

BIG Conference Report – 2010

Back to Black? Prospects for B2B Research

The BIG Summer Party and Conference Awards 2010 was held on Thursday 15th July in the library of the Royal Institution of Great Britain, home of some of the world's greatest scientific and research books. More than 80 people turned out to see the winners presented with their awards. The three winners were James Keeling of BPRI (best newcomer), Allan Hyde of ORB (best content), and Neil McPhee of Nuance Research Ltd (best presentation). Unfortunately Neil was en route to Chicago when the presentations took place.

New Ways of Working - keynote address

The great thing about the BIG conference is that by the time the first session of the conference opens the majority of the delegates have been together for at least half a day. We had already had the golf tournament, welcome drinks, dinner and after dinner entertainment, and were now ready for some serious engagement.

We were not disappointed by Rohit Talwar, global futurist and founder of Fast Forward Research, who was introduced by the Conference Chair, Pene Healey. After he had cautioned us that "the future may not be like the past" he went on to explain this seemingly banal statement by illustrating that up to just a few years ago business planning was very much based on old assumptions. The main areas he picked out as not conforming to the old ways were:

- Total sustainability
- Business Models
- Emerging markets

On the first issue he explained that the companies which are going to do best in the future are either guaranteeing their stocks of consumables now or looking for alternatives. He pointed out that China is currently ensuring their oil prices from Africa for the next 20 years.

On business models he says his motto is "free or fantastic" and illustrated this with reference to music companies; their revenue stream has changed out of all recognition in the last 10 years. How does the music industry now make money?

Most interesting of all he gave us a breakdown on the power shift from the emerged to the emerging markets. Apparently at the most recent meeting of the G15 the Chinese premier sent a secretary to attend meetings on his behalf - not a diplomatic secretary, an actual secretary. The emerging economies also have more than their fair share of what hope there is in the world; Rohit categorized attitudes in the West as despairing and all about things we want to get away from, whereas in the developing world they are building infrastructure and education and hope.

Another rabbit out of the future hat was the changes we could expect to how we would live our lives in just a few years. Scientists predict that anyone currently under 50 has a 90% chance of living to be 100 and this is going to mean a huge redefinition of life and what it means to be human. Some of the predicted elements in this new life are:

- Augmented reality – we will all walk around wearing our “Google goggles” which will elucidate everything with which we make contact
- Fully mapped personal genomes – no nasty surprises somewhere down the line
- Body Area Network – miniature devices which monitor our bodies at all times and wake us up and then call an ambulance if we are having a heart attack
- Life Logging – does what it says on the tin

Your correspondent's personal un-favourite consequence of everyone living a lot longer is the prospect of the five generation office. If, like me you sometimes find the three generation office that bit too demanding - think on.

While we are coming to terms with the changes in our office space, Rohit entertained us with a variety of future job titles which we might have while working there among which were: Body part maker; Nano medic; Virtual lawyer; Social networking worker and, my personal favourite, Memory augmentation surgeon (at least I think that was it).

The questions companies now have to ask themselves are:

- Are we sticky or are we magnetic? (although apparently it is possible to be both)
- How networked are we?
- How do we cope with the blurring of the line between research and lead generation?
- What is the difference between thought leadership and word of mouth?
- Do we have the models and tools for the new measurements?

Rohit's talk was just what one would hope for from a futurist; ideas we had seen a little of expanded and extrapolated and some real blue-sky thinking about things we hadn't even contemplated. A great start to the conference.

You can subscribe to Rohit's newsletter at www.fastfuture.com

Responding to a recession

Recessions are times when it's easier to make changes. In good times we all carry on doing whatever worked before – recessions make us think more, we have to be sharper and smarter and evolve our ways of working. The three papers in this session were case studies in how we can make a success of change.

The first paper entitled 'New ways of working, Better ways of understanding' was presented by Cathy Bickham, BT Business, Alex Johnson, Jigsaw Research, and Duncan Fergusson, ICM Research, and described a 2009 project called Business Themes, designed to identify and communicate across BT Business:

- Business issues and priority needs for UK SMEs
- Customers' needs from their IT and Comms Suppliers
- 'Hot Buttons' to use in messaging in customers' language

The challenges were to generate a new perspective and insights, and grasp and articulate the very rapid recent changes in the UK business environment, whilst retaining continuity and familiarity (this was the third wave of an annual project).

