



# Act in Concert

## How to Soothe Friction Between Researchers and Creatives

Creative agencies and market research are not always known to work hand in hand particularly well. Researchers are accused of having no sense for creativity while creatives allegedly only want to listen to their gut feeling. **Edward Appleton** suggests how both sides can work to resolve “creative tensions” and become more productive.

**C**reatives and market researchers are not always the best of friends – researchers are accused of killing good ideas, using standardised but insensitive approaches and methodologies. “Great ideas simply can’t be researched”, is a common assertion as they are too original, and that they break with existing thought patterns. The relationship may have improved over the years, but an underlying tension is often still present – both for qualitative and quantitative market research agencies. What is needed to improve the situation

so that creative work is consistently inspired by insights and doesn’t feel threatened or boxed in?

### Core Challenges

Happy Thinking People works constantly with many of the world’s top creative, design and innovation agencies. We’ve come to see the core challenges as follows:

- Creative and insights worlds are very different and work according to their very own rules. Respecting those roles and rules helps boost creative outputs immensely.
- Research sometimes reflects an over-rationalised view of what consumers really think and feel deep-down. We need to facilitate differently – with an edge.

### Respect and Inspire

Co-creation, innovation, concept optimisation, concept writing workshops – Happy Thinking People has worked on all sorts of different “creative” projects globally. It leads us to two observations on how creatives and researchers can work well together. Firstly: creative and research processes are two very different disciplines, with their own set of rules and ways of working. Confusing the two is counterproductive. When creatives try to be researchers and vice-versa, problems arise. So our mandate is to understand as well as respect the way your “meaningful other” works and feed into that. Secondly, research works well for creative tasks when the insight remit includes delivering conceptual clarity (rather than a shopping list of descriptive, executional pointers) – a mental map, a “creative playing field”, with a start and an end-point for a yet-to-be-told story, for example. The space in-between is where creatives have freedom to roam mentally and craft an imaginative journey – whether it’s for a communications campaign, a new service, an optimised packaging design or a totally new product. The skillset is one of conceptual framing.

### Ethnographic Inspiration

Research also serves as an empathetic orchestrator of “ethnographic inspiration”. It captures emotions, in-the-moment reactions, real life situations, the trade-offs people make, the tensions they feel, what they say and what they mean and much more. In addition, it feeds the creative machine with aha moments as well as turns of phrase or visuals that suggest metaphors. The Happy People Thinking insights folk are a mixed bunch of ethnographers, semioticians, cultural specialists and act as creative Insight Consultants, working collaboratively with various types of creatives. In the end, the output corresponds 100 percent to what we felt and witnessed ourselves when leading insight work.

### Facilitating With Edge

Getting the best out of any creative research project requires re-thinking the way facilitators or researchers “manage” innovation and concept workshops or ideation sessions. That means ditching the analytically neutral hat and getting involved. Consumers are no longer the passive creatures they perhaps once were. More and more they understand the “marketing game” and become experts in decoding. In many research situations, they also engage in over-rational responses which can be misleading and for a creative vaguely de-

pressing. Getting to participant responses that are immediate, unreflected and more “System 1”, if you will, requires a different, involving and “edgy” approach. Sessions need to move along constantly, be task-infused and time-boxed. Gamification techniques need to be used, if possible involving all the senses, with people working in groups of small teams. Participants ought to be positively distracted by doing things, always moving onto the next task or topic, for example – so that their thinking patterns are working a little bit more naturally and their reactions are unfiltered.

We have a range of techniques aiming to get people to switch off their “rational responses”. These techniques encourage them to say things that they may not themselves fully understand and that don’t make them feel ashamed about expressing feelings or thoughts that at first glance don’t have a strong logic. Stop making sense, if you like.

The facilitator’s job is to make compelling but inspiring sense of what people mean behind what they say, or do, without needlessly engaging in laddering exercises, or developing complex output narratives tapping into so-called archaic structures.

### Uncover Connections

The “answer” is often to be found in “surface details” – be it a phrase, a look on someone’s face, or laughter that comes unexpectedly. Probing of course makes sense to uncover hidden connections in people’s reactions. For example: if a certain colour in a print ad mock up irritates, a blue, or a print ad rough is criticised harshly on a layout point – probe to see if it’s actually the overall tonality that has got people’s heckles up, which may be perceived as arrogant or patronising.

At the end of the day, creatives and researchers that respect each other’s worlds with their own set of rules harmonise best and spark more insight-inspired innovations. Research facilitators and moderators that understand the dynamism and openness of sessions, that get involved themselves, and embrace pace and fluidity are likely to access the diverse gut-felt reactions that are so powerful in any creative development exercise. ■

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