Reactions to the Gender and Queer Perspective: Market Research Is Empowered By Accepting Gender and Sexual Orientation As Consumer Categories

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ABSTRACT

Present-day market research is facing a crisis! This is visible in the ever greater number of products with increasingly dismal sales. Is poor consumer spending due to a lack of demand altogether or is it, as we suggest, that products are simply not meeting consumers’ needs? We blame this failed planning on the ‘customary practice’ and andro-centric framework of conventional market research, which permits neither diversity (e.g. gender and sexual orientation) among consumers nor collaboration between suppliers and consumers of a product during production. Finding methods based on gender studies to involve consumers in the process are discussed in the essay and it presents innovative solutions to this problem.

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Present-day market research is facing a crisis! This is visible in the ever greater number of products with increasingly dismal sales. Is poor consumer spending due to a lack of demand altogether or is it, as we suggest, that products are simply not meeting consumers’ needs?

We blame this failed planning on the ‘customary practice’ and andro-centric framework of conventional market research, which permits neither diversity (e.g. gender and sexual orientation) among consumers nor collaboration between suppliers and consumers of a product during production. Finding methods based on gender studies to involve consumers in the process are discussed in the essay and it presents innovative solutions to this problem.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, conventional market research, whether quantitative, qualitative or otherwise, has not always yielded the results that it could have. The underlying reason for this is that market research today seeks to confirm hypotheses regarding existing products and services. This raises the risk of problematic distortion of the statistics and the results. We believe a solution to this problem may lie not in focusing on the existing features of products nor on the products themselves, but rather, on making that which has not yet been produced the main focus of our research. What is interesting here is the question of how the collective wisdom of as yet non-existent – but nevertheless necessary or desired – products and services can be identified and then tested in terms of viability, manufacturability and marketability. We assume that consumers do know exactly what they want. However, the method of accessing these desires – and a way to express them – must constantly be reexamined.

Gender studies, diversity management and action research deliver methods for introducing diverse consumers as active participants to market research. The service “market research” for commercial enterprises can enter a new field with these methods: namely innovation development. Before any other questions such as product description, pricing, marketing communications and points of sale, we must consider the matter of innovation if constructive and creative ideas are to be successfully realized.

Action research is based on a close collaboration between usually socially conflicting parties in problem solving. What motivation do consumers (male and female) have for supporting companies in the development and conceptualizing of new ideas with a view to ultimately even influencing prices, design, communication
Research done concurrently with production eliminates some of the error that can have a particularly distorting effect in quantitative studies — we only have to look at the largely unreliable pre-election polls for an example. However, problems also exist in qualitative methods and these are repeatedly seen as of greater consequence since what good does it do a company to recognize that a product is not well-received only after it has been produced.

Asking consumers to comment on the attractiveness of a product or its packaging, or about the impact of a particular advertisement bestows on them a judgment role rather than making them part of the development process. They do not act, but simply react. Reactive methods always involve the danger that rather than eliciting authentic opinions, they result only in vague answers based on what was perceived to have been desired. This is even worse in written formats or telephone interviews since the lack of face-to-face interaction often leads to a lack of motivation and less careful consideration in answering the questions. The frequently used panel techniques can be criticized for referring to a set of data which is not restricted to any one particular product and therefore offers questionable results. There are plenty of examples in which panel market studies were of little use to the corporate clients who paid for them.

While all of the above methods are important for market research in terms of guiding the process of sales and distribution, but a new idea is needed to obtain optimal production.

To elaborate, we must ask what the reason is for and the goal of market research. Surely it is intended to protect profits, or better yet, to expand them. In this case, market research is a way to collect information!
Objective market conditions such as market potential and sales volume should be examined. To this end, the central issue must be the purpose and use of a product: Of what use is it? What purpose does it serve?

A company is interested in whether its product has been optimally designed for a certain group of consumers, and if not, then how it can be optimized for them. Of course, it must also know: which group would buy such a product? To be able to answer this, research methods must be further developed to allow these matters to be resolved: which product for which target group at what quantity produced?

