

**Helping you to
press the right buttons**

**Understanding communication:
how far have we come?**

Where are we

Look at where we are now. There are more channel options for businesses to communicate down than they have either the budget or the bandwidth to fully exploit. The media industry has over 40 years of systemised thinking about how media channels work and how we should measure their effectiveness. Research and tracking of communications campaigns has evolved to the level of sophisticated marketing science. Touch any communications agency and you'll find a well-structured and well-argued process for how communication should be designed to meet the needs of the market place. People pre-test and post-test like mad to get it right. And yet...

Why are some companies still frustrated by the outcome of their communication spending? Why does the musical chairs game of agency reviews, firings and new appointments continue unabated? Why is investing in marketing communication still such a risky business? Why has the tracking study risen to the top of the marketing essentials list? ("At least we have something to show the Board where the marketing money did or didn't work".)

And why – as people have been asking with increased frequency in the serious business press – **don't we have any new information or alternatives to the system that's been in operation for the past 40 years?**

This is a broader debate than we can tackle as individual writers. All we can do through this short paper is offer 2 people's perspective and a number of ideas to throw into the ring. And that perspective can be summarised in one sentence:

**WHAT THE SYSTEM HAS LARGELY OVERLOOKED
ARE THE BASICS OF HOW COMMUNICATION WORKS.**

We've had a media sales culture and a continuous market appetite for spending on the available channels. It's been more a question of 'what's the next thing?' In media. In technology. In convergence – to maintain the momentum of spend. It's been less a question of 'have we really figured out how this stuff called communication actually works?' The market learnt first by broadcast rules. We actually had things like "TV Homes", as if the medium guaranteed possession of the household – and that thinking hasn't exactly died. Then we've had the emerging church of narrowcast in opposition – so each end of the spectrum can slug it out with its own set of codes and beliefs – but no unifying theory of communication. So the world continues to push messages at people in the hope that some of it will stick. This is being done with little appreciation that there's an off button, which those same people control. Customers decide what they see, hear, read & do – but we seem reluctant to accept this in our approach to communicating with them.

The right to communicate

Nonetheless, it's generally accepted that there's been a major shift in control of the communications process, where "consumers" are progressively more sophisticated and more ruthless. Nowhere is this more prevalent than the online environment, where failure to deliver on a simple task performed at the expected speed gets you deleted from their repertoire. This challenges a lot of assumptions about the *rights* that businesses and organisations have to communicate. Just because we have the money and the media to do so doesn't mean you can squat on my lawn. We may think we have rights in this area, but how secure are they in practice?

Broadcast communication, one-to-one marketing, peer-to-peer computing, mass customisation, customer relationship marketing, collaborative commerce. All familiar terms, some more current and more real than others, all enabled by forms of technology & sets of equipment.

But how do we know communication is enabled by people?

Or to be more precise, how do we know that the recipients of all this communication are in a mode to receive? And if we understood this better, how much would it improve our chances of getting through?

This is basic stuff. The behavioural science that explains it has been around for some time. What it tells us is:

WE ALL USE FILTERS TO SHUT OUT OR LET IN COMMUNICATION

THEY ARE ON MOST OF THE TIME

THEY'RE PROGRAMMED TO OPERATE BY THE RECEIVER'S EXPERIENCE OF THE WORLD (NOT THE SENDER'S).

AND IF THE SENDER DOESN'T RECOGNISE HOW THAT EXPERIENCE IS FORMED...

...THE MESSAGE IS DEAD IN THE WATER.

Before you even spend money on writing the brief, let alone on running any media.

So why does the whole business act like these filters "*aren't really there*"? Like the world is out there receptive to communication – and all you have to be is diverting & intriguing & impactful & compelling???

Of course you have to be all those things, but you need to get through the front door to the brain first.

There's a basic principle here that contradicts whatever McLuhan meant by "the medium is the message". In order for anyone to start believing they're managing peoples' perceptions, they need to know that what they say & how they act will let them into peoples' cognitive and sensory systems in the first place. So in fact:

THE MEDIUM IS THE CUSTOMER – AND THE MESSAGE IS THE RESPONSE YOU GET.

It is the customer who opens and shuts the door – who gives or deny a response. We need to understand them differently to the way the system's always worked. We missed a step along the way. If a piece of communication fails it's because it didn't get through their filters.

Terms of engagement

Understanding 'permission to communicate' has never been one of the strongest causes in the media industry. It seems to us that there's a lot more work that can be done in this area and that it will pay significant dividends – both in risk reduction (when marketing funds are under even more pressure) and communications productivity (when the ROI question is asked).

