Research excellence

The trouble with tracking

On the wrong track: Today's tracking surveys ask the wrong questions - and they ask far too many of them!

The purpose of tracking is to provide marketers with information that can be used to increase profitable sales in a sustainable way. The problem with many of today's tracking programmes is that they are not set up to deliver this.

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What is tracking?

Brand tracking, in our industry, is a generic term for the collection and analysis of time-series data that are relevant to the performance of a brand in the market. Many companies actually run three or more tracking programmes, measuring communications separately to elements such as brand equity and claimed consumption.

The problem is that the big budgets set aside for these tracking surveys are failing to deliver against important client objectives: they often don't provide accurate information, they often don't provide actionable information; and when they do provide information, they often don't provide it in time.

Too long and too boring

Respondents often find tracking surveys too long and too boring. Researchers would do well to listen to their concerns, because long, boring surveys are a big part of the problem with tracking.

First of all, they contribute to slow turnaround times. Marketers need feedback about the effects of their and their competitors' marketing activity in time to take action. Faced with masses of data, researchers will not always know when something significant has happened. The greater the mass of data, the more likely that significant insights could go unnoticed. Part of the solution is to build intelligent alerts into tracking systems. Another vital element is ensuring the relevance and actionability of the data generated in the first place. Data only become information when they lead to clarity about what marketing actions to take. If you can't talk about the marketing implications of a particular data-point, then you shouldn't be collecting it.

Weeding out non-actionable data points and their related questions will help to cut down the length of tracking surveys. But length isn't the only issue. We've always known that people are prepared to engage in lengthy interactions as long as the survey is interesting and relevant. The bigger problem with today's trackers

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is that they are boring. To be more precise, there are too many questions that are tedious and not relevant to the way a particular respondent makes decisions. The consequences for data quality are dire.

The dangers of asking too much
In a 2008 test[1], people were asked a simple attribute association question (the most widely used method for measuring brand image) involving 10 brands and 12 attributes. A week later the same respondents were re-contacted and asked for their opinions again. The results were revealing. On average, consumers only associated half of the same attributes to the average brand second time around.

This instability is all the more frustrating when we consider that most of these attributes need not be measured in the first place. We know now that you can predict which attributes a person will apply to a brand with remarkable accuracy as long as you can identify the two or three criteria that are most relevant to that person – and you know the one or two brands that they judge best relative to those attributes[2]. Yet it's not uncommon for a typical survey to ask people about fifty or more attributes for multiple brands.

We need to own up: by forcing people to answer so many permutations of these questions, we are driving them nuts. The results are low completion rates and poor-quality responses.

One of the reasons companies have multiple trackers is that each one by itself is too long to squeeze anything else in. Shorter, more relevant surveys will have two benefits: first, they will lead to more valid data; and second, they will enable more efficient, holistic measurement and integration.

So, we can achieve some considerable improvements just by making tracking surveys shorter and less tedious. However, this will only take us so far if those shorter surveys are still asking the wrong questions.

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**The wrong questions –
and how to stop asking them**

We have always known that there's a gap between what people say in surveys and what they actually do. Thanks to contemporary science, we know the various reasons why the gap exists – and this can help us to fix it.

The first cause is the fallibility of human memory. Through most of our history, people lived in resource scarce environments. As a result we are 'cognitive misers'[3]. Memory developed mainly as an aid to taking appropriate action given a situation. It did not evolve to be encyclopaedic. Put simply, human memory is context and event-driven[4].

People retain brand information – both consciously and unconsciously – because they need it to make brand choices. Remembering the experience of a brand helps to do this, remembering exactly when a brand was last used doesn't. Absorbing brand communications – whether consciously or unconsciously – helps. Remembering when and how we were exposed to those communications doesn't. The human brain retains the relevant information effectively, and it tends not to remember the stuff that doesn't help in decision-making.

The problem is that the typical tracker is anchored in questions about when and which channel, and then uses these questions (the ones that respondents struggle to answer accurately) as the basis for its modelling. Models based on such an unreliable source are, at best, suspect.

A second problem can be termed 'The Fallibility of Conscious Introspection'. Behavioural economists are increasingly aware that people make mistakes when they allow the parts of their brain that are not good at certain tasks, to perform those tasks. There are times when thoughtful deliberation works best; at other times, instinct is what we need.

One of the problems with the classical, quantitative survey is that it asks the brain to be thoughtful and deliberative when behaviour in markets actually involves a mix of the thoughtful and the instinctive. We need to dig below the deliberative parts of the human brain if we want to uncover deeper motivations; and we need to find ways to do so in quantitative surveys.