The first conclusion that we can draw from the discussion above is that most of the market research done today focuses on the acceptance of a product which is already produced (after the fact). We do not yet have at our disposal, however, a pre-production method of investigating the as yet unmet needs and wishes of consumers.

Thesis 1: It is of grave consequence when product development follows today’s commonly practiced principle of trial-and-error (will it sell or not?). This results in too many rejected goods – products which do not interest buyers.

In this article, we wish to present our thoughts and suggestions on how to initiate market research production.

PROBLEMS OF MISGUIDED CONSUMER GOODS IN THE MARKET

Thesis 2: Modern production proceeds according to andro-centric discourse.

This means that the andro-centric competitive relationship between companies operates solely within the context of industrial production, thereby creating a mass of powerless consumers.

The andro-centric element, here, is that the producers are predominately males who think and act out of a male perspective, or rather, male-dominated discourse (reference Drinck/Kreienkamp 2006). The entire organization of specialized production, which consists of companies, processes, manufacture, advertising, corporate policy, hiring and managing of employees etc. is informed by this male culture. These very often white middle-aged males possess what Judith Butler calls a regulative ideal which means that they think and act according to their own models, perceptions and issues, which they themselves have defined as relevant. It is out of this regulative ideal that they decide what and in which form something should be made available to the consumer market.

What does this one-dimensional quality mean in terms of disadvantages for the product range? Conventional market research tries to ascertain how a product might look that everyone buys. But what is really the definition of “everyone”? Is it in fact possible to hit a single and optimal consumer group? We look skeptically at a definition of “everyone” and see the andro-centric implications: “Everyone” refers to whomever the legitimate voices (the manufactures, corporations and decision-makers) think it should. In order to truly define and fulfill the needs and desires of target groups, an emphasis on diversity is necessary; a term which does exist in the business world, but which has yet to be fully implemented throughout the production cycle.

Diversity (biologically and managerial) means variety! Ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, religion and physical abilities are traits that describe one’s identity, which, together with practices of Diversity Management, have become corporate assets. In the market, it means summarizing traits of different groups of customers and serving them according to their needs. But how can the needs be
identified, if hegemonial forces control companies and dictate the discourse of production?

REDEFINING TARGET GROUPS

The andro-centric approach presumes to know the needs of manifold groups and deploys the production apparatus so as to translate those needs into products and an evaluation of market suitability. Market research is designed accordingly: The interviewees become subjects for observation while the traits that define their identity, and thus motivation, remain overlooked.

Criticism of male-oriented production brings with it the problem of giving rise to generalisation and stereotype-formation. Hagemann-White (1995) discusses this problem in correlation with target groups, such as that of ‘women’. This is marked by significant uncertainty within the field of gender-research, which similarly affects market research. Namely, how can women be defined as a target-group?

The delineation of “women” as a group regularly leads to a crisis of legitimacy, since the variety among women (as among men, of course) makes them almost impossible to nail down. In limiting this group to its biological sex, a criterion of exclusion is the basis for its creation, or better said, invention: We have formed a group, which we label “women,” though it can never capture the variety among women. And furthermore, it must also be asked: How can something which has just been created then be meaningfully investigated and in which way would the results of this investigation begin to eliminate, or even overcome, real problems?

We know that market segmentation and research are always problematic, but also unavoidable, because our research is based, from the start, on a hypothetical group. With that in mind, we’ll continue with our approach for defining pools of interviewees: we aim more for diversity categories than, for example, Sinus Milieus. When we poll “women,” our groups consist of heterosexuals, homosexuals, young and old women, women of different skin colors, religions and national identities. The characteristics of products and brands that are collectively outlined by such diverse groups are, we believe, attributes of “typically ideal” products or brands and include:

- Independent consumer decision-making
- Credibility of the company
- Appreciation of people and nature
- Simplification of products and their descriptions
- Sustainability of production and distribution channels
- The ability to repair products, or repeat services

Many of these values belong under the complete heading Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR essentially defines all those activities of a business that extend beyond the purely commercial practices. Due to changing conditions (especially globalization, improved information and communications technology and changed mentalities) it has become increasingly necessary for businesses to take a closer look at their CSR practices, as they otherwise risk losing the legitimacy necessary to continue business. Society demands of companies that they accept responsibility for activities beyond their business. Out of their own interests, companies attempt to live up to these expectations and then face the challenge of developing appropriate concepts. As a result, CSR represents an opportunity to move closer towards achieving social responsibility.
UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL INTERACTION IN PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

As previously outlined, market research based on an array of previously existing products yields the problem that something that has not been produced – but is desired – is not included in the discussion.