The written paper describes all the processes, and gives hints and tips on how to make such a collaborative effort work, (such as leaving your ego at the door), but a key learning was that working together was both efficient and generated better insights more quickly. Though there were certain references to bonding through alcohol (which seems somehow to help the process), it was clear that the collaboration had brought out the best in all parties, and BT had achieved a very successful outcome which was being used in many ways across the business.

The second paper was also about collaboration between an agency and client – but with a very different objective – to ‘nurse’ a Financial Services multi-client study through the recession and the turmoil in the Financial Services Industry (merging of clients is not good news for a multi-client survey!). The paper was presented by Mark Long, BDRC Continental, and Debbie Johnson, Nationwide. It was entitled ‘Syndicated Surveys’ – Survival of the Fittest in Troubled Times’ and demonstrated how, by really working together, it was possible to keep alive the valuable ‘Project Mercury’ which measures and diagnoses the standing of mortgage lenders amongst intermediaries. So important was this survey to Nationwide that they helped with the marketing and even personally recommended to colleagues in other institutions that they should subscribe! But the key element in the mix was flexibility from both sides: BDRC was flexible on pricing, and Nationwide was flexible on design, sample size and reporting. A true partnership approach that is rarely encountered these days – but one which is more likely to increase the number of multi-client studies – which surely are an efficient product, both in terms of scarce respondent time, and client budget resources.

The third paper was about another area that we neglect at our peril during a recession: R&D or ‘Research-on-Research’, as our American colleagues call it. There are lots of new technologies and opportunities around, but we need to understand how new approaches can work in a real research context. The paper was entitled ‘Thought In – Thought Out: a Co-created experiment’ and was presented by Scott Dodgson of SKOPOS. Scott has a skill-set that we need more of in our industry: he understands how people interact with the digital space – he’s one of those rare people who have managed to translate a boyhood interest in technology and its applications into a successful career. His paper described an empirical experiment (both qual and quant) to evaluate and recommend the continued and improved future use of LinkedIn as a complementary tool/channel for B2B research and possibly co-created insight.

And, with a good many ‘sturdy’ caveats, the conclusions were that LinkedIn is a useful vehicle (but probably shouldn’t be used as the only vehicle), Co-creation needs both strong appealing moderation and engaged participation, and that LinkedIn discussions can be very useful for qualitative insight generation. The object was to answer the question: what is cutting edge research? and the analysis provided the response that the (best) combination of individuals, procedure, scrutiny and tools is what delivers cutting-edge research.

In the question session after the presentations, Ray Poynter challenged the speakers by pointing out that what they had presented was ‘incremental’ innovation rather

than true 'breakthrough' innovation. They agreed. The client-side presenters in particular emphasised that their clients could be nervous about something that was not tried and tested. In fact everyone agreed that the industry needs to work on both incremental and real blue-sky innovation. Recessions certainly stimulate the incremental part – we hope that real investment is also being made in new market research products and services for the next decade.

Emerging from the storm

- Recession is the mother of reinvention
Sarah Goodson, Accenture and Vikki James, BPRI
- B2B sans frontières – the business environment in post-conflict Iraq
Allan Hyde, The Opinion Research Business Ltd

Well, I suppose any session which includes the promise of an iPad and a guided tour of research in a War Zone must be high on the list of memories from this Conference!

Sarah Goodson and Vikki James opened the pair of papers with a review of several case histories ranging from Google to Telecoms, pointing out along the way that many now very successful brands/companies had started in previous recessions, not least of all the now ubiquitous iPod, and they argued that research had a fundamental role to play in the process by filling in some gaps between the known and the unknown. How would people behave in recessionary times? How can companies/brands remain relevant to what their customers want/think/believe?

Their review covered three essential stages, Transition, bridging the move from the old to the new; Evolution, moving into new but still based on improvements to the "now", and thence onto Revolution, with attendant "big risks" but "big rewards". They then went on to explore the opportunities for research providers of offering Analytics, access to/information about Emerging markets and finally, New Technology.

The cases were persuasive, but having entered the research market in the early 1970s, started my first business in the early 1980s and having traded through every recession since 1972, I must say I found their optimism as regards companies' and agencies' forward thinking a little isolated.

My own experience is that in recessionary times the majority of suppliers and providers tend towards the no-risk approach and it is only the brave minority who strike out for something with risk attached to it.

