



Big Ideas: Research Can Make a Big Difference

It seems that everywhere we turn these days we see or hear something about “big ideas.” Major global companies, including the likes of Coca-Cola, Procter & Gamble, Unilever, and Diageo, are putting increasing emphasis on finding powerful, mind-blowing creative concepts to fuel their marketing communications campaigns.



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Not content to leave the appearance of big ideas to chance, these marketers are actively investing in the process of developing them. Among the notable success stories, we find the Guinness campaign that creatively affirms, “Good things come to those who wait,” and P&G’s salute to moms, based on the idea that the myriad self-sacrificing tasks of motherhood make it possible for children to grow and succeed—and maybe even become Olympic champions.

Momentum is building around the pursuit of big ideas because the stakes are higher than ever and the process has been neglected for too long. Today’s consumers face an abundance of brand choices when they shop, but too often they lack compelling reasons to choose among all the viable options. Advertisers, of course, are trying to provide shoppers with reasons to choose *their* brands, but they struggle to make themselves heard in a media environment that is increasingly cluttered and fragmented.

This is where a big idea comes in. A big idea can cut through the noise to capture consumers’ hearts and minds. A big idea can change a brand’s course for the better. Yet many advertisers have traditionally neglected the stage of research in which truly big ideas are likely to emerge.

Typically, clients focus their research energy on the brand strategy phase and then, much later, on copytesting (when it is usually too late to make significant shifts or modifications to core concepts). But in that oft-neglected space in between, advertisers have an opportunity to systematically uncover and develop the big ideas that can propel a brand’s creative communications—a chance wasted if the wrong methods are employed. In order to capitalize on this opportunity, marketers need to understand both the nature of big ideas and the best way to go about developing them.

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What Is a Big Idea?

In short, a big idea is the driving, unifying force behind a brand's marketing efforts. Of course you want to have a big idea behind your campaign—but how do you know if you really have one? What separates a truly big idea from one that is merely ordinary? How do you recognize a big idea or detect a kernel of a big idea that could be developed?

A big idea is a game-changer. It shifts paradigms and turns category convention on its head.

While consensus on big ideas is still emerging in the advertising community, we have established our own set of criteria for answering these questions. The criteria come from recent client work as well as our vast empirical learning around what drives advertising success (the ultimate outcome of all big ideas). While a big idea doesn't necessarily have to include all of the elements described below, we believe it's fair to say that the more of these attributes apply, the bigger an idea is or can be.

Characteristics of Genuinely Big Ideas

- *Big ideas resonate with consumers.* For an idea to be powerful, it must hit home with consumers in a meaningful way. It must be based on an idea that's authentic. And though it may contain a rational appeal, a big idea usually strikes an emotional chord.
- *Big ideas are disruptive.* One of most important elements for any big idea is that it is a game-changer. It shifts paradigms and turns category convention on its head. Taking distinctiveness to the extreme, a big idea represents a new way of thinking, feeling, or acting.
- *Big ideas have talk value.* The biggest and best ideas generate buzz and word of mouth. People feel compelled to share their reactions to these emotionally charged, highly resonant, and game-changing propositions.
- *Big ideas stretch brands.* A big idea pushes and extends brand boundaries without breaking them. We consider this an indicator of brand compatibility—one that accounts for believability and credibility all in one. So the question we ask is, does the idea push the brand in

positive and potentially new ways without going so far as to strain either credibility or believability?

- *Big ideas transcend cultural and geographic boundaries.* The biggest of big ideas are truly universal. Cutting across distinctions of class and ethnicity, the biggest ideas speak to people at a fundamental human level.

Big Ideas in Action

We've defined a big idea and described its characteristics. But what we have not mentioned explicitly is the connection a big idea must make to a brand. No matter how provocative or appealing a big idea may be, it won't make for an effective marketing campaign if it's not harnessed to a brand in a compelling way.

Consider the big idea developed for one of the world's leading laundry detergent brands. The very successful campaign for Omo/Persil started with a simple insight about moms: They can turn into control freaks when they're worried about their kids getting dirty. Building on this insight, the brand wanted to challenge moms to relax with this message: "Let your kids play and get dirty. It's important for their healthy development. Omo can take care of the cleaning." Valuable consumer feedback was solicited during the development process, which ultimately led to the big idea "Dirt Is Good."

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Let's think about "Dirt Is Good" in relation to our criteria for big ideas. "Dirt Is Good" had resonance because it addressed the inherent tension between moms' controlling instincts (vis-à-vis dirt) and their desire for their children to be free to grow and develop through play. Moms found the message relevant, meaningful, and evocative. Before this campaign, it could be argued that most moms (and most makers of laundry detergent) thought of dirt as the enemy, but this big idea made us think about dirt in a very different way. It made us think of dirt as an ally in our children's development. Therefore, "Dirt Is Good" was disruptive. And while the idea was relatively simple, it was quite provocative and generated buzz.