We're perfectly aware that communications effectiveness is taken very seriously inside the industry. It's fair to say, however, that the bulk of learning and best practice is applied after the event. Sure there's a lot of pre-testing of content that goes on, but we're talking about the critical stage before that.

When the fundamental terms of engagement between companies & their customers must be understood - before serious money gets committed to the marketing process.

The language of experience

It sure is "the experience economy" but then it always has been. This isn't an emerging trend, but a constant reality. If you want to communicate and create a shared experience between your brand and a group of customers, you need to understand how these people form *their* experience. Not in general terms – you'll be there forever - but in the specific context of the market or category your business is involved in. Like choosing a car or a holiday or a financial service provider.

This isn't a complex process to go through, but it is a thorough one.

It's called Language & Behaviour Profiling or LAB for short. The understanding we need to get the communications outcome right is there if we have the patience to listen. To listen first to *how people talk* about their market experience, before we even conceive of what we want to send them. That means listening to the *patterns of language* they use to describe that experience. This tells us what motivates them at a below conscious level. It also tells us what the modes of communication are that people prefer to use for receiving information – *in that particular market context*. Conventional media information doesn't really tell you this. It tells you how people consume the medium in general, but not why that medium is fit for their purpose when they're in the market for a product or service.

By matching these patterns of speech we can create rapport with customers and open their filters. We have permission to engage with our chosen market.

The missing piece

This, for us, is the missing piece in the marketing communications jigsaw, without which the whole picture can't form. LAB is the unifying theory of communication that gives every media option its best shot. It does that by acting as the diligence process, which sets the terms of engagement between companies and their market places. Which in turn will be the source of shared meaning between brands and their customers. So you get the impression of a different chain of events in the communications process and some changes in basic assumptions along the way. There's an opportunity at the outset to increase the probability that communication will be effective by:

LEARNING HOW THE ORGANISATION CAN ENGAGE WITH THE MARKET.

So we can see where there are connections or disconnects between the world of the marketing organisation and the worlds of its target customers. We can compare what shapes experience on both sides and how it drives customers' decisions to open up or close down new information. The next step is to understand:

WHAT THE PRIORITIES ARE ON BOTH SIDES

So we know what the desired outcomes are from either side of the market place relationship – what's most important to the marketer and what's most important to the customer. Then we move on to define:

HOW RELATIONSHIPS CAN BE BUILT THROUGH MATCHING LANGUAGE

so we have a systematic idea of how both worlds can speak the same language and share the same terms of reference for the market. At which point we can assess

THE PREFERRED MODES OF COMMUNICATION FOR THE RECEIVER

So that what is communicated comes through the channels they are most likely to pay attention to.

What this changes

If we say it's the missing piece, we shouldn't go on to make extravagant claims. What will happen is a tightening up of the communications process. Planning the outcome with greater certainty. Owning information about language & relationships that's unique to your market place and what you offer. Knowing what the hot buttons are from the demand side, not the supply side. Critically – having a different set of information to set against generalised media conventions – so your channel choice is better aligned to the behaviour of the category.

At the core of this there is a major change and it's to do with how the information is gathered. It's also a challenge to a major assumption of the research industry: that we can learn what we need from peoples' opinions and attitudes. This isn't wrong or invalid. Our argument is that – if you want the missing piece – you have to go deeper. What effective communication needs is

RESEARCH BASED ON EXPERIENCE, NOT OPINION.

Opinions and attitudes are part of the chain, but they don't set the agenda deep inside people. We can talk to people and ask them what they think and we'll get a reasonable picture of what's going on above the watermark. So we may have a broad picture of:

“WHAT I THINK & BELIEVE”

but we won't have a detailed picture of:

“HOW I FORM MY THOUGHTS & BELIEFS”.