However, maybe this is the point: when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Research and Marketing Darwinism at work here? Survival of the fittest? Well, there is no doubt that their argument found some solid support among the audience, and that the argument should be true, but the real interest came when Vikki did a stage-front demo of the iPad, and in spite of the fact that no-one beyond the front couple of rows could see the screen (I was in the front row!), it is a mark of the power of a brand/brand scarcity (the iPad not having been released in the UK at the time), the audience's interest was tangible.

We then moved onto Allan Hyde's paper on research in war-torn ("post conflict") Iraq. Allan's argument, to simplify, was:

- We should be grateful for our blessings
- Projects in our typical markets, while they may cause us grief, are never going to be of the challenge level of working in an environment where basic market structures are absent and death is a real possibility!
- The variability of market characteristics and drivers are extremely variable, and thus I assume we should be more wide ranging in our thinking and less rigid.

Definitely a case of "you have never had it so good", or at least comparatively. I guess the audience was most enthralled by the reality of the danger within the case he presented covering the Business Attitude survey and the absence of some familiar basic facilities (sample frames, access to respondents, electricity et al).

In all, a message of if we can do it there, we can do it anywhere!

Newcomers – why it's great to be in B2B research in 2010

Have you ever wondered how the recession and the industry are viewed by those just starting out in their market research career? The first session after lunch, chaired by Sinéad Jefferies, aimed to answer this question, when for the first time three young researchers were invited to take the stage to give a 10 minute presentation on why they felt B2B research was the place to be in 2010.

First to the stage was Claire Fenner from Circle Research discussing how research can help shape a changing world. Claire discussed the greater need for accountability in a post-recession environment and highlighted how research can help clients identify the most efficient ways to spend their marketing budgets. Claire also discussed how cost consciousness has led to changes in technology and a rise in the demand for online research. With social media continuing to grow, Claire showed how this is creating new opportunities for young researchers, who are in the right place to mould and shape the future of our industry.

Next up was James Keeling from BPRI. Using Charles Darwin's theory of evolution James discussed the positive outcomes of the recession for younger researchers in an evolving business environment. With clients' budgets declining, he showed how the 'more for less' mentality of clients actually benefitted younger researchers, as they become a cost effective resource. Through increased responsibilities, James argued that the recession has given young researchers more exposure to a wider variety of projects, which in turn benefits their training and development at this crucial early stage of their career.

Rounding off the presentations in this session was Elizabeth Duffy from Acritas. With a background as a translator Elizabeth discussed the similarities of being a professional translator and a B2B researcher. Describing clients as the reader of a book written in a foreign language by respondents, Elizabeth explained how it was the job of the research agency to act as the translator, to ensure the message gets through to the client without being lost in translation. It is therefore key for research agencies to 'bridge the communication gap' between clients and respondents by using language accessible to both parties.

A longer Q&A session followed the young researchers' presentations in which numerous questions came from the floor. Some interesting ideas were discussed regarding bringing fresh blood into the industry but perhaps the most contentious issue was how to prevent seasoned researchers from suppressing the creative flair and ideas of younger members of the team. Few people in the room were left in any doubt that if these three are in any way representative, we should do as much as we can to nurture their talent and give them real opportunities to have their voices heard. If this is the future, then it's in very safe hands indeed.

The good, the bad and the ugly

Straight after the Buck's Fizz reception on Friday morning came a lively and thought provoking session.

First up was Mike Barnes – from Lloyds Banking Group - but very emphatically speaking on his own behalf rather than as a representative of Lloyds – and he shared his views on the rise of DIY research. He described the trend towards clients undertaking their own surveys as 'The longest suicide note in history'; a phrase originally used to describe Michael Foot's Labour Party manifesto.

Mike's research had uncovered that client-side research teams don't see the DIY survey software as a particular threat but their internal clients are using it extensively. It gives them speed, it's cheap and they have control. But it also gets used to bypass protocols and guidelines (with HR departments being particularly at fault here) and it's used by people who don't know how to construct questionnaires or to analyse data. The focus is on the questions rather than the objective and it ends up telling them what they already know: Garbage In Garbage Out.

Mike reminded us that the move to DIY surveys undervalues what market research wants to achieve – to move up the value chain, not to be seen as a commodity. He suggested we all need to take this threat seriously and educate our clients and internal clients, and called on the MRS and AURA to take on this fight.

