

BIAS THE PARTICIPANT

DESIGNING SURVEYS THAT ELICIT A DEEPER EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

FOREWARD

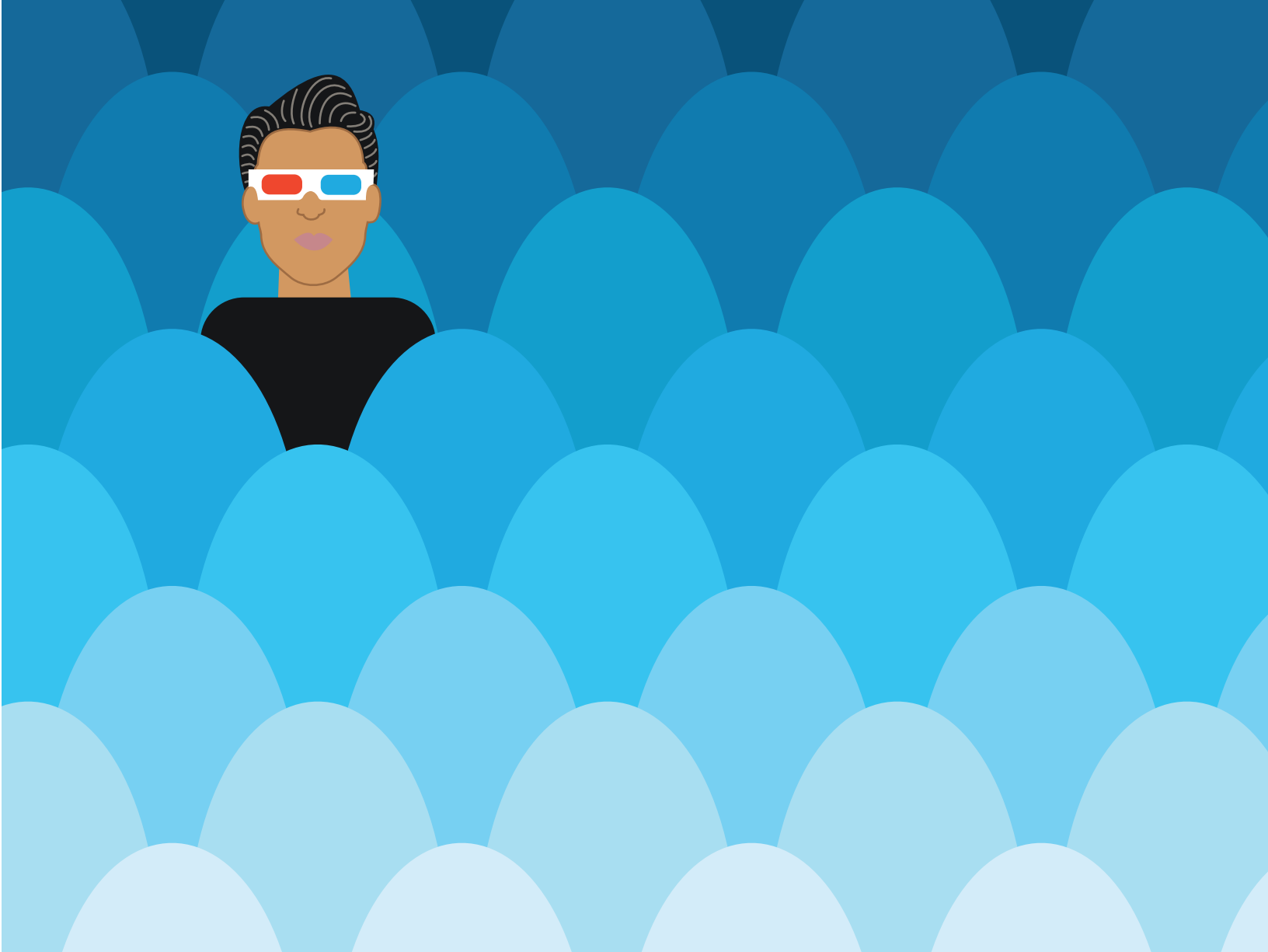
I was motivated to publish this short essay because let's face it: the vast majority of market research survey questions suck. If you've ever completed a survey or responded to a request for customer feedback, you will know what I'm talking about.

The problem is the orientation researchers adopt toward the people answering their questions, not the questions themselves. To tap into a genuine mindset, a surveyor must do the thinking for their respondents, much like a stand-up comedian does the thinking for their audience. This means reconsidering the prevailing assumption that a surveyor's job is to measure what people think and that, to do so, they must remain objective. A good survey should not result in people answering questions superficially but nodding along in agreement.

I pitched an early version of this article to Scientific American. The editor politely declined. An article arguing for more subjectivity in the research process was not a good fit for a science magazine. I then rewrote the essay and pitched the new draft, which aimed to appeal to brand managers and CMOs, to HBR.org. The editors declined. Although I did not receive a specific reason why, my educated guess is that, for a magazine focused on best practices in management and leadership, an article about market research surveys was too analytical and narrow in scope.

Both rejections got me thinking. Is there a publication that features the best thinking at the intersection of insights, research, and brand strategy? Wired.com felt too tech driven, Inc. and Fast Company felt too clickbaity, and the trade publications felt too technical. I decided that my best option would be to self-publish and share the article on LinkedIn.

I'm still scratching my head. The market research industry needs an intellectual home—a space for practitioners to share ideas and debate methodology. This space should spark new modes of thinking that rely on the humanities and the revolution in data. I hope that this piece of writing will inspire people in the consumer insights business to imagine the benefits of such a space.



