

BIG Conference 2011, Revolution or Evolution? - Summary

Thursday 12th May

The 2011 conference started off with gusto. Held for the first time this year at the Belfry in the Midlands, the large conference room provided a good backdrop for some excellent sessions.

The themes of the day were what we can learn from marketing, the future, and how to engage people in what we do; all very different, with **papers** interspersed with liberal refreshment breaks. But the papers were not the only thing that drew in the audience, for the first time there was an entertaining B2B style **"Family Fortunes"**, as well as the tried and trusted recipe of three **afternoon training sessions** for delegates to choose from.

The **keynote session** this year was given by Patrick Barwise, acclaimed author (we were reminded of this!) and emeritus professor of management and marketing at the London Business School. His speech focused on how to achieve long term organic profit growth through customer focus and innovation which is the topic of his latest book *'Beyond the Familiar'*. Patrick was introduced by Pene Healey, chair of BIG Conference.



The holy grail of sustained profit growth is exceedingly difficult to achieve, particularly in today's uncertain climate, and Patrick emphasized that there was no magic silver bullet. *'Beyond the Familiar'* offers a practical framework to master the challenge of achieving long term organic profit by building strong brands, based on actionable customer insights flowing freely through the business and ultimately leading to consistently great customer solutions and experiences.

He debunked the marketing myths that uniqueness and differentiation are everything and stressed the importance of delivering on promises, building on trust, relentless incremental improvement and an open organisational structure. Tide, Aggreko and Apple were cited as good examples of the former, and GM as an organisation that had not "listened" - and suffered the consequences.

His suggestions were not only valuable to those running their own businesses but held out great opportunities for the research industry and B2B research.

The first "papers" session chaired by Rebecca Candy gave us a glimpse of the future with **'Industry – the shape of things to come'**. Three speakers presented very different papers, but all giving us useful insight (if via different routes) of how our future might look.

Trevor Wilkinson's paper looked at the B2B market, past, present and future, synthesising information and coming to the conclusion that our market is around 10% of the total (ie worth around £200 million). He was broadly optimistic about our future, even if industry forecasts B2B is likely to grow at slightly lower rates than the research market in general. He ended with the quote "There are reasons to be cheerful"- let's hope he's right!

Richard Hepburn took a quirky turn at first, our interest whetted by pictures of wharfs and containers; somehow linking it in to today's supply chain management. We were lyrically swept up from the docks "heartbeat of industrial economies" to post containerisation, and the creation of sophisticated logistics, a commoditised industry with professional operators. This in part is how he sees us as researchers moving too, with us on a *"parallel track"* with industry consolidation and increasingly end to end processes. Richard suggested we read up (Simon Chadwick, Robert Moran) and reconsider our business model and profit formula – the IKEA-isation of research? This vision was far less apocalyptic and far more intriguing than it sounds!

The next speaker, James Sweatman of BPRI, (at the time on secondment to Accenture) also took lessons from history. After maps of colonisation, he considered the rise of the East (Mongolia likely to have a far bigger GDP rise than anywhere in Europe) and the impact of universal accessibility and user driven content – the *"Always On"* society. James thinks that predictive tools will become ever more important in today's world and finished with the immortal quote by Henry Ford: *"Business is*

never so healthy as when, like a chicken, it must do a certain amount of scratching around for what it gets”.

It looks as if our future is going to be more based on business models, more client focused, more collaborative – but that of course, looking back in history and drawing analogies with other times, other sectors and other “worlds” may be our best way of predicting what might happen to us.

The morning finished with a change of pace and style. We shifted from the highbrow to the middle brow, with Sinéad Jefferies pitting a client side panel (thank you AURA) against an agency panel in an engaging game of Family Fortunes.

The game was based on research findings from a MASSIVE survey (34 responses) completed just a few weeks ago asking questions such as “name the most important skill for a researcher” or “name the worst thing about the research industry”. The agencies won by a “significant” margin (one of the most hated words) but Danny Russell of Sky, Richard Drury of Boots Opticians and Harri Mirpuri of Which all gave such good value with Bob Quareshi, Crispin Beale and Philip Dunn, that the audience enjoyed it as much as the contestants.

There was some serious stuff embedded in the less serious however – we learnt that Curiosity is seen as the most important attribute, that bad questionnaires are seen as the worst thing about the research industry and the most important attribute for an agency is having “people you trust” So there we are – we all have lots to learn but often the teams got near to the right answer if not spot on; and the Q&A session that followed Family Fortunes was as interesting as the session itself.

After lunch in the restaurant, the next main theme was participation, how to engage people in what we do. Lucy Davison chaired the session, each speaker coming up with very different examples of work that they had done to illustrate how respondents had been engaged in the process and motivated to take part.

Mark Ursell of Tpoll Market Intelligence demonstrated how surveying at critical times (new service sign up, event based, life stage journey etc), can monitor the success of customer relationship marketing (crm) and e crm. He used work with Dyson as a case study to show how they could prove that it is vital to intersperse “information” emails to customers along with “cross selling emails”. Too many salesy ones erode the relationship with the brand.