Next on was Crispin Beale of Facts International with 'An Inconvenient Truth – what really goes on when you commission fieldwork'. Crispin moved fairly recently from the client side to an agency and he explained how as a client he relied on the MRS Code of Conduct and agency integrity – but also outlined an example of how he'd come across research being circulated, and decisions made, based on a sample size of three people.

Crispin discussed the issues which had 'scared the Hell' out of him when he went agency side; what he described as the seven deadly sins of fieldwork:

- Unclear objectives and the lack of proper project set up
- Who will be speaking to your customers; the need for interviewers to be brand ambassadors and appropriate to the respondent
- Do you know who is doing your interviewing? Some agencies – perfectly legally – allow their interviewers to declare themselves as self-employed to avoid National Insurance, holiday pay, sick pay etc. This gives them a competitive price advantage but they don't have any obligation to check that the interviewer even has the right to work in the UK
- Using research to sell

- Poorly written and leading questions
- Poor quality sample – out of date lists and then weighting being applied inappropriately to avoid costly interlocking quotas
- The 'black book' approach to recruitment – respondents not coming from where you think they are
- And finally, turning a blind eye – which for the sake of the industry we can't afford to do.

He finished by reminding us that self regulation is better than having regulations imposed on us.

Finally up was Neil McPhee of Nuance Research Ltd with 'Never mind the quality, feel the width!' Picking up on the theme of the previous papers he talked about the move towards low cost, simplicity, standardisation across countries and process. As a result you don't now get the depth and individuality. Neil talked about how in the past motivational research tried to find out why people did things with lots of emphasis on interpretation.

He discussed topic guides he's come across which are no longer qualitative in nature. While a 'scripted' topic guide works well for consistency and simplicity and where you can't do a face to face briefing, it delivers less insight. Complexity requires more thought so inevitably takes more time.

Neil showed us examples of ethnographic research he's undertaken with doctors, illustrating the importance of treating B2B respondents as humans rather than functions. He moved on to talk about where he saw qualitative research going in the future with some interesting new techniques.

He left us with the thought 'Just because you can talk, does not mean you can interview: it's an art form not a process'.

Three very interesting and engaging papers and a great start to the second day of conference.

Client question time

Panelists:

Lucy Cobby, HSBC

Julian Dobinson, BSkyB

Caroline van den Bos, Royal Sun Alliance

Having been warmed up by Ray Poynter, Crispin Beale and a very energetic Mike Barnes in the previous session, delegates returned to the 'Client Question Time, chaired by Trevor Wilkinson, which pretty much followed the template set by the BBC. Trevor had great pleasure in doing a David Dimbleby (it's not as easy as he makes it look) and was pleased to introduce our panel of eminent clientside researchers, Lucy Cobby, Julian Dobinson and Caroline van den Bos.

We fielded questions from the audience in four broad areas:

1. How's business: the effect of the recession on the clients' businesses and sectors
2. The impact of the economic climate on research conducted by the clients
3. How B2B agencies have responded to the clients' changing needs
4. The future: how the panelists saw the future evolving for B2B research

Unsurprisingly the recession has affected our panelists' businesses and the sectors they operate within. Having said that B SkyB has continued to go from strength to strength and financial companies such as HSBC and RSA have continued to commission research. However inevitably budgets have been affected by the economic climate and our clients did require their research agencies to be smarter, more flexible and to maximise added value.

The recent general election and the formation of a Conservative / Lib Dem coalition was felt to be significant, although it was too early to judge the effect on our panelists' business and research spend (it was noted that the election result is perhaps more likely to affect research spending by the public sector than spending by the private sector).

Our panelists reinforced the impression given elsewhere in the 2010 conference (indeed in 2009 too) that, with the advent of insight and multiple sources of market intelligence, the areas that clients are expecting agencies to help them are in the analysis and synthesis of data (there's too much data and it needs processing) and in the drawing of conclusions and business implications from that intelligence.

In this area, it was insightful to hear the panelists' answers to the question 'If the ideal B2B agency were an animal, which one would it be?' - an eagle (with its sky view of the market), a dolphin (smart, agile and able to cover a lot of areas) and a dog (loyal and close). The ideal agency is therefore a close ally, a partner, one who can take a wider view and help the client to make sense of the market.

Interestingly Julian did not necessarily distinguish between B2B researchers and consumer researchers, and was more likely to think in terms of good and bad researchers.

