Old And New Marketing Techniques: Using Images To Penetrate The Mind Of The Global Consumer

Stream 23: Critical Marketing: Visibility Inclusivity, Captivity

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The ZMET Technique

It is becoming more and more apparent that organizations which try to understand their customers using conventional marketing tools, may lose grip on their behavior if they only consider the rational aspects that motivate them to purchase a given product or service. Many of these traditional approaches do not discover what consumers really want, because heavily influenced by the researchers’ predisposition and expectations. The main problem refers to the need to uncover the actual thoughts and feelings of customers with respect to a product, in the most unbiased or impartial way. This is particularly important when designing the marketing strategy of products in new geographical markets or new segment.

To address this issue we can distinguish two characteristic models. One consists in the conventional understanding through the analysis of explicit, rational or verbally expressed thoughts by using images and metaphors. The other defines a novel, enriching view through becoming closer to the customer. Here, I wish to contrast these two radically opposed frameworks of how multinationals engage in doing business locally or abroad. In this vein, the first model can be associated to an image of planned strategy where senior managers sit in an office and formulate courses of actions based on past experience, traditional marketing techniques, and rational control. This has been the conventional approach to strategy formulation since the 1960s, because managers assumed that it was enough to analyze correctly to predict properly. Since the first oil crises in the 70s, and the more turbulent environment experienced in the decades of the 80s and 90s where the impact of globalization made competition much fiercer and most sectors more unstable, managers have taken into account the uncertainty factor. This is why they have had to abandon the idea that planning is all there is to strategizing. The novelty consists in integrating the turbulence into a strategic plan by being aware of the changes and being sufficiently agile to incorporate them as they occur. This is why a second model of creative strategies has emerged, where it is the consumer who becomes involved in the process since the start.

The primary reason for the study of the consumers’ mind is to understand consumer behavior through their emotions. Contrary to what may be common knowledge, most consumer decisions are based on emotions, not reason. Marketing communicators can use either negative or positive emotional appeals to motivate purchases. For example, a Crest ad plaid on mild fear when it claimed that “There are some things you just can’t afford to gamble with”, referring to cavities. Hartford, on the other hand, uses humor to convince its customers that its insurance products are more appealing. An executive at the company’s ad agency explains: “Insurance is such a low-interest category…you better make people cry or laugh, or it is not going to be memorable”. Rationalization and justifications are certainly very present in customers’ decisions, but the emotional and passionate sides play an enormous role. This role, however, is often dismissed or ignored by marketing researchers because it is difficult to capture and study.

Many consumers mistrust or even resent marketing research. A few consider that marketing researchers use sophisticated techniques to probe their deepest feelings and then use this knowledge to manipulate their buying behaviors. Finally, the probing may raise privacy or ethical issues, and it has been noticed that increasing
consumer resentment has become a major problem for the research industry. For the moment, then, the question that obviously most interests us is “how” to best go about seeing the thoughts and feelings of customers more fully, without facing these problems. Let us start by describing briefly conventional marketing techniques and later we will study a new way to understand customers’ mind and feelings.

Traditional methods to understand consumer behavior in marketing research

As Peter Drucker reminds us: “There is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer… Because it is its purpose to create a customer, any business enterprise has two - and only these two - basic functions: marketing and innovation.” This statement emphasizes the pivotal role of marketing in business. It implies first that markets do not exist automatically and second, that effective demand depends on customers that are created through marketing activity. In substance, it stresses that the customer essentially dictates the directions and dimensions of what constitutes a business. Focusing on the marketing area, we can argue that marketing today must be understood in the sense of satisfying customer needs. Thus, its actions must start long before a company has a product and must consist of managers’ efforts in bringing about a good that reflects the needs, wants and ability to purchase of future clients (creating a product whereby innovation is key). If the marketer does a good job of understanding consumer needs, develops products that provide superior value and prices, distributes and promotes them effectively, these products will sell very easily.

Conventionally, it is agreed that the marketing process consists of:

1. Analyzing marketing opportunities
2. Selecting target markets
3. Developing the mix
4. And managing the marketing effort.