The big idea “Dirt Is Good” also stretched the brand. By asking moms to stop fearing dirt and start embracing it, the brand put itself on the line. To maintain consumer trust, it had to deliver on its promise to get clothes clean, no matter how dirty they were. Finally, in relation to the last criterion, the ability to transcend cultural and geographic boundaries, the basic premise of “Dirt Is Good” was universal—a mother’s concern for the healthy development of her children. However, the campaign did need to be modified slightly in certain parts of the world. In regions of Africa, for example, where poor sanitation is a genuine health problem, it did not seem appropriate to say “Dirt Is Good,” so in that region the idea was restated as “Dirt Is Fun.”

Research Done Right Can Help Progress Big Ideas

There are some who argue that we can’t (or shouldn’t) research our way into a big idea—that big ideas surface spontaneously or come in the form of divine inspiration to agency creatives. I disagree. There are ways to harness consumer research—both qualitative and quantitative—to not only facilitate the co-creation of big ideas, but also to make good ideas even bigger and better. Our process is designed around this fundamental belief, and therefore we incorporate the following best practices:

- *We utilize the consumer throughout.* We see a role for consumers even at the earliest stages of idea formation. With guidance and the right partners, consumers can be a source of great thinking and ideas.
- *We maintain media neutrality.* We feel that the biggest and best ideas are not specific to any medium; they should be able to come to life in any channel. For that reason, we do not develop or assess potential ideas in the context of any specific medium.
- *We are flexible on “how” but consistent on “what.”* We can adapt the means by which we conduct our research, but we remain true to the criteria and measures that we know make for truly big ideas.

Our overall approach to this research is all about the development of winning ideas. We start by scattering seeds and nurturing a crop of concepts before we even think of



thinning them out. We use qualitative research to elicit and cultivate possible ideas because, when we’re not wedded to specific wording, we can really explore, push limits, assess an idea’s potential, and possibly even stumble upon a new one. We follow this qualitative work with a quantitative assessment to validate the true power and potential of an idea. And because this research is built on a foundation of understanding how advertising works based on almost 100,000 Link studies (plus countless ads followed in tracking), it lends even greater confidence to the results of the qualitative activity.

This approach does place us at odds with some of our competitors. Many of them start with a large number of ideas and use quantitative research as their first step to cull down the list. Then they use qualitative research to refine and optimize the selected ideas.

While this may seem efficient, we would argue that this approach is flawed for a number of reasons. First, it requires a large volume of ideas up front. These ideas are typically produced hastily by agency planners and creatives as well as brand managers and internal marketing staff. Usually there is no active participation from consumers in the beginning of the process.

With this approach, an idea is “fixed” throughout the research process. It doesn’t allow for the possibility of finding out that



slightly different words would have more impact, or that combining two separate ideas into one would be even more powerful. Each idea in the quantitative test has to stand on its own as it was originally expressed; it cannot be formed or changed into something new or different in their process. So what you get from this research are a few ideas that represent the best of the bunch, as tested. However, it is hard to be confident that these ideas are strong in the absolute sense. Because their research is not based on a proven framework of what ultimately constitutes effective advertising, our competitors cannot offer the same level of confidence in their results that we can in ours.

We avoid these pitfalls with our approach by emphasizing qualitative exploration and development before quantitative assessment. To do so, we break the early-stage process into three potentially separate pieces:

- **Inspiration.** This qualitative research phase, designed to generate possible idea “territories,” puts highly creative, innovative consumers alongside agency planners, creatives, and the client. Because we use brand positioning and/or brand benefits as inputs, this approach is particularly useful when clients know in a general way what they want to say, but aren’t sure how best to say it. Ultimately, we want to determine how consumers conceptualize the positioning or benefits and make them their own. We typically execute this phase through a workshop that stresses co-creation, with specific roles for consumers, clients, and agency.
- **Development.** In this next qualitative phase, we identify the most resonant elements of potential ideas and evaluate their fit with the brand. This process tells us if we are on the right track to creating a truly big idea. Utilizing key visuals and text, we talk to category and brand users to understand factors that the big idea might leverage. This phase can be conducted via face-to-face group discussions or online using IDEABLOG (our proprietary online research platform).
- **Assessment.** The quantitative assessment phase identifies the ideas that are “biggest” and best for the brand. In this step, the ideas that came out of the development

process are packaged and presented to consumers, typically in the form of idea “manifestos” and a cluster of visuals. The ideas are evaluated on a mix of key measures, including those at the core of Link (engagement, brand associations, and motivation). Diagnostics are provided to facilitate further optimization.

We understand that client needs vary—and that the early-stage development process is highly nuanced—so we provide a flexible yet comprehensive approach. We feel that putting the emphasis on development first and then evaluating quantitatively using a proven framework for what makes advertising successful is the right and best way to research big ideas.

What Does This Mean for Marketers?

Big ideas are more important than ever. They make the creative development process flow more efficiently and more effectively, thus leading to better creative work and stronger in-market results.

But big ideas don’t just fall from the sky. You must work intentionally to cultivate them. Understanding the attributes and characteristics of big ideas is the first critical step. Then, as you apply this knowledge to your brand’s circumstances, we recommend that you approach the process in the way that is likely to be most fruitful, and that is to seed and feed your ideas before you measure them. By using dynamic qualitative techniques and involving consumers early on in the process, you’ll greatly increase your chances for coming up with big ideas that rival “Dirt Is Good.”

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