All in all the panelists appeared to think that B2B agencies did a good job, although there were some instances of cock-ups (an idle comment by an agency wiping millions off the share value of B SkyB was a salutary lesson). Julian did jokingly answer our 'which animal' question with 'cheetahs' with a reference to Crispin Beale's earlier warnings about dodgy practices in research fieldwork. However, agencies were broadly thought to be doing a good job, although Caroline did issue a challenge to agencies to really offer value by putting research in a wider commercial context and providing business conclusions rather than research conclusions.

Looking forward, our panelists did see a growth in the use of new research technologies and techniques, such as online research tools and possibly social media. However these are simply additional tools and were felt to be unlikely to alter the kind of added value that researchers can offer.

Unlike the BBC's version of Question Time, the panelists were in broad agreement on most issues but that didn't detract from a very informative and interesting session.

Many thanks to Lucy, Julian and Caroline for taking part and sharing their experiences and views.

A very entertaining session, then, and one that has given Trevor a renewed respect for David Dimbleby.

The BIG time machine

As we waited for the Tardis to circle and land we were given a somewhat scary view of the future with the aged faces of four 900 year-old Time Lords. Nick Coates introduced this journey on the BIG time machine which promised to give us four different perspectives on what the world of B2B research would look like in 2020. And he somehow had managed to convince his speakers that displaying their 'age warped' faces would help get us in appropriate futuristic mood!

The session started with a lively discourse from Ray Poynter, of The Future Place, who commended us on the 'post prandial perspicuity of being present for this performance' – alliteration clearly a key tool for the 2020 researcher. Ray talked us through six big themes that he feels will have an impact on what we'll be doing in 10 years time. He covered the mass-customised world, apps, disintermediation, conversations, open book systems and the wikiworkplace. The world and relationships within it are changing: Apple doesn't research the apps that appear on the iPhone, it simply created the market and consumers decide what works; rather than speaking to a selection of customers, if you have 20,000 customers, you can have an online community of all of them and let them guide you. Although many of the ideas Ray put forward are still alien to many in research, and perhaps especially in the world of B2B research, the relevance and reality of his examples gave everyone food for thought.

The next Time Lord was Sarah O'Brien from Vivid Research who wanted us to think about what we in B2B research can learn from the world of FMCG. Sarah talked about the benefits and similarities she found when working on a mix of projects at the same time – babies' dummies alongside a new insurance product. So – what can something like financial intermediary research learn from washing powder? The conventional wisdom is that finance is low interest – but is washing powder really any more interesting? Where FMCG excels is in identifying the emotional benefits. Sarah contrasted the more top down approach with Persil's journey from 'washes whiter' to leveraging more emotional benefits with 'dirt is good' – based on deep understanding of consumer benefits. The recommendation is that in future we should apply more consumer disciplines to our work in B2B – why don't we work through the brand footprint as we would for an FMCG product?

Glenn Ward specialises in in-house video production at GfK NOP. No matter how much the industry progresses, we always seem to need a reminder that well presented information can go a very long way in gaining buy-in to our insight. Glenn talked about the role videos can and will play, not only as simple vehicles for vox pops, but also to bring in an expert point of view, and at the pitch stage as well the final debrief. We were given a few simple tips in terms of visualising data and the ever-needed reminder to keep things simple. How will the work we're doing now with video and other innovations translate into the world of 2020? Glenn suggested that we may be using avatars and surrogates – will the researchers stay at home as

ever-changing innovations create clones to go out and do our jobs? Only time will tell...

Ruth McNeil concluded this gallop through the future, with the outputs from her workshop of yesterday afternoon. Ruth's perspective was to look at 'What's today that's also tomorrow'. Starting from analysing the key trends that have been shaping our industry over the last six to nine months, three big themes were identified – alliances; analysis and tools; and outside factors. In her workshop Ruth ran a synectics session, getting people to think about completely unrelated worlds, and looking at what the relevance and lessons could be for our world. Some examples of the creative thinking that came out of this: from the world of 'Circus' – we shouldn't treat our respondents as freaks; from the Red Hot Chilli Peppers world – the music industry needs to deliver music in new ways, and as Glenn had demonstrated, we need to be delivery information and insight in new and entertaining ways; and from the Church, a salutary warning to guard against an insight/process schism that could divide our industry.

Our time-travelling sages had clearly done their duty, and some lively Q&As set delegates up to discuss things further over the final tea-break of the conference.