A very different paper by Yasha Estraiikh of Opinion Leader took us through an engaging case study, a project commissioned by Business in the Community (BiTC) to understand the importance of work experience to young people and use the findings to encourage, in parallel, business leaders to “hear them” and pledge to provide more work experience. The way they engaged their dual audience of young people and the business leaders themselves was very different – music, rap and the draw of being able to meet C suite leaders for the young, and profile, the ability to meet young people and be seen to help, as the draw for the business community. The novel format described, the parallel session, with its buzz, enthusiasm and commitment to action had us all clapping.

The final Thursday paper was given by Oliver Rowe of YouGovStone, a think tank panel of “*city and country*” influencers. Oliver described the 500 depth interviews and 500 online interviews undertaken to provide a benchmarking of fourteen cities in their capacity as financial centres. Fitting in with the theme of the overall session, he talked of how they did have to incentivise to get the numbers needed, using a number of different routes including cash or charity donations as incentives, a considerable dose of flattery, an appeal to their “loyalty” and lastly appealing to their self –interest by suggesting that by participating, respondents were influencing something they cared about.

So engagement has many different faces depending on the nature of the research being done, the audience, time and place. Despite common themes, we learnt different things from each speaker, which is how it should be.

The afternoon ended with the alternative training workshops. These were given by Steve Wills (Customer Insight Solutions) on ‘**the business brain**’; Nick Thomas (MrWeb) with a Jobs forum on how to write copy that draws in recruits, and an old favourite, Ray Poynter (The Future Place) on ‘**listening is the new asking**’.

After all this intellectual powerhouse, tennis, drinks and the conference dinner provided a welcome counterpoint.

Friday 13th May

The BIG Conference Committee is not known for its lack of confidence, and it didn't shy away from the challenge of organizing a stimulating morning after the late night before.

The first session was the real meat of the conference - real life research problems and how to address them. The session was entitled '*How Research is Changing Businesses*' and featured Dr Susan Prendergast of Insitas, Caroline Van Den Bos of Royal Sun Alliance, Tony Smith of Synovate and (the always reliable) Jonathan Fletcher of Illuminas.

Jonathan kicked off with the use of cultural mapping in B2B decision-making. This offered fascinating insights on cultural variations in business behaviour. He explained about how both corporate structures and decision-making processes varied by the importance of family, the level of trust and cultural dynamism in the society and whether the culture is 'high' or 'low context'. Using these four parameters he was able to pigeonhole virtually every industrialized society as to how their organizations behave. Except, of course, the French, who in his estimation are unclassifiable.

Susan Prendergast then gave us a case study of work she had carried out for Wells Fargo bank, which needed to increase customer satisfaction but wouldn't allocate resources to the project ahead of more commercial concerns. The key for the researchers was to make a "*very hard financial case*" by calculating the ROI on increasing Customer Lifetime Value. To do this they used a form of Net Promoter Score (NPS). Once the NPS was no longer seen as a 'soft' metric they won their case for funding.

At Wells Fargo internal buy-in was crucial to the project. This was also the case at Royal Sun Alliance (RSA) which engaged Synovate on a customer engagement exercise. New management required new metrics and dashboards but there was a huge amount of work to be done. Both Caroline Van Den Bos and Tony Smith managed to convey the very real pain points for both client and agency. Since it was virtually impossible to estimate a fair price the two companies contracted a 'shared risk model' which required both organizations to be totally frank about their costs. They also emphasised the importance of involving procurement in the process.

There was a huge amount of information to take away from this session, but one useful summary point was: "*When doing quant keep an eye on the qual and when doing qual keep an eye on the quant*".

Two interludes of light relief followed. The first, '*The Millennials Do B2B*', a sinecure for Ray Poynter of The Future Place who had managed to get himself the gig of chairing a panel session of young researchers about how B2B research could benefit from engaging with social media. The participants were so engaged themselves that the lively session ran on wheels. The second was another of the 'borrowed from TV' formats. '*The Highs and Lows of Research and insight*' had been planned as a 'Grumpy Old Researchers' session to include Neil McPhee of Nuance Research, Derek Farr of Critical Research and Phyllis Macfarlane of GfK NOP. However one of the grumpy number (McPhee) had been taken ill and the session felt a bit lopsided for want of him. The others did cover gamely for him with Macfarlane playing the straight man to Farr's gagster.



Mark Thomson



The missing Neil McPhee!



The Millennials

Phyllis also chaired the last session of the day, a keynote presentation from Mark Thomson, Media Director at Royal Mail. Mark gave a bravura performance for a man that most of the audience thought was in a dying trade. Apparently Royal Mail has never been healthier. Thomson pointed out that spending money on direct mail has a better *"cut through"* and that *"as volumes have gone down, response rates have gone up"*. He said mail was all about the *"sensory appeal"* of getting something in the post. He had some good examples: a personalized chocolate letter, a mail shot from Rolls Royce written on the fine sandpaper they use for the last polish of the car and his own business cards which smelled of strawberries and had pink fluffy material on one side. He also mentioned payment by results as a good way of incentivizing a direct marketing company.

The final session broke up with several of the delegates who had stayed for it attempting to get their hands on Thomson's business cards. No curse of Friday the 13th for him and a big hit for the BIG Conference.