



Mind the gap – bridging the divide between research and creativity

IQPC Consumer Insight Conference, London, March 2002

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1 Introduction

The role of qualitative research in developing new products, services or advertising is increasingly being called into question. The last decade has seen a growing band of advertisers (Earls 2001), designers (Dyson 1998; Bayley 1998) and even ex-researchers (Gordon 1999) saying that qualitative research, and the group discussion in particular, is a barrier to creative thinking. The group discussion format is assumed to stifle creativity, kill off delicate new ideas, and lead inexorably to the lowest common denominator in advertising and design. The general public, it is argued, lacks the ability to think creatively, cannot imagine the future, and dislikes radical change or unusual ideas. Thus, there is little point asking consumers what they think of new ideas, and still less asking them to come up with ideas for themselves.

Some of these criticisms are more relevant to bad qualitative research rather than research *per se*, but there is a real divide between the research mindset and the creative mindset. Researchers value rational discussion, clarity, logic, representativeness and reliability. Researchers do not like uncertainty and are often employed by clients in order to minimise risk in decision making. Creative personnel, on the other hand, need to bring together diverse points of view, consider solutions which may appear irrational, live with uncertainty and be willing to take risks in order to innovate. These opposing mindsets may lie at the heart of the divide between research and creativity.

This paper argues that qualitative market research, and the much criticised group format, are not inevitably damaging to creative thought. Our paper describes a case study of research conducted by Turnstone for the Army Recruiting Group to assist in the redesign of Army Career Information Offices. Our argument is that by adapting conventional qualitative methods and using a diverse range of approaches, research can generate real consumer insight which assists, rather than hinders, the creative process.

2 Army recruitment

The Army has demanding recruiting targets. The targets for soldier and officer recruitment for 2000 – 2003 are as follows:

Army Recruiting Targets, 2000 – 2003

	2000 – 2001	2001 – 2002	2002 – 2003
Soldier	15,900	15,050	15,050
Officer	882	1,000	1,000

As well as having overall recruitment targets, the Army has a specific target of recruiting 6% of candidates from ethnic minority populations for the year 2002 – 2003, and is also committed to raising the proportion of women in the Army from the current 15%.

In addition to needing more recruits, the Army also needs better qualified recruits. Jobs in the Army frequently require computer skills and higher levels of education than in the past – for soldiers as well as officers. They also demand a broader skill set to cope with the increased involvement of the Armed Forces in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.

In addition, there are a number of factors which have made the Army's recruitment task more challenging in recent years:

- The declining number of young people with family or friends who are, or have been in, the Armed Forces;
- The lower profile of the Armed Forces nationally, with reductions in overall numbers and the closure or merger of some local regiments;
- The increasing numbers of young people who stay in further or higher education after leaving school;
- The changed aspirations and values of young people, among whom individualism and self fulfilment can take priority over public service and teamwork.

To meet these challenges, the Army has run a highly successful marketing campaign since 1994, lead by the *Be the Best* television advertising campaign. The marketing mix also includes radio and press executions, a range of brochures and leaflets, an

on-line careers office and website, a club and magazine for 12 – 16 year olds, and a range of outreach activities among young people.

The Army also has 123 Army Careers Information Offices (ACIOs) around the country, and these are a crucial point of contact between potential recruits and the Army. They are a key information source for young people, and once the young people enter the office one in three do go on to apply to join the Army. However, the Army needs more young people to enter the ACIOs, and also to appeal to a wider range of youngsters, in order to meet its recruitment targets. Although ACIOs were thought to be doing a good job for young people who were familiar with the Army and relatively interested in joining, they were thought to be less successful in attracting those whose interest was not highly developed.

It was decided to review the design of the ACIOs to see how they could be made more appealing to young people, especially those whose interest in the Army was less well developed. As part of this review, the Army Recruiting Group commissioned Turnstone to carry out qualitative research to explore the image of ACIOs and to develop various design ideas. The research team felt that conventional group discussions were unlikely to yield creative insights which would be valuable to the design team, but that with some changes the group format could be adapted rather than rejected. We therefore carried out a series of 14 workshop sessions lasting 2 ½ hours each, based on the group format but with certain key changes. These are described in detail below.

3 The research process

The standard group discussion format has been developed over many years to provide a vehicle for exploring people's attitudes and feelings (Chrzanowska 2002), but it was not designed to assist in processes of innovation. We therefore took the basic format, but proceeded to break a number of the unspoken rules of conventional qualitative research. None of these changes are revolutionary, but the combination of approaches provided a level of insight which would not have been gained by other means.

We began the sessions with a conventional group discussion away from the ACIO to explore respondents' current image of Army Careers Offices and their own aspirations and ambitions. After gaining their current views, we travelled from the venue to the ACIO which we were visiting. In many cases, we were able to walk

there with the respondents and this had several advantages. In essence, we were able to include a small ethnographic component in our project – seeing how familiar they were with the route, how they chose to get there, and what their genuine first impressions were. We could also observe the young people outside the office – what did they look at, how did they feel outside the office, and how long did they wait before entering? This short journey provided a valuable break in the session, but more importantly it provided a more natural social environment in which to talk with the young people. Most groups of young people do not spend hours sitting down in one place discussing issues. They wander around local parks, shopping centres, games shops, fast food outlets, and they hang around on street corners chatting to their mates. In the short walk from the first venue to the office, and hanging around outside the office, we found that the young people relaxed, could speak more freely, and that those who had been quiet during the group could be more forthcoming.

