

In Creative Self-Defense

By Jerry W. Thomas

Often the copywriter or art director in an advertising agency is bombarded, crushed and mangled by marketing research results. Is there no defense to this useless slaughter of great ideas and brilliant campaigns? Must more tender souls be sacrificed to the gods of “facts” and “numbers” and “statistics” and “focus groups”? Do not despair.

The notorious marketing researcher, Dr. Juggler Vain, credited with sending over 36 creative types to an early grave, was recently recruited by the C.I.A. (Creativity In Advertising) to assist them in fending off the vicious “facts” attacks of researchers. A copy of Dr. Vain’s secret Counter-Research Handbook has just come into my possession. The following excerpts from that work are presented as a public service:

Chapter Three. The Best Study Is No Study

(Page 26) “. . . Any research study is a potential danger. Prevention is the best strategy. Go to the library. Do your own research. Prove that so much good information is available that no new research is necessary, even though you personally would like to see the new study conducted. If account service or the client insists on doing the research, then support the new study with enthusiasm. Ask for information. Ask for more information. Write a list of 50 questions you want added to the questionnaire. Ask for a sample of 2,000, instead of the proposed 500, to permit regional breakouts of the results. Argue that only heavy users of the product should be interviewed (heavy users are usually a small percentage of the population and, therefore, expensive to reach); or if everyone uses the product, then ask for a subsample of non-users. By now, your support and enthusiasm have run the cost of the research to over \$100,000 and the whole study is canceled by the client...”

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Chapter Seven. The Client Uses Focus Groups

(Pages 68-71) “. . .Your copy or art is going to be exposed to focus groups. What do you do? Go to the groups yourself. Insist that the opportunity to learn is so great that you must attend the discussions. Once you are in the observation room behind the one-way mirror, play it cool. Groups are strange animal-like organisms which have a mind of their own. They are very unpredictable and usually uncontrollable. Listen. If the results go your way, keep cool and brag on the client’s wisdom in suggesting groups. If the results don’t go your way, spring into action. Get some hard liquor out and quickly mix drinks for the clients. Encourage them to drink up. Get them new drinks the instant their glasses are empty. Start pointing out how the lady in the blue hat is dominating the group (this planted idea may be useful later). Tell dirty jokes. Get the observers to laughing so they can’t hear what’s going on in the focus group room. Make wise cracks. Light up a Honduran cigar and drive everyone from the observation room. Unplug the audio equipment and pretend the sound system isn’t working. Try to fix the equipment yourself, so no one else will discover the source of the problem. Accidentally hit the light switch so that all of the observers (hidden in the dark behind the mirror) are suddenly exposed to the members of the discussion group. This so unnerves clients they usually forget everything said in the groups.

As soon as the group is finished, do not . . . repeat . . . do not allow any debriefing or instant analysis by the

moderator or the clients. Insist that everyone go home and try to digest all the great new information produced by the groups. Warn against the dangers of instant analysis. Tell everyone to “sleep on” the results. Tell the researcher you want a really good report and to take as much time as he needs to write it. Again, act quickly.

Hold follow-up meetings on the focus groups first thing the next day. Speed the clients into whatever decisions you wish. They won’t remember much from the previous night’s groups anyway. By the time the moderator’s report comes in two or three weeks later, all of the decisions will be history and no one will even bother to read the report.

If perchance the report does come in before the final decisions are reached, then brag on the learning provided by the report and note that the research results have been incorporated into the new creative. Chances are the client has not read the report; thus, you might get away with this little ploy. But if the client has read the report, you must retreat to the final fallback strategy.

Say focus groups are interesting and entertaining, but that the results from groups are only “hypotheses.” Mention the lady in blue hat who biased the group’s results. Suggest that interpretation of group results is a very risky business and subject to great error. Note that everyone sees and hears something different from groups. And, lastly, mention that the moderator still lives at home with his mother. Usually, this will carry the day for your side. But if it does not, then insist on some real research, some “hard” numbers, something statistically reliable. Demand

a quantitative study to provide answers which everyone can trust. Argue that the decisions are too important to be trusted to focus groups . . .”

Chapter Eleven: The Client Uses a Quantitative Study

(Pages 158-60) “. . . Okay, so the client wants to evaluate your creative efforts with some type of “numbers” survey, such as a day-after recall, or an advertising concept test, or a copy test using one of the standardized testing services.

If the client suggests a day-after recall study, tell him what an excellent idea that is. Now, you have two options to pursue. First, you can jimmy the commercial to force a high day-after recall score. Just repeat the brand name about 12 times in 30 seconds, show the brand name during the whole of the commercial, and repeat one simple message over and over. Or you can protest. Point out that day-after recall is a simplistic measure which cannot hope to measure the motivational depth and subtlety of the persuasive masterpiece you have created. Argue that one market may not be representative of the whole United States. Argue that the audience of one television program may not be representative of the whole United States. Insist that the day-after recall test be national in scope (which might make the test too expensive; see Chapter Three).

If the client wants to test creative in rough form (storyboards or rough print ads), tactfully explain that executional values add a great deal to commercials, that

it is most important to test only finished commercials. By the time the finished commercial is ready, the client may have forgotten about his intent to test it. But, if he does go ahead and test it; how likely is the client to believe any research which says the commercial is no good—after he has sunk 200 grand into producing the commercial? You’ve won again.

If the client persists and wants to submit the finished commercial to one of the standardized testing services, tell him what a smashing idea that is. Hold your breath. The creative may do well and achieve high test scores. If high test scores are not achieved, then suggest that the client consider a real evaluation and not trust such an important decision to survey research. Tell him the only thing that really counts is the real world and real consumers buying in a real store with real money. What is needed is a live test market, you explain. A real experiment. None of this unreliable research stuff. . .”

Chapter Twenty. The Test Market

(Pages 388-91) “. . . The store audits, the telephone tracking studies, supermarket electronic scanner data, and actual sales figures from the test market in Omaha all indicate that no one is buying the product. The panicked client bemoans the failure of the new creative. What to do? Stay calm. Say the creative works on the unconscious mind and requires several months to have a dramatic effect—unless the client can afford to increase the media budgets to accelerate the advertising response function.

After six months at 300 GRPs per week, the client again complains about the lack of success in the marketplace. At this point, it is necessary to explain that a real-world experiment (a test market) is difficult to read because of uncontrollable variables such as competitive activities, pricing changes, weather, the general economy and the moods of consumers. Suggest, too, that the advertising may be overly effective, causing consumers to raid the warehouses, ambush the delivery trucks, and steal the product off the supermarket shelves, a fact not reported by the marketing research data since only sales are being measured, not thefts. Accuse a major competitor of

sabotaging the test market with unfair and un-American activities. Suggest a counterattack: roll out the program nationally, immediately. That way, the Communist-inspired competitor would not be able to undermine the program; he simply could not sabotage every market simultaneously . . .”

For those of you interested in the complete writings of the good doctor, please send 25¢ and pieces of your broken heart and crushed ego to Dr. Juggler Vain at C.I.A. headquarters.

About the Author

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Decision Analyst is a global marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new products research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.



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