The main idea behind this model is to connect with customers by making them central to the whole process. Thus market segmentation seeks to group and serve in various ways the many types of customers by identifying geographic, demographic, psychographic and behavioral factors common to each. These market segments allow a company to identify those consumers who will respond in a similar way to a marketing effort. The targeting process then seeks to evaluate each segment and assess its attractiveness. For example, General Motors says that it makes a car for every “person, purse and personality.” Finally, market positioning fulfills the goal of locating a product in the minds of target consumers, in a clear and distinctive place relative to competing products.

Once the company has chosen its overall competitive marketing strategy, it will define its marketing mix composed of a set of controllable and tactical tools to produce the response it wants in the target market. The famous four Ps - product, price, place and promotion - constitute the broad group variables that provide a company the means to influence the demand of its products. In this marketing process, however, the key to this flow of actions can only be the marketing information. Success will depend on the accuracy and quality of the information collected about the customers and their probable future behavior with regard to the product.

Managers need to support their marketing decisions with data and they usually
start by gathering secondary data. It consists of information that already exists somewhere such as commercial reports (i.e. Nielsen Marketing Research) or computerized databases (i.e. Dialog or Lexis-Nexis). Obviously, secondary data can be obtained quickly and at a lower cost than primary data. There are, however, significant disadvantages such as not providing data about up-dated customers’ reactions to a newly implemented change to the product. Hence, in most cases companies turn to primary sources of information.

Under the research approaches for primary data, one of the main methods consists in observing consumers. Observation of relevant people’s actions and product situations provides actual and exploratory information useful in rapid decisional processes. Survey research is an approach best suited for gathering descriptive information, since the survey will directly ask people about their knowledge, attitudes, preferences and buying behavior. There is a vast literature on how to build successful surveys as it is also the most widely used method to collect primary data. The main advantage is its flexibility. Last, there is the experimental research, which is best suited for gathering causal information. Experiments allow marketing managers to explain cause and effect relationships. But how are causes discovered? The answer to this question is complex and philosophical. It entails answering by understanding first to a large extent how cause itself is viewed. “The most basic assumption we typically make about human beings is that they can reason and in reasoning they aim at rationality. This is so even though attributing rationality to an action entails evaluating that action against some standard about which there can be disagreement.”

Information can be collected by various tools such as mail, telephone, personal interview (individually or in group) and online. Personal interviewing takes two forms: individual and group interviews. Again, individual interviewing involves talking to people, whether in their homes or offices, on the street or shopping malls, with trained interviewers who are able to probe correctly as the situation requires. Then there is the focus group, which has become one of the major marketing tools for gaining insight into consumer thoughts and feelings. However, doing this marketing research is far from being easy. Questionnaires are long and tedious. The response rate may be very low which increases the problem of sampling and generalizing from the responses. Telephone interviews represent a higher cost than questionnaires and people may not want to talk about personal issues. Most importantly consistency amongst the different interviewers may be lost along the way and may skew the results. Cost wise personal interviews can amount to four times as much as telephone interviewing. Focus groups are thus not only expensive but also time consuming. It may be hard to generalize from these small samples. In addition, because the researcher has more freedom than personal interviewers the problem of objectivity may become even greater.

Marketers have used these methods for decades. The results have not always been satisfactory, however, mainly because of the quality of data. Marketers often complain that they lack enough of the right kind of information or have an overload of the wrong kind. ZMET on the other hand offers three advantages. Historically, qualitative research appeared in 1941 with Columbia University sociologist R. Merton. He conducted the first focus group. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, markets were affected by many drastic changes. Companies came to realize that with an average of 30,000 items in the shelves of conventional American supermarkets, the introduction of something like 17,000 new products a year (base 1996) and the Internet shaping new dimensions to attract customers, methods of
market research needed to be ameliorated. Usually data on qualitative marketing approaches confirm Zaltman’s disbelief about more conventional techniques. He points out: “Most new products are developed and launched using those techniques. And 60 to 80% of all new products fail”. Even standard focus groups may have outlived their usefulness. People often “lie” about their real feelings if the rest of the group disagrees with them, and their memories may not always be fresh about your company’s products or services, thus severely limiting the quality of focus groups’ data. What Zaltman observed, and we will soon come to explain how he developed his hypotheses, was basically that first researchers usually are so caught up in the literal, that they neglect the metaphorical. Second, market researchers do not understand the human brain as a key processing centers of images, symbols and deeply rooted meanings. Third and final they do not speak the adequate language.