A great example of this is the purchase intention question. This is one of the most widely used questions in typical trackers. Yet we've known for decades that at face value, answers to the question correlate poorly with what individual people actually do[5].

Behavioural economics helps us to identify two reasons for this: people make fundamentally different choices based on the context and framing of a question – and they are also fundamentally comparative. If you ask a person which brands they are likely to use in future, they will often name more than one. What matters isn't the absolute score that a brand gets on scales like 'purchase intention'. What matters is its score relative to competitors. Non-comparative modelling is a dangerous mistake for tracking surveys.

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Easy mistakes to stop making

These problems are challenging ones – and require innovative approaches to fix them (innovative approaches that TNS is already using for our clients). However, there are also a number of mistakes in many tracking surveys that researchers really shouldn't be making in the first place. These simplistic approaches to tracking include omitted variable bias - which assumes that outcomes are directly related to own-brand communications spending and ignores the many other factors involved - failure to take into account the impact of existing brand relationships in the mind of the consumer, and a failure to ask the right questions when it comes to the feelings that a brand evokes.

To explore that last problem in more detail, products become brands with appeal when they create affective memories in the part of the brain that's called the 'hippocampus'. The word 'affective' here means more than 'emotional'. It's the entire complex of feeling that a brand evokes as a result of the neural tracks that form when people see messages about it or use it. The brain uses these memories to bias choice in what's known as the 'dorsolateral prefrontal cortex'.

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Strong brand relationships form when adverts connect brands to things that people care about. Measurement should be devoted to trying to establish whether or not those affective memory traces are being created. Most communications measurement focuses too narrowly on questions about the communications, and not enough on whether or not the communications are creating relevant affective associations.

Why are these mistakes tolerated?

Why are such mistakes tolerated when the tracking surveys they undermine represent such a significant investment on the part of clients?

If there is one underlying reason it's because our industry does not care nearly enough about respondent-level validity. It's an important but often ignored truth that survey data can be valid at aggregate level and yet wrong about individual people. In other words, it is invalid at respondent level. The question 'which brands have you used in the past six months' may correlate well with market share when aggregated up; and yet correlate poorly with what individual respondents have actually bought. The reason for this is mutually compensating error – that is, for everyone who says that they used a particular brand but didn't, there's another person who says that they didn't use that brand, but did.

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The problem is this: the fact that these kinds of question have aggregate validity induces many researchers to be careless about respondent-level validity. This in turn leads to serious mistakes when these measures are used as dependent variables. We are wrong about 'who' we are talking about when we try to segment and profile people; and we're wrong about 'why' when we try to answer the question 'what motivates them?' And so we end up making mistakes about a brand's users and what drives their usage.

It doesn't have to be this way
Demanding respondent-level validity and evolving tracking surveys to deliver it plays a major role in solving the problems that undermine current programmes. Not only does it root our profiling and analysis in accurate information rather than misleading aggregates, it also involves cutting out a lot of irrelevant and non-actionable questions in the first place. When we weed

out questions with poor respondent-level validity, we often find ourselves getting rid of questions that didn't need to be asked anyway. In contrast, when we develop new questions that can deliver respondent-level validity we find ourselves better reflecting the way that consumers actually make decisions.

TNS has started a rigorous programme of testing and refining survey questions to deliver respondent-level validity. We are also leveraging mobile technology, heuristics and concepts such as gamification to find new, more relevant ways of asking questions, and ensuring that the results are available in real-time.

We will discuss these issues in-depth in future papers. Suffice it to say for now that trackers do not have to settle for expensively generated aggregate and retrospective data. There is another way – and we believe that it is incumbent on the research industry, and TNS as leaders, to deliver it.

Sources

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About TNS

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About the author

Jan Hofmeyr is TNS's leading expert on consumer behaviour, with a career spanning over 20 years advising many of the world's best-known brands. He invented Conversion Model whilst working for the Customer Equity Company (acquired by TNS in 2000), recognising a need for better quality insight on consumer motivations. In 2010, following a period of five years at Synovate, Jan returned to TNS to continue his work in this field, updating the ConversionModel methodology to cement its position as the world's leading measure of consumer commitment.

Prior to working in market research, Jan was a senior political advisor for the African National Congress during and after the first democratic elections in South Africa. He is the co-author (with Butch Rice) of Commitment Led Marketing and the author of numerous, award-winning papers on brand equity.

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