

Getting to heart of market research

Professor finds surveys less useful than a long talk

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Where Torsten Ringberg is concerned, the key to marketing angle grinders and reciprocating saws to bricklayers or carpenters isn't muscle. It's feelings.

Inside those muscular chests, it seems, beat hearts yearning to be understood.

And if a company wants to figure out how best to handle complaints, a good way to start is to ask a dozen or so customers to talk about pictures symbolizing their problems.

When it comes to analyzing consumer behavior, Ringberg looks more to Freud than to focus groups. To truly understand customers, he believes, you have to put them on the couch.

Soft-spoken and Danish-born, Ringberg came by way of Hawaii and Pennsylvania to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he is an assistant professor of marketing.

There, he's helping stretch the boundaries of market research with methods that veer toward psychoanalysis. In some cases, researchers such as Ringberg believe, two-hour interviews with a handful of consumers yield more insight than opinion surveys of hundreds.

"People would like to be listened to much more than they are," Ringberg said.

And he sees that extended listening as a path to learning how consumers really feel – not how they say they feel.

Take the case of Milwaukee Electric Tool Corp.

A few years back, Ringberg said, the Brookfield-based maker of top-end power tools for professional tradespeople was experiencing declining customer retention and couldn't figure out why. Surveys showed customers liked the tools just fine, he said.

Enter Ringberg, and something called the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, affectionally known among motivational researchers as ZMET.

ZMET is a patented process developed by Harvard Business School emeritus professor Gerald Zaltman, whose consulting firm, Olson Zaltman Associates, has worked for such consumer giants as Procter & Gamble Co., Coca-Cola Co. and Motorola Inc.

Ringberg studied for his doctoral degree under Zaltman's founding partner, Jerry Olson, at Pennsylvania State University.

Using a ZMET-inspired approach, Ringberg and a colleague arranged interviews with 20 tradesmen – carpenters, electricians and others – for two hours each. Beforehand, each was asked to write down several feelings that came to mind about his work and bring in pictures representing those feelings.

Then the interviewers followed a rigorous format that includes repeatedly asking "Why?" like a persistent 6-year-old.

The results, said Joseph S. Smith, then vice president of marketing for Milwaukee, were surprising.

"We thought these were machismo guys – men's men," he said. "We didn't think they were the kind who would spill their guts on 'Oprah.' "

Wrong. The tradesmen proved to be unexpectedly talkative.

"Some of the things that were noteworthy were how proud they were of their profession, how proud they were of the work they did," Smith said. "These people felt that society did not value them and their trade, their skills, as much as it did the technical and white-collar professions. They felt they were looked down upon."

Including, some thought, by Milwaukee Electric Tool. Like other power tool companies, said Smith, who now works for Milwaukee competitor Bosch, the firm's marketing tended to portray the tradesman as "a big, burly, mean guy with biceps who looked threatening."

"They thought that was condescending," Smith said. "Some of them actually said 'I'm offended by that.' "

In fact, what Ringberg found was that the tradesmen greatly valued the analytical, critical-thinking aspect of their jobs and loved to keep learning.

The upshot: Milwaukee Electric Tool launched a marketing campaign emphasizing "respect for tradesmen," said Bret Stasiak, vice president of relationship marketing for BVK, then Milwaukee's advertising agency.

It's hard to say how that played out. About a year later, Smith said, Milwaukee Electric Tool went up for sale, and the leadership has changed. Current executives declined to be interviewed.

'Respect' message

Smith and Stasiak said the "respect" message was well received. When a video presentation containing the essence of the campaign was unveiled at an internal trade show, "people literally broke out and started to applaud," Stasiak said.

With the work of such people as Zaltman, Olson and transplanted Frenchman Clotaire Rapaille, who claims 50 of the Fortune 100 companies as clients for his method of tapping the "reptilian" parts of consumers' brains, efforts by marketers to probe the subconscious appear to be enjoying resurgence.

The approach was in vogue in the 1950s, then yielded to quantitative research. But over the last 10 or 15 years, the psychoanalytical model has been attracting attention.

"There's a huge amount of interest in new market research techniques . . . trying to uncover the motivation behind people's

actions," said Tim Calkins, clinical professor of marketing at Northwestern University.

One of his Northwestern colleagues, Bob Schieffer, a former market research director for Abbott Laboratories, said his students are amazed at how much they learn with ZMET and other qualitative techniques.

Schieffer likes to use such deep-probing methods, then apply the findings to help construct meaningful surveys. He believes much behavior is based on unconscious drives that opinion research alone can't capture.

"You can't measure what you can't understand," he said.

Count Ringberg among those who believe in digging beneath the rational, initial response in search of the truth. He also has led a group that used ZMET in long interviews with dissatisfied customers to explore how companies should best deal with them.

Ringberg concluded that companies should tailor their responses based on which of three basic groups the customer fell into: "relational" consumers, who value an emotional tie to the company; pugnacious "oppositionals," who want to fight; or pragmatic "utilitarians," who see their dealings with the firm as strictly business.

The results were published last summer in the Journal of Marketing.

As with Milwaukee Electric Tool, Ringberg and his colleagues interviewed a relative handful of people – just 24. But the methods are so effective, he said, that researchers don't need the hundreds or thousands polled in typical opinion surveys.

"What we're tapping into is a cultural fabric that is shared by many people," Ringberg said.