**Reading the customer’s mind through images and metaphors: ZMET**

Tom Brailsford, a manager of technological research at Hallmark, who has used ZMET for studies on both mothers and memory, said he had found the technique impressive. “It really does touch a part of consumers you cannot get to with any other technique I have ever seen”. Most other traditional marketing tools elicit literal descriptions of user activities and needs. It is then the researcher who attempts to abstract generalities about those consumer’s habits. Unfortunately, what seems to happen very often, is that there is not only a mismatch between the researcher’s interpretations and the consumer’s deeply rooted abstract thinking, but also, it is not that consumers will not tell you what is on their minds. It is that they cannot.

ZMET is a way of advancing marketing research by allowing people to understand their own thinking (including values, beliefs and behaviors) more fully, presumably with the least possible intervention from researchers. It offers a relatively simple approach whereby individuals get to share their thoughts and feelings with trained marketing researchers. In a nutshell, it surfaces basic constructs and ideas about a product service or objects in general. Then it allows participants to highlight the connections among their inner views. As a method, it builds on current research and thinking in such diverse fields as cognitive neuroscience, art and literary criticism, visual anthropology, the philosophy of mind and psycholinguistics. Professor Gerald Zaltman of the Harvard Business School (HBS) is the founder of the technique. **Table 1** describes how he came up with the idea. Since beginning using ZMET nearly ten years ago now, the technique has been applied to more than 200 cases. Some of these are part of Zaltman’s own academic research carried out at the Mind of the Market Lab within the campus of the HBS. Others are driven by the private consulting firm - the Olson Zaltman Associates (OZA). A sample of the corporations that appear in their client list includes DuPont, General Motors, AT&T and Christian Dior. These clients are usually reluctant to unravel all the findings derived from the ZMET results for fear of exposing company secrets to competitors. In general though, they praise the technique itself and recognize its novelty together with the value it adds.

ZMET differs from more habitual market research tools mainly because it addresses the right side of the brain. That is the side which controls a person’s emotions or feelings. The dimension of consumer motivation, which is traditionally used, may be referred to as the rational side or left side. Rational decisions include decisions made on the basis of value, habit, price, immediacy, speed and product features, such as user friendliness, that eliminate anxiety, hard work and other
negative emotions on the part of the end user. Traditional marketing tools exploit mainly this left side of the brain because that part makes the more rational, logical and sensible decisions. Hence companies know they will tap into hard facts. Also, this side is the one that easily communicates as it uses the conventional language based on logic. Hence, it can be successfully tapped into by marketing researchers with questionnaires, telephone or personal interviews. Focusing on the left side is necessary because consumers do not actively think about their motives for purchasing a product all the time. However, they experience these motives and act on them.

Normally, it is difficult to ask directly about these motives or talk to the right side of customers’ brains because people need to reflect about them. They also need to open up a more private side of their experiences. To make things worse, it has been proved that for most products, decisions are made on the basis of emotions. This is especially true for goods in the fields that involve recreation, fashion, cosmetics and other areas where discretionary income accounts for the largest share of purchases. So marketing to the mind is fundamental for these industries, since ZMET addresses issues of how to motivate consumers to buy your products and keep them loyal, all the while satisfying both their rational as emotional needs. ZMET manages to tap into the right side of the brain because it speaks to memory through images. It also pays attention to the more metaphoric dimension of spoken language to grasp consumers’ unconscious references to a product.