In the spotlight

The last session of the conference was an 'In the Spotlight' interview with Fiona Wood, Head of Research and Insight at the Central Office of Information (COI). With a 2009 spend of c£29m from across government departments and the public sector; Fiona has arguably one of the largest client-side jobs in the Industry. Fiona was interviewed by Phyllis Macfarlane.

Earlier in the conference we'd discussed the qualities that good market researchers should possess – how we need to broaden our skill-base beyond craft MR practice, and that we need both generalists and specialists. It was interesting therefore to establish that Fiona had: firstly, a solid grounding in the market research business, secondly, that she had spent several years working in non-research jobs in the Charities Sector, Arts Administration and Higher Education (in Marketing and Development roles), and, thirdly, that she had an MBA. A good role-model for young researchers to emulate!

Fiona explained the structure of her team at COI and the system they use to select agencies, and in particular that all COI's procurement processes are compliant with EU purchasing legislation. In fact their work is so varied that they use over 100 agencies in total, across a wide range of specialisms. Naturally the list includes many small and medium sized agencies.

On the subject of B2B research and whether it is viewed as different from B2C by COI, her response was that she personally wasn't sure that it was a standalone specialism for researchers – at COI they often work on programmes that include both B2B and B2C, but they do recognise the need for experienced researchers and (usually) specialist interviewers because of the complexity of issues, expertise of respondents and potential issues around database management and information security.

For the COI, B2B is quite widely defined, including audiences like teachers, social workers, medical staff and front-line workers – researchers and interviewers need to understand who they are dealing with and what the issues are for them. In the last financial year, B2B accounted for 20% of research spend through COI.

Phyllis noted that she quite often saw interesting papers at conferences like ESOMAR and the MRS, which demonstrate that the COI is very open to new methods and techniques to tackle difficult and sensitive research issues – did Fiona see COI as having a leadership role in research methodology generally? Fiona's response was, yes, she has a team of talented and motivated researchers working on some of the most challenging and fascinating research done in the UK, she feels they have led the way on public engagement and behaviour change – and there's more to come. But she noted that they couldn't do any of it without their suppliers, COI researchers like to work and learn with their agencies so that they inspire each other to greater things.

On the subject of online research and the use of social media for research purposes her view was that online techniques are a handy addition to the toolbox, but not the solution to everything, and many come with disadvantages of their own. And she pointed out that government has a duty to be inclusive, and not all of our business audiences are online, or have regular access to a personal computer at work (sole traders, some front line staff etc.).

She couldn't comment on what will happen in the future – we will have to wait and see!

And her final point: when asked what advice would she give the audience both personally and as businesses, she responded: love what you do – your passion will take you to all sorts of places and translate into rich insights for your clients. And for businesses wishing to work with COI – be patient. It takes time to go through the processes, but in the end it is worth it because they do some of the most interesting work there is in the UK.

And so we ended the conference on an optimistic note – yes, the MR Industry needs to change, but we are confident that we can, and will, change, and will emerge all the stronger in the decade to come.

Workshops

The busy exec's guide to Social Media – Ray Poynter

This was a very enjoyable session from Ray who, in my view, is unique in the research world because he sports a beard yet is still fully conversant in the dark arts of social media. Ray is very much at the vanguard of the campaign to drag market research, and especially B2B research, kicking and screaming into the modern age, and his expertise in social media very much reflects this.

So to help the audience with his guide to social media Ray provided us with his 1-10 scale. Where 1 graded the social media application as a must have, even for the busiest exec, and 10 ranked as only for those with both an interest in social media and time to spare.

What was particularly enjoyable throughout the workshop was Ray's ability to jump out of his presentation to give us live online demonstrations of any issues that arose. This was especially useful when we were discussing the micro blogging site Twitter. Ray was more than happy to go off-piste where necessary answering any specific social media questions.

Ray started with YouTube and showed that despite its recent rise in popularity, video blogging is still difficult to do well. He then moved onto Blogs (which he readily admitted were difficult to maintain). And he mentioned a number of blog search tools such as Technorati; and blog trend and keyword monitoring tools such as blog scope and blog pulse. These, along with commercial blog monitoring tools and services like Buzz metrics and cymfony, all scored poorly on Ray's Busy exec scale. Google alerts also scored poorly and I have to agree on this one. Although the principle is good in that you can set up automatic searches on particular subjects and get these searches pushed to your inbox, having the time to review all the email notifications is another matter all together.