Thesis 3: Something not yet produced could become a consumed item, were it indeed produced!

The environmental movement of the 1970s and 1980s campaigned heavily for the development and use of alternative energies in order to achieve greater sustainability of energy production. They had too little influence to enforce their demands, however. The hegemonial discourse aimed at further exploiting the available fossil fuels. A few small but innovative companies with highly vocal and socially-engaged interests successfully promoted the development of alternative energy sources. In doing so, they achieved what Foucault calls a powerful counter-discourse. The showdown between the two opposing discourses resulted in a paradigm-shift: the consumers have in the meantime been able to force even leading companies and political parties to make alternative energy an essential part of the production of energy.

Another example:
Since the time when Microsoft first achieved dominance over computer operating systems, there has been a growing group of software developers who have invested their creativity, know-how and logical thinking-abilities in the development of the operating system Linux. Their motives in doing this are social, not monetary. In the meantime, this non-commercial organization has become a publicly acknowledged threat to Microsoft’s quasi-monopoly over operating systems. Had Microsoft opportunely made its programs open to further development by users, they might have been able to thwart this problem.

Next, Wikipedia is a free online-encyclopedia which has been composed by many anonymous writers in multiple languages. The collaboration is made possible by a Wiki, a software with which any internet user can insert or edit articles in his/her browser. To ensure the accuracy and political correctness of the information, a group of selected experts or “peers” reviews the entries and, if necessary, removes them. Not only is access to the information free of charge, users are even encouraged to take part in the writing and editing of the entries. Of course, this only works, if you have access to the internet. In this way, Wikipedia manages (despite all the debate) to create a space for active participation in the discourse and delivers an essential enrichment in knowledge to its users. The principle: “Knowledge is Power” has thus been taken out of the equation and replaced by a transparency of power.

There are plenty of examples of innovative strategies in non-profit organizations where developers and manufacturers have collaborated successfully with users and consumers. Aside from the purely economical motivations of consumers there are also other motivations for economic transactions, which, as a source of innovation, have remained untouched by companies, since it seems that they cannot be integrated into the conventional model of market research and product development.

To allow counter-discourses to break through, methods are required. Moreover, the question is: what kinds of methods will provide a link between the experience of manufacturers and manufacturing companies and the wishes and needs of
consumers? It all has economic advantages: we believe that a growth in consumption will occur once the concept of “innovation” in the production process is redefined. That is to say, future innovation is possible only through a transparency of power, i.e. through the participation of consumers in the production of goods.

CONCURRENT MARKET RESEARCH IN PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT – FINDING METHODS FOR INNOVATION DEVELOPMENT

Intercultural communication experienced through Gender

As we have already seen, discourses are responsible for determining which goods are produced. Through discussion and action (negotiation and manufacture), what is created reflects our perception of the world. Perception which, in turn, reflects our own frame of reference. There are differences between men and women here:

Thesis 4: Men have different belief systems than women, they perceive the world differently than do women

Fundamental differences are found in language and communication. Communication is more than language – it involves listening, touch, looks, gestures and words. Men and women communicate differently, as Deborah Tannen stresses when she says that when men and women are having a discussion, they are involved in intercultural communication (1992: 159). The communication strategies of men and women differ so greatly, it is as if they had emerged from different cultural backgrounds. This explains the great rift in the discourses of men and women. As we have seen above, this often leads to the situation in which, through the androcentric bias of the discourse, men conceive and produce goods, without ever putting them up for scrutiny in light of the needs of women – they believe themselves to be experts; they determine which norms, images, values and role-models are held and are defined as being correct and normal (see Faludi 1995).

