

RW Connect

Mining the Silent Evidence

TECHNIQUES & METHODOLOGIES— BY ESOMAR ON FEBRUARY 22, 2011 11:29 AM

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In his seminal rant, *The Black Swan*, Nassim Nicholas Taleb raises the intriguing notion of 'silent evidence'. To explain the problem, Taleb tells the tale of Diagoras, an ancient Roman non-believer, being shown portraits of survivors of a shipwreck, told they were 'believers', and used as proof that prayer saved those who survived the tragedy. Diagoras was reported to reply, "How many of those who drowned were believers? Did you interview them as well?"

Taleb brings up a valid point — that experiential observations cannot always be counted on to bring completely valid conclusions. For example, Taleb says that with experiential evidence he can prove OJ Simpson is not a murderer. "I had lunch with OJ just the other day, and he didn't kill anyone." Of course in market research we rely on experiential, empirical evidence to draw conclusions and offer marketing strategy to our clients. We use regression analysis to determine strategic drivers of communication; T-tests to see if different groups of people have different means of product usage, and conjoint analysis to determine the maximal product construction.



However, what about the proverbial worshipers who drowned? What about those who don't use our clients' products, visit their restaurants, join their loyalty programs, are prescribed their pharmaceuticals, or vote for their candidate?

Mining the silent evidence does not mean interviewing the dead. It does mean, however, that perhaps a vigorous exercise in opposition research may yield valuable information for the brand manager to plot his product's strategic course and the answer the proverbial elephant in the room — moving non-customers to customers. It is a common assumption that retaining customers is far easier than attracting new ones, so customer satisfaction studies are vital. However, moving non-customers to customers can be lucrative as well. To mine the silent evidence, construction of the survey may vary. Pricing? Communications? Brand positioning? All these studies take a different form.

To us, the most obvious requirement of a 'silent evidence' study would be the use of two simple questions presumably placed into the screener.

Do You Use This Product? – YES
Do You Use [clients] Brand? – NO

Once through this simple gate, the client will be able to garner strategic information about his competitors' such as:

- Current brand loyalties
- Current product usage
- How competitor customers receive their brand information
- Are they members of competitive brand loyalty programs
- Do they follow competitors on Facebook or Twitter

An array of strategic questions can be asked. Brand attributes, purchase intent, intent to recommend, etc. Traditional strategic analysis is applied to those who are not part of the customer brand's panel. Even images of the customers brand can be shown to see where they stand with their non-customers.

Brand Implications

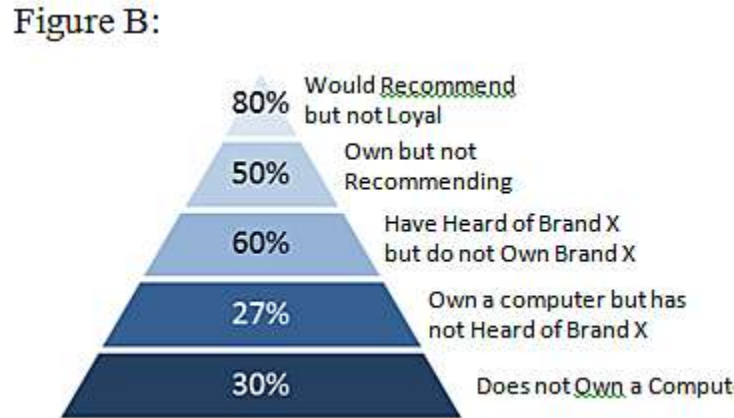
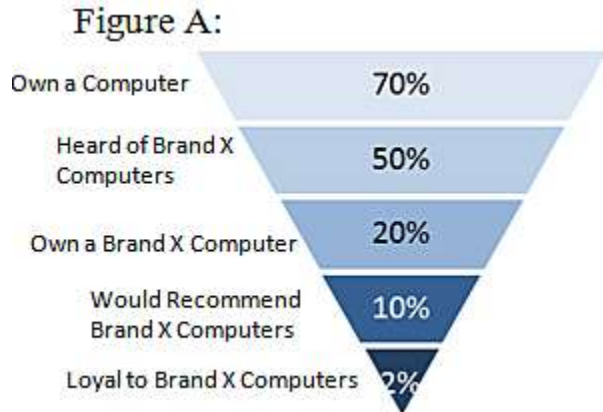
Most often, mining the silent evidence becomes a challenge more because it is overlooked than it is purposefully ignored. Basically, it's just easier to notice what is right in front of us than what is missing. To help get your mind primed for these types of findings, one helpful tool is likely already at your disposal; reference your brand funnel. Even if you do not have an official brand funnel, drawing one up with your best guesses is a valuable exercise. (Figure A)

Figure A represents a standard view of a brand funnel to help understand the market presence of 'Brand X' in consumer PCs. Each level of the funnel helps the brand manager conceptualise where 'Brand X' computers fit into the decision making process for consumers.

The brand funnel is a powerful tool for articulating what you have in front of you, while pointing out that not everybody who owns a computer deals with you or your brand. By itself, the funnel is a reminder that there are those whom the brand has not reached and therefore allows us to see the 'silence' within all aspects relating to 'Brand X'. What makes this useful is that we are starting with something that reminds us that the silence exists; this makes it harder to forget to take notice.

However, if we want to 'mine the silence' we need to do more than know it exists. If we take the funnel, flip it on its head, we look specifically at what people are NOT doing. By going through this process we can identify specific opportunities and the consumer groups that need to be targeted to capitalise on the findings. The goal is to take the brand funnel and turn it into a brand filter; while your brand funnel articulated where you have succeeded in converting consumers, the filter points you to the barriers that stopped certain consumers from converting.

Figure B represents the same proportions from Figure A, but working as a filter instead of a funnel so that we can identify the barriers for 'Brand X' computers. For example, if 10% of households would recommend 'Brand X' and 2% are loyal as seen in Figure A, then 8 of 10 households would recommend but are not loyal (Figure B). If 20% of households own a 'Brand X' computer and 10% of households would recommend 'Brand X', then 50% of 'Brand X' owners are not out recommending 'Brand X'.



It was mentioned earlier that Figure B helps define target consumer profiles. The assumption here is that if you know which consumers would recommend 'Brand X' and you know which of those consumers are loyal to 'Brand X', you can identify those who are not loyal within the group that would recommend. This is not much of an assumption as long as you have completed the research that allows you to create your initial brand funnel. Once you are able to identify why one group is loyal and the other is not, you can start to get specific in identifying why one group is acting differently than the other. As with most things in marketing, once you understand the 'why' you can get strategic in figuring out ways to impact the underlying behavior.

The purpose of this exercise is to have something front and centre that focuses on your opportunities in order to inspire a different line of questioning and thought. The standard brand funnel is important and works very well but it is focused on what you have in front of you. Mining the silence is about noticing what is not in the room, and in order to take full measure of your brand, the opportunities are at least as important as the strengths.

Conclusion

The true value in mining the silence is in remembering that for every comment that we collect from a customer, there are 10 comments that have not been heard. This does not lessen the value of what we have in front of us; just as we see in Taleb's tale of Diogenes by simply realising that what we hear is only a piece of the puzzle we allow ourselves to consider the broader context which allows us to better leverage and more intelligently utilize the piece we have.

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