuff. You can't have a meeting good enough to get them to go there. For those who are having trouble finding value in the content, the city is irrelevant. If the

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content is good and the results beneficial, you can have the meeting in a train station and people will attend.

Use Testimonials

For those organizations hunting for new members, there are many approaches where the data can give you some insights to follow. Testimonial approaches are a very strong framework from which to build value for prospective members. They humanize the organization, provide benefits the audience can relate to easily, and put a face to the issue of keeping members involved and active. Your research data sets showing the biggest challenges members or customers face are the key to crafting solid testimonials that answer these challenges. You can use the top 3-5 problem areas the data reveals and create a series of ads or brochure pages featuring members explaining how their involvement in the organization helped them solve the problem or meet the challenge. They would be highly credible, they would show the organization at work, and they would outline very relevant benefits that would resonate with the audience to a high degree – all driven by a few questions in your phone research survey.

Use Everything Available

There are many creative approaches buried within your primary research, and there are many sources of data that can be used to augment, support and reinforce your primary data and the subsequent analysis. Member application data, tradeshow or annual meeting attendee data, industry atlases or SIC code studies published by the U.S. Department of Labor, can all shed light on your target population. There are other kinds of research as well that will generate data, including focus groups, written or e-mail surveys, web surveys, live interviews at meetings or tradeshows, and live long-form personal interviews at a research facility equipped with one way mirrors and camera equipment. All these are viable forms of information gathering, and each has their place in providing you data you can use to form a creative approach to your outreach marketing.

The key is to believe the numbers and use them in conjunction with your internal organizational knowledge to drive an effective creative strategy.

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