In order to conduct research alongside product development, with the ultimate goal being to create a product that a target-group finds attractive and useful, the methods of research must be different from those currently employed. As early as the 1980’s, Maria Mies postulated several important methodological principles for this purpose:

1. The andro-centric postulate of neutrality is useless. As we previously implied, there is no such thing as “everyone.” It is therefore wise to produce goods designed for target-groups and which is based on the principles of diversity.
2. A vertical evaluation process always leads to distorted results. Asking, or indeed, interrogating a group of consumers will elicit reactions, not actions. In order to facilitate a greater exchange of ideas, and thereby raise the quality of results in the interests of both parties, one must strive to achieve parity between researchers and their subjects.
3. It is not the status quo – i.e. how something is or how it appears to be – but change which allows us to understand how something works and in what ways it could be improved.
4. Choosing the appropriate research techniques depends on the ultimate goal. Do we wish to investigate the status quo or do we intend to change something?

An appropriate tool for innovation development is a well-known summative method of evaluating the projection process: action research.
Action research involves intercultural parties

Action research is an established method which dates back to the 1930’s when John Collier was called upon to help improve relations between whites and Native Americans. In 1964, Kurt Lewin coined the term action research to express the close cooperation that the groups had developed to identify, analyze and solve problems. At that time, he was primarily concerned with resolving social conflicts. According to French and Bell, the term action research generally refers nowadays to the usage of information gained through science and the application of the scientific method to solve practical problems (2004). This calls for scientific researchers, practitioners and laymen to work toward a solution together. The entire research process is spiral: it involves a systematic collection of empirical, as well as qualitative and quantitative data, which address the needs of consumers and their descriptions of purpose and meaning for products. The process also concerns actions to enable a change in individual variables in the system, a revised collection of data, and thereafter, the testing and assessment of those actions. The whole process runs in a feedback loop: the resultant data are assessed and initial theories are formulated, which are then checked against new information and revised accordingly.

Action research offers these particular points:

1. The problem presents itself as the result of concretely defined negative circumstances.
2. The main goal of the research is not simply to conduct tests, but to bring about practical change to the problem being investigated.
3. The problem is approached through a social process, which is designed so that no single group, not even the most powerful, can solve it alone. This is based on the Principle of Diversity.
4. The distance is bridged between the researcher, whether male or female, and the subject, in this case, the consumer and his/her purchasing behaviour. In this way, the researcher him/herself must be actively involved in the research process. This occurs through the feed-back given to participants and direct application of the results.
5. Likewise, the participant renounces his/her role as the interviewee and subject for observation, in that he/she participates actively in the discussion of goals as well as in the collection and evaluation of data.

Since the 1970s, there has been an upsurge of acceptance for action research in Germany: it has found application in all sociological and business disciplines. It is used particularly in research on gender strategies in decision-making processes. While this method cannot always be viewed as the supreme tool for creating insight and results (Thomae 1999: 5), when used concurrently with production, it stands as a meaningful and affordable alternative to conventional qualitative techniques (open interviews and group discussions), which focus solely on consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions.

Finding results with gender studies and action research for innovation development

If we examine the role of consumers up to now, both male and female, they have mainly been subjects of research, who were quizzed and observed to find out how they behave, how they react, when confronted with a potentially new article for consumption.
Yet, consumers are not just end-users; first and foremost, they are the ones who have to deal with the situation of the market and what it has to offer them. We have recently taken on various projects in this area (see e.g. Drinck/Kreienkamp 2006) and have held workshops on top-of-the-line entertainment systems and computers. As our workshops with women have shown, the way products are explained (either by the sales-person’s manner or in an instruction manual) and the way products are designed (not suited for an easy-to-manage household – cable and TV-towers – and non-user-friendly: ease-of-use without much prior knowledge – setting-up of computers, internet and telephone) leaves women feeling discriminated against. They wish to emancipate themselves from these dictates. They want to take on responsibility, they are making demands and are demanding their rights (somewhat in connection with consumer protection laws). In all, their motive is strong because it is intrinsically felt: their own needs and desires are driving their demand for equality in the selection of goods on the market. This means that women consumers have the motivation to improve the situation. As such, the cost of the investigation into needs and motives is greatly reduced (no deep psychological interviews, no drawn-out panel discussions).