Ray moved on to Twitter and attempted to de-mystify this phenomenon to the audience. The number of quizzical expressions in the room showed that this wasn't going to be an easy task. Using his own Twitter account, Ray demonstrated Twitter searching and Twitter monitoring. He also introduced the concept of hashtags using the BIG conference hashtag of #BIG2010. For the uninitiated a hashtag is a convenient way of categorising and indexing tweets to make them easier to search on. Other useful hashtags for market researchers are #Mr #marketresearch and #MWL2010 (Marketing Week Live and the Insight Show). Ray gave Twitter monitoring tools such as Tweetdeck a high importance score and I couldn't agree more. Tweetdeck allows you to keep track of hashtags, other users, people who mention you, search terms, and generally helps to filter the important and relevant from the banal.

Facebook was the one social media tool that I felt needed more explanation. Ray gave this the highest score as the most important tool, yet he failed - in my view - to clearly describe why. Although he did express his views on the more frivolous uses of Facebook, such as Farmville, mafia wars and Foursquare, which all scored 99 out of 10 on the importance scale. The final social media tool covered was business networking site, LinkedIn, which again scored well in terms of importance.

To wrap up Ray discussed the importance of smart phones as a means of accessing, contributing and consuming social media. The iPhone came out on top, due in the main to the large variety of applications (or apps) available.

Overall the session was pitched at the right level with useful information for both Social Media virgins and seasoned campaigners. Ray's final thought will be music to the ears of women everywhere when he said that one of the biggest benefits of the social media revolution is that it is finally teaching men how to multi-task.

Synectics – Ruth McNeil

Predicting the future's a subtle art. Having heard Rohit Talwar's predictions for the future (from 1,000 year old humans to vertical farming) Ruth McNeil's excellent synectics workshop provided 15 delegates with practical techniques for trend exploration by asking the question 'what's today that's also tomorrow?'.
(Note: The original text contains a typo 'final' which has been corrected to 'finally' for better readability.)

Synectics, as Ruth reminded us, is a creative technique originating in the 1950s that helps discover solutions to problems by focusing on metaphorical processes. In this case what this meant was plunging our hands into Ruth's casket of mysteries (a paper bag) and pulling out a metaphorical prompt (card). Our cards contained 'worlds' that were to function as analogies. The idea was, firstly, to talk to a partner about the world in question – anything from Aborigines, to the Circus, or Lastminute.com – and identify the challenges associated with that world.

Next we were asked to consider its future. These ideas were to provide our tools for unlocking the future of research. In our case, a discussion about cages led us to ponder the ethics of keeping animals in captivity and the challenges for the Circus as a form of entertainment in evolving from Victorian Sideshows to 21st Century art form. We ended up reflecting on the role of the respondent and whether or not captivity wasn't quite an apt analogy for how we tend to involve consumers in our world. We then found ourselves meandering down a rather picturesque side street inspired by the Sultan's Elephant show that took to the streets of London a few years ago, and wondering whether a more 'street show' form of research mightn't be an interesting way of rethinking respondent engagement.

Anyone familiar with this kind of technique will know that the benefits tend to derive from externalising the problem and finding a new way in. By exploring what comes out we discover unexpected perspectives, new ideas and reminders of existing ideas possibly forgotten. But we also need sustenance. At this point Ruth introduced a second input, namely six months of MrWeb articles, which she had neatly summarised into themes. Much of the subject matter was familiar, but it was salutary to remember how diverse and how innovative our industry is at present, with discussions about neuroscience brushing up against the new collaborative approaches of co-creation and open innovation. The themes also highlighted some of the threats currently under discussion in the research community: DIY, quality, loyalty card databases, analytics and so on.

We discussed these and other themes, inspired by our 'other worlds' and generated a number of future-focused platforms, including: changing the status of respondents, communicating insight, sharing success by moving towards outcome-related fees, new technologies (eg mobile) and a whole host of others. Ruth then went on to present the session themes in the Friday BIG Time Machine, thus setting a conference record for the speediest conference presentation turnaround.

For anyone wanting to explore different ways of freeing up the brainstorming process, synectics is well worth looking into. Ruth was only able to offer us a glimpse of the technique, but it certainly got the creative juices flowing and led us down a few unexpected pathways.