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In the public eye

Public sector market research is at once interesting, rewarding and full of pitfalls. Yet, to be effective, it must embrace market thinking, claims **Sheila Keegan**

Thirty or 40 years ago most people felt that governing was best left to the government. We were a more obedient society then. Women knew their place. Class structures kept the rest in line, and we respected figures of authority because they were in authority - well, for the most part we did. Today is very different. Leaders have to earn our respect. Society has become 'feminised': it is more egalitarian, more fluid, more overtly emotional. There are fewer shared norms. Change is endemic. If we don't like what's happening, we make our voices heard and we expect to be involved in policy decisions that affect our lives. Now we are stakeholders.

Government decision-making has, to a large extent, reflected these cultural shifts within society. As the 1999 Modernising Government White Paper states, "We must understand the needs of all people and respond to them. This too is a crucial part of modernizing

government."

One consequence of this cultural shift is that research expenditure in the public sector has grown dramatically in recent years and growth is likely to continue. The government is now one of the country's biggest advertisers.

Same beast, different spots

It's self-evident to point out that public sector research is different from commercial research. On the one hand, there can be great freedom in the fact that success is not measured by financial gain. Some brilliant advertising campaigns have resulted. On the other hand, the area is awash with political correctness, which injects a host of ethical and practical issues that are simply not relevant to most commercial research.

This often makes public sector research complex and sometimes frustrating, though, generally, the satisfaction of working within this area outweighs the problems. It's

very energising to work on. an advertising strategy to promote teenage road safety, or on communications to help parents decipher the national curriculum. It just makes you feel good.

The differences, however, between the commercial and public sectors can be

overstated. To be effective, the public sector has to embrace marketing thinking. A brand is a brand whether it is Corn Flakes or the NHS. The national curriculum, the police force, even the government itself are, in a sense, brands. Marketing government thinking and marketing brands is an integral part of public sector research and of social marketing.

The historical view is that the public sector has no competitors. This is no longer true. Private healthcare and independent schools compete with the NHS and the state education system. On a micro level, private gyms compete with local council facilities - and so on.

Merging and overlapping public and private is becoming commonplace. Competition is broadening.

Practical Issues

What, then, are the specific research issues that differentiate the commercial and public sectors? The following is by no means exhaustive, but it reflects Campbell Keegan's experience over the years of working on a wide range of public sector projects.

Establishing agreed objectives is often the first hurdle. Typically, there are different client groups with different agendas. The objectives need to be layered from broad to specific to meet these agendas. This may be time-consuming and stressful, but it protects everyone's sanity in the end.

Research samples are often complex. Different stakeholder groups with different, possibly conflicting, agendas need to be included. For example, do you include Welsh speakers within the sample to demonstrate inclusivity, even though they would be over-represented?

Research stimuli is another issue. Comparing brands, products and advertising is useful in commercial research. People can develop ideas more easily by comparing and contrasting them with others. In public sector research this may not be possible. We have to be more ingenious. Then again, the research issues themselves are often complex and sometimes hypothetical. Respondents may not have the skills to understand and comment sensibly on the areas we want to explore.

Refreshingly, samples may include people who are rarely researched. Respondents may be semi-literate or illiterate. They may not speak

English. They may come from very different cultures. They may have social or health problems.

Most researchers are white, middle class and educated. Arguably, research itself is a middle class concept. Establishing rapport with people who may have very different backgrounds, experiences and education is not always easy. It needs a good deal of self-awareness and experience to minimise nervousness, suspicion, hostility or, conversely, over-compliance

You could say that the same applies to all research, but in commercial research there is, however loosely it is perceived, a shared feeling amongst researcher and researched that the consumer culture is valid, if not desirable. After all, we focus on respondents who can afford to 'consume'.

In public sector research, it isn't always possible to control the research situation. Many years ago I conducted a paired depth with two women who suffered from a sexually transmitted disease. The women were recruited and interviewed in a special clinic, it being difficult to recruit them on the street. One was a prostitute. The other had contracted the disease some years before and it had only become evident after she was married and monogamous. It was an uneasy march. The dilemma was, did I interview one of them alone and lose the second interview or did I ignore their discomfort and interview them as a pair? I chose the latter option. I got what I needed, but I don't think it was a pleasant experience for either woman. In retrospect, it was the wrong decision, but often these decisions have to be made 'on the hoof, and you have to make the best of the situation.

Then there is the more prosaic

issue of drop-out rates. Last minute nerves amongst wary respondents can decimate a carefully planned research session. Sometimes it doesn't take much to ease the tension. Meeting in familiar pubs, clubs or cafes can allay anxiety.

Of course, not all public sector research is carried out with people who are disadvantaged.

There are those who are eager to contribute in order to put the world to rights: the man who objects to his local hospital being closed and wants to have his say, those who come to lament the state of the health service, education, poor public transport. It requires skill and sheer will power to make sure that you can keep control, keep respondents enthusiastic and also cover your own agenda.

New opportunities

Public sector research continues to evolve. It is challenging, and it forces us to address the cultural, conceptual and practical issues that arise. It keeps us on our toes and it's likely to grow. Until fairly recently, the main thrust has come from central government departments. Increasingly, however, local authorities, prompted by the requirements of Best Value, are commissioning research directly.

Research will increasingly be used to explore what might be, what we as a society aspire to, rather than just evaluating what is. This will require more creative research approaches, creative workshops, consultative panels, interactive sessions between government and the governed. New areas will open up. Exciting times. ☺

Sheila Keegan is a director of Campbell Keegan Ltd.