INTRODUCTION

Would stand-up comedians be better researchers than those who research for a living?

Over the past few years, my work in market research has involved using online surveys to ask people about dish soap, cloud computing, the future, sports, if they'd consider drinking non-alcoholic beer, and hundreds of other questions about their lives as consumers. Although researchers are advised to remain objective when writing survey questions, I've found that they can learn more about what people think by deliberately biasing them into a mindset that frees up their ability to reflect honestly about their experiences.

I've come to call this approach subjective research. It shifts the research goal from passively collecting personal data to drawing on personal experiences to elicit a reaction. Subjective research does not involve a live performance or literary effort but it does share the same end goal as comedians, novelists, or anyone trying to get people to nod in agreement.




PAY LESS, STRESS MORE

I relied on this approach when a major retailer engaged me last year. They were interested in learning more about their customers' top "stress drivers" and wanted to craft new language that resonated. Counting what customers bought or quantifying their opinion of the store wasn't enough. We needed to capture what it is like to walk up and down the aisles. To do this I had to guide the thinking of the thousand or so respondents — all of whom were customers — we recruited for a survey. Introspection alone would have only gotten them so far.

I asked three questions.

First: "Yes or No: When you shop for groceries, do you feel like you're in a hurry?" Think about this question. "When you shop for groceries, do you feel like you are in a hurry?" For some, it is a tricky question. There is internal debate involved — "Do I?" — and perhaps a child-like impulse to avoid a direct answer — "Well, it depends..." The second question was, "When you are shopping, are you normally late for something?" Like the initial question, I instructed respondents to answer "yes" or "no" — a subtle but intentional nudge to make them feel rushed, as if they were in the store.

The third question was inspired by a suggestion from the client, and was given to people who said they do feel like they're in a hurry but are not late for something, "Why, if you're not typically late for something, do you usually feel like you're in a hurry?" Each of the answers to this question read like a short story. Some people shop during the day and can't be late getting back to work. Some people rely on drivers who have to wait in the parking lot. Some people get anxious in crowds. Just about everybody dreads waiting in line. Kids were universally compared to ticking time bombs placing their parents one tantrum away from an early exit.




When we presented the findings of our research, our client was willing to ignore the traditional survey guidelines and listen to our recommendations. Our findings helped them communicate with their customers in a way that went beyond emphasizing the price and quality of their products.

They focused instead on the fact that their customers did not have the luxury of calmly strolling up and down the aisles, and the result was a new strategy that pulled the right psychological levers. For us, it was a deeply satisfying moment.

MAY I SPEAK TO THE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD?

Subjective research starts with introspection. When I shop, I feel a dose of low-level stress as soon as I walk through the automatic doors, a feeling that slowly intensifies until I finish paying, after which it is replaced by a sense of relief and accomplishment. Instead of writing off my experience as unique, I used it to capture how other people shop. My objective was not a smile and laugh; it was to use a few carefully crafted questions to elicit a cathartic response.

Despite the positive outcome with the client, it's unclear if there is room for this style of research. If you own a retail chain, testimonials like the ones we helped to generate give you something you need: a glimpse into the inner lives of your customers. And yet, the questions are deemed bad methodology by traditional research guidelines. I wrote a "loaded question," relied on "non-neutral" language, and, by forcing people to pick "yes" or "no," I used "absolutes." According to the set of rules I ignored, a better question would have been, "When you shop for groceries, how would you describe your mindset?" followed by a dozen or so adjectives which most people, eager to finish the survey, would have skimmed before superficially picking one or two.




We should write more survey questions that do not revolve around rigid guidelines but rather our ability to craft language that engenders new ways of thinking. Given that brands are constantly competing to distinguish themselves, this seems like a skill worth investing in.

Think about standing in the checkout aisle. The cashier scans your discount card. The store learns something about your digital self. The “you” that politely says “thank you” to the cashier and walks through the automatic doors and silently contemplates the best route home (perhaps with a few screaming kids in tow) is completely ignored, as if it had never entered the store. In an era in which brands can collect personal data without having to interact with anyone -- web browsers track websites visited, wearables count steps taken and calories burned -- we should not lose sight of the fact that surveys are an opportunity to learn about the subjective “you.” Here, the concept of “biasing the participant,” which is normally considered a methodological survey error, becomes a feature of the survey-writing process.

How do we do this?

NODDING IN AGREEMENT

I do not know of any market research departments that require its employees to listen to stand-up comedians. Even the idea sounds strange. But a researcher who gets to play around with our humanity instead of only measuring our clicks or asking questions like “Would you recommend this product to a friend?” would be in a better position to uncover what we all try to conceal as shoppers: our motives. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan once recommended that researchers attempt to “make effective contact with a genuine feeling [and] proceed to exploit and accentuate it as much as an Eddie Guest, a popular novelist, or a movie star.” Eddie Guest, who I had to look up, was an American poet.



McLuhan would agree that researchers should use survey platforms like a comedian uses a stage. This new orientation could help brands better connect with consumers by giving researchers the opportunity to use their personal experiences to design better surveys. If market research continues on its current path, it risks missing out on a new way to think about the role of the researcher. We cannot claim to know something until we can express it clearly, and in a way that makes people react with an acknowledging head nod.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam McNerney is the Behavioral Science Lead at Publicis. He writes at the intersection of behavioral science, market research, and culture. He has written for Scientific American, Scientific American Mind, Psychology Today, Fast Company, Fortune, BBC Focus and several other publications.



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