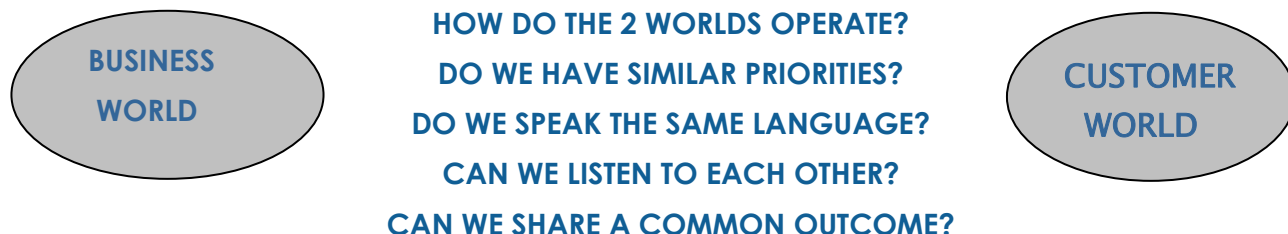
This is why a lot of segmentation ends up pretty generic, repetitive and blunt-edged. You ask people who they are in terms of 'lifestyle & attitudes' and the chances are you'll get some good, but broad indicators of people leading similar kinds of lives. Which is information most media and businesses can own about consumer or customer classifications. Where it gets interesting is when you want to know why people with broadly similar 'lifestyles' are behaving in different ways **within a given category or market sector.**

“HOW I FORM MY THOUGHTS & BELIEFS ABOUT A SPECIFIC CATEGORY.”

Which is where the journey ought to begin, as the entry point for what you really want to know about people, which is:

“HOW I FORM MY THOUGHTS & BELIEFS IN THIS CATEGORY ABOUT DOING BUSINESS WITH YOUR COMPANY.”

Understanding how people construct their motivation and preferences through experience is critical, if you want to work at this level. Opinion based research won't get you there. You can use opinion research at the later stages of evaluation, but the critical first step is this:



Because what changes from the broadcast thinking we inherited and its 40 years of system is an approach where:

FUNDAMENTAL INTERESTS ARE ALIGNED, BEFORE MESSAGES ARE SENT.

New language & terms for marketing

Think of it as a turnkey – which progressively tightens up the chain of communication – and a new toolkit for getting the ratios and relationships right. A lot of this is new and so the terms and language won't be familiar, but the process of aligning interests can cover a whole range of relationships.

Between:

businesses & people

organisations & staff

staff & customers

people & technology

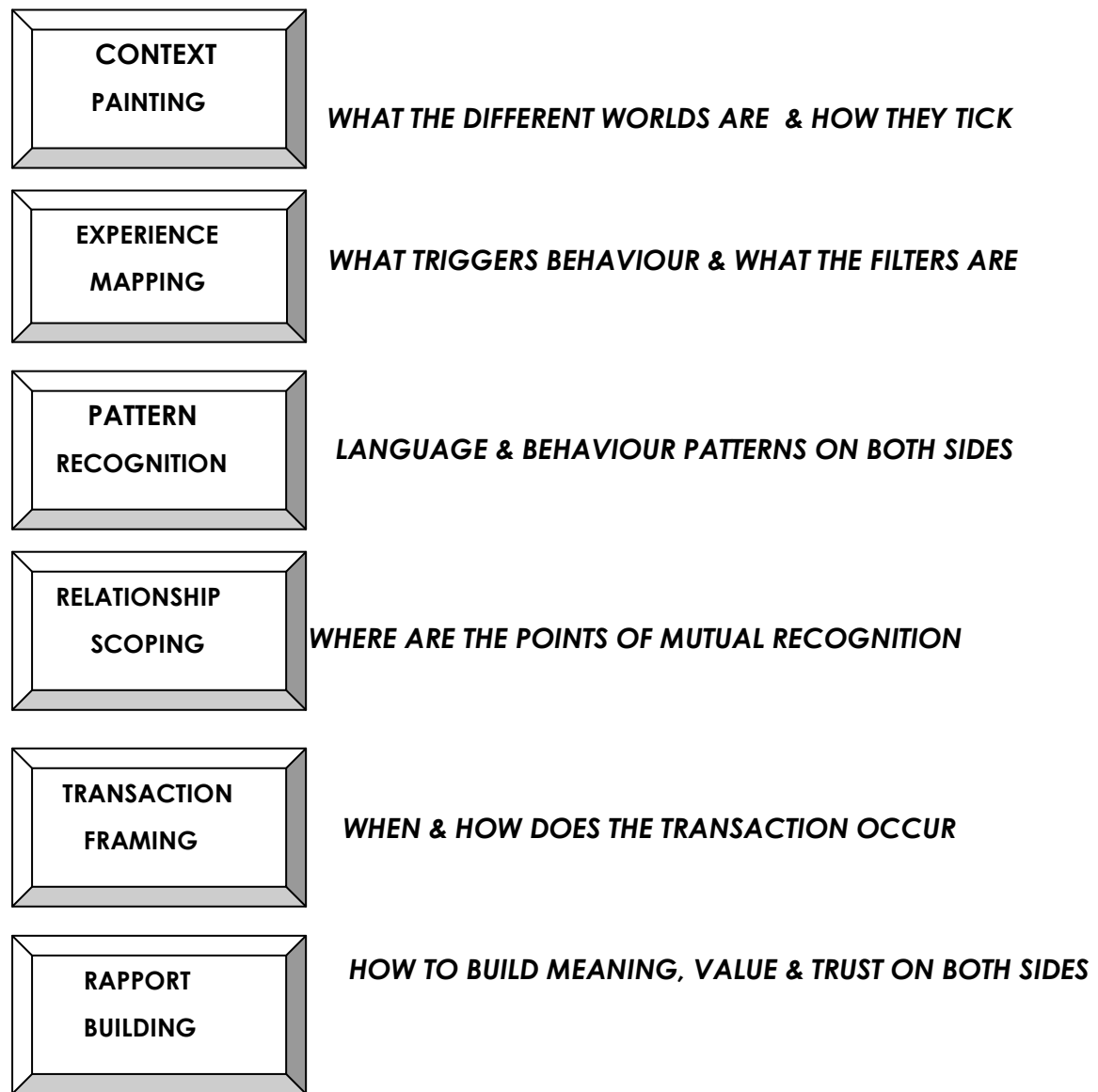
call centres & enquirers

web sites & users

media & audiences

propositions & stakeholders (more on this at the end).

We can use new frameworks and techniques to get these alignments right:



All of these are alignment tools and designed to support and build perhaps the most critical element in strategic marketing and communications.

The effective proposition

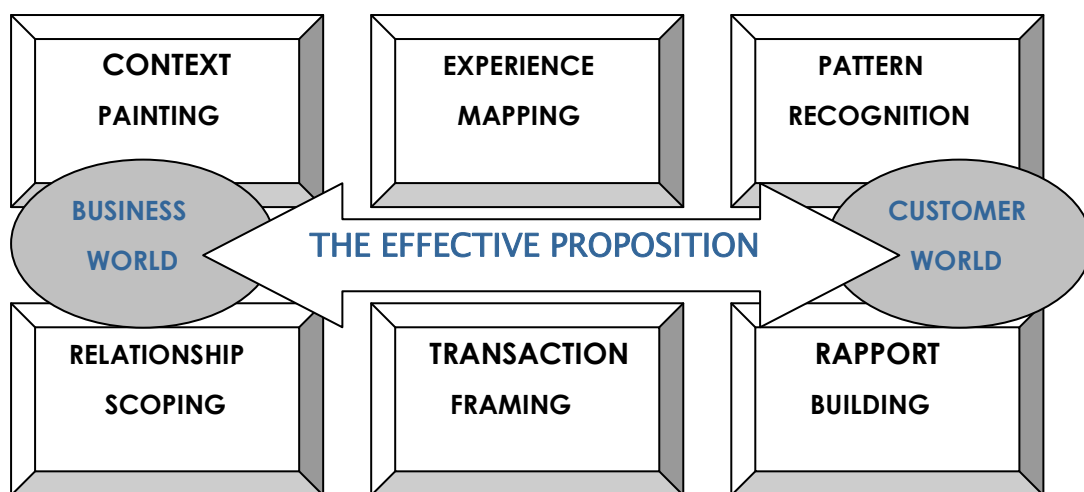
Like the basic workings of communication, the core proposition of the business is something that gets less attention from some businesses than it should – and is a much more important issue for alignment of the whole organisation than perhaps has been realised. There are Vision and Mission Statements and sets of Values, but you have to ask yourself what's really driving things? What's the core idea of the business that it takes to the market place and how should this be organised so it can be communicated effectively? People have written about "organising around the customer" but that seems more like a positive sentiment than an organising principle.

**The proposition is the thing you really organise around
because it's the proposition that gets and keeps the customer.**

Customers are very conscious and very able, but they can't design your marketing outcome for you. They can, however, let it happen – if they let you in.

Much of our thinking is based on this idea. The proposition is what generates the positive experience. The most effective propositions are designed by understanding how customers form experience – which in turn helps validate the marketing intent of the business. So the 2 worlds on either side of the relationships are better understood and more effective communications bridges can be built. The fundamentals are in getting the organisation to speak the same language as those different customers with whom the proposition will have to engage.

That's where this thinking and the toolkit really lands. At the front end of the process, giving the organisation its best chance of effectively engaging with its market place and its co-dependents in the process.



So the moral of this short paper is simple: understand how communication works and the probability of a successful outcome increases.

This may seem like a statement of the obvious, but progress often leaves the obvious trailing in its wake.