If end-users or consumers are seen solely as subjects of research who are paid in order to discuss this with a researcher, the motivation is imposed externally and does not come from within. The drawback of external motivation lies in the lack of personal initiative in the conception of new products. The research subjects have to be constantly rewarded, in order to get them to take part in the evaluation process.

The producers experience a combination of motivations. They are motivated externally: their goal is to collect as much information as possible so as to be able to produce economically and sell as much as possible. They are also intrinsically motivated to experience the joy of success or triumph over the competition.

Combining gender and sexual orientation for market research

Market research conducted alongside production does not necessarily have to be tailored for strictly-defined target groups. We have just discussed one possibility in which “women” as a target group could be approached. This also makes a lot of sense if it is assumed, as it usually is, that women invariably identify themselves by way of certain symbols of identity (fashion and jewelry), rituals (a certain performance) and a set of rules and restrictions (regarding what women should and should not do) as belonging to a particular gender. This sense of belonging is also necessary and consciously desired as part of following or satisfying a need for orientation. Enlarging gender by sexual orientation gives even clearer results, as they are already being explored by leading multi-national organizations. These know that without a functioning approach to diversity, they will not be as successful as they could be.

Over the past year we have investigated how multinationals deal with expression of sexual orientation. We observe that they feel confident that diversity management has been consistently and permanently implemented only when it is seen as credible by the queer community. The sponsoring of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GBLT) organisations and events, which is open only to those companies whose workers feel free to claim non-mainstream sexual orientation, lays a foundation for reaching out to GLBT decision-makers and market players. The next step is self-evident: to open-up product development and find out the essentials for designing GLBT-friendly products. As outlined in action research, the basis of this interaction is trust and emancipation.
This is already well-established in the non-profit sector. Companies provide financial and organizational support for GLBT chambers of commerce. In return, they gain access to the members and member companies. In addition, they can build up their Supplier Diversity Programmes, since the GLBT-chamber of commerce handles the authentication of its member companies. Once this process is set in motion, the suppliers gradually become their customers. In the meantime, a company has access and can use the supplier’s market information, which could lead to the development and launch of products with higher marketability. The extent to which this process can be applied is an area for further research.

CONCLUSION

Of course, there is a certain risk that comes with pursuing market research and innovation development with the aid of the suggested method of action research. Too little protection of competitive information could reveal key innovative projects to the competition and undermine competitive advantage. This could potentially eliminate a company’s gains in knowledge or lead to an overlap of the responsibilities of producing companies and market research firms. The factor of time is always a risk: time to market determines the production process. But knowledge alone is no longer an asset; it is merely a market pre-requisite or even a commodity (Ridderstrale, 2006). Therefore, the protection of knowledge is counter-productive in the future.

It is an issue, however, worth consideration. In his book “Management in the 21st Century,” Peter Drucker engages intensively with questions surrounding change management (1999: 127f). A central topic here is innovation development and the related strategies for change. This can only succeed through an organized system of eliminating inefficiencies, a continuous optimization and consistent appraisal of success. In addition, this process requires the strength necessary to invoke a paradigm shift. Only in this way can changes in an industry, market structures or demographics be dealt with in a timely and appropriate manner. Within the suggested method of action research for evaluation begun prior to and running concurrently with production, the paradigm shift is easy to identify: Companies must capture the internal motivation of male and female consumers in a manner similar to non-profit-companies and make them true participants in the development process. This requires a lifting of borders between producers and consumers in the construction and, to a certain extent, the production process. The dispositive nature of short-term product adjustments or acceptance surveys for existing products would not be eliminated, but rather, enriched through a progressive instrument which assures future business.

As a new field in the service of market research, innovation development will become a strategic vehicle for the development of a business in the long term. The advantages are clear: opportunities for partnerships and alliances with companies where the vertical or horizontal supply-chain processes still need to be improved; fewer miscalculations in the development of new products; direct PR with the participating consumers (a personal recommendation is worth its weight in gold); no learning-curve for interviewees to overcome, as is often the case with externally motivated participants; and an increase in a company’s ability to adapt to the market, since the domination of the leading opinion can be broken through.

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