On arrival at the ACIO, we divided the groups into pairs and we gave each pair an instamatic camera. We then set them a task, which was to photograph anything they saw on the outside or inside of the office which related to key brand attributes. So for example, one pair might be asked to photograph anything they saw which looked “modern”, another might be tasked with photographing things which looked “boring”, another with finding design features which looked “hi tech”. They had ten minutes to explore the office in their pairs and then we reconvened the group in the office to review their pictures. The purpose of this exercise was two fold. Firstly, by giving the young people a specific task to accomplish, we gained a greater degree of commitment on their part than if we had simply asked them for their views. They found it fun and engaging, and therefore they put more effort into the task. Secondly, it allowed the young people to express themselves in a visual medium rather than insisting on the usual verbal discussion. Many respondents would have found it difficult to discuss design in an abstract way, although an essential part of the research was to explore the linkages between design elements and brand attributes. Allowing the young people to use photography gave them a visual medium to express themselves. The visual materials generated provided a resource for further discussion and also a good way to communicate the research findings to the design team.

Finally, we asked the young people to re-design the office themselves, as they would ideally like it to be. They had already spent some time discussing their ideas in the group, they had explored the office in some detail and taken photographs. So

towards the end of the group we thought we would give them the opportunity to tell us directly what they thought the office should look like. We provided coloured pens, cards, brochures and leaflets, and of course they could also use the resources available in the office and the pictures they had taken. When the young people had finished their designs, they were asked to present their ideas to rest of the group. Initially, we were uncertain whether this would yield useful results – as we have pointed out, it is commonly assumed that respondents lack the ability to generate creative ideas themselves. However, we found that the young people surprised us with the range and diversity of the ideas they came up with, many of which were valuable creative insights which could be implemented quite quickly. We believe that the young people were able to do this because we had given them sufficient stimuli to spark their imagination, we had encouraged them to access their own creativity throughout the research process, and we provided them with a range of different ways to express themselves – from telling us directly, to photography, to drawing, to simply pointing out the things in the offices which caught their attention.

4 Key Findings

The research generated a range of key findings which have been used by the Army to re-design four offices as part of a trial. In some cases, the young people's ideas could be directly implemented, whilst in others they drew attention to consumer needs which required more subtle solutions.

Some of the key findings from the study were:

- The need to re-position the offices as information centres rather than recruitment offices: the new offices have a more eye catching shop front and are described as Army Information Points, rather than recruitment offices.
- The need to divide the office into two zones – a browsing zone and a more serious interview zone. In the existing offices there was little scope for the young person to access information in their own time. They were very quickly thrust into the heart of the office and had to account for themselves, without having time to gather information or get used to their new environment. The new offices have an initial browsing area where the young person can gather information for themselves, and an interview area where they can speak with the recruiter if they wish.
- The recruiter's desk needed to be moved: in most offices, the recruiter's desk directly faces the entrance, so that as soon as the young person walks in

they are face to face with the rather imposing Army recruiter. For some young people, this was a barrier to entering the office as they were uncertain how they would be treated. In the redesigned offices, recruiter's desks have been repositioned so they do not form a barrier between the young person and the rest of the office.

- More information is freely available, enabling the young person to browse through brochures, CD Roms and the Army website in their own time in the front of the office.
- Items of Army equipment – boots, rucksacks, ammunition boxes – are available for young people to try out, to give them a better insight into what life in the army is really like and enhance their interest in joining.

The Army has conducted research comparing the reactions of those who have enquired at the re-designed offices with those of other enquirers, and the initial findings are positive. Those who enquired at the new offices were more likely to say:

- The office looked smart and attractive;
- The office had an appealing window display;
- The office was easy to get into;
- They were influenced by the outside appearance of the office and the window display in their decision to go in.

However, the enquiry rates for the new office suggest that although the new design has encouraged more young people to walk in, these youngsters may be less likely to actually make an enquiry. The traditional Army enquirer may already have informed themselves about the Army before walking in, whilst the new offices may be attracting more “window-shoppers”. Thus, more attention may need to be paid to conversion rates in the new offices, and the Army is giving its recruiters specific training to address these needs.

Thus, initial findings from the research suggest that the re-design has indeed encouraged young people to walk into the ACIOs, has given them a more smart and attractive appearance, and has made them appear less forbidding to potential recruits.

5 Conclusions

It has often been said that qualitative research is a barrier rather than a catalyst in processes of innovation and creativity – and there is some truth in this assertion, although it is often overplayed. However, we have shown that there is no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater, and that by taking a more creative and imaginative approach, qualitative research does not have to be a wet blanket, stifling rather than promoting creativity. The research process used in this study – combining elements of ethnography, photography, accompanied journeys and visits, and drawing – generated a wide range of creative insights which were of direct value to the design team, and to the Army, in achieving their creative and marketing objectives.

6 References

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