Communication specialists agree that about 80% of all human communication is non-verbal or silent. A high percentage of the meaning contained in any message is not the one conveyed by words. But images follow their own framework. Accordingly, visual representations are processed differently and are not necessarily subject to the same logical scrutiny and counter-arguing. In addition, because they are more dominant and internal to thinking, they have an increased potential of affecting attitudes.

ZMET uses pictures as the stimuli for the storytelling process. Furthermore, the technique emphasizes metaphors, as the linguistic images that purport the customers’ assignment of meaning to the topic discussed. Understanding customers’ metaphors - which are a sort of knowledge representation - related to a brand, is the key to make use of customers’ experience, understanding and memory. From a communication standpoint, the use of metaphors as units of thought is of great importance to marketing. What the discussion of an image chosen by a participant does is precisely eliciting metaphors that are rooted in image schema. By contrasting patterns of our sensory experience - that is what we see from our memory in a picture - with a projection of this experience into our abstract understanding, we come to organize that sense making process.

As explained later, the main part of a ZMET interview consists in providing people with the opportunity to tell ‘their stories’ about images they collected. Storytelling is the window onto the customer’s mind. It is in the interaction of images and the use of both metaphoric and literal language that researchers have the greatest chance to uncover consumers’ mental constructs. The shared properties thus between vehicle and topic - in this instance between an image that best represents thoughts and feelings about a product - constitute our abstract understandings. These models usually remain hidden as tacit knowledge but consist, however, in the primary components of our mental constructs guiding action. To tap into those is like finally talking to the right side of the brain and gaining the useful and relevant kind of
Images can become very effective objects through which the process of surfacing hidden or unconscious thoughts is enacted. “What a person notices [in a picture] will always mirror the inner map that she or he is unconsciously using to organize and understand what the senses are perceiving”\textsuperscript{11}. Relationships among associated thoughts can then lead onto causal models used by consumers to make sense of a product, brand or organization. Finally, ZMET assumes that both reason and emotions co-mingle and need to be considered jointly as a very productive mix allowing researchers to operate on both dimensions rather than merely stressing one over the other, and making a decision tilt in the wrong direction.

Marketing managers face many problems. Perhaps the most significant is that of offering a product to the most appropriate customer. The need to thus segment the market - which should ensure loyalty and positioning - while also spreading costs through sufficiently large groups of purchasers - is a well-known strategic tradeoff. More recently, the trend has been then to pay greater attention to what are called human universals, because it has been shown that some traits and behaviors are found in all, or virtually all societies. Universals represent either a specific need or the source of that need to which a product or service should be linked to render it interesting to consumers. The importance of universals in the target markets is about monitoring change that may signal greater or lower standardization for the company. Universals may not necessarily lead to a marketing attribute but may be helpful in understanding the kind of depth needed for some product uses. Finally, I wish to stress the fact that all societies have metaphors expressing universals. If marketers learn how to study and analyze the dominant metaphors - through the interpretation of cultural maps and mental schemes revealed by the right side of the brain - then they may use the meaning of these universals for different cultures. This is why metaphors are at the center of ZMET and play a role at both levels: the linguistic and the cognitive.

**ZMETs procedure\textsuperscript{12}**

Now, we can describe the typical procedure followed with ZMET. Normally, a total of 25 customers are recruited to participate in a project. After qualifying for participation - based on screeners who chose them according to demographics and level of product consumption - customers are given a set of instructions and guidelines about the research topic. It can be about a brand name, a service concept, a product use or design, and so on. They are instructed to collect pictures from magazines, books, newspapers or other sources, whether personal or public. The condition is that these pictures must best represent what the topic means to them. A personal interview with a specially trained ZMET researcher is then scheduled approximately seven to ten days hence. The personal interview held with each individual separately involves a guided conversation that tends to last at least an hour and a half, and whose detailed steps, 1 through 8, are described in Table 3. Then it is followed by a session of half an hour of digital imaging, step 9 in that same table. In this last step in which the participant is actively involved, the digital imager first scans the interviewee’s pictures into the computer. Then the participant is asked to produce a collage of the most important images. Thanks to the software this unified image can be modified (background may change color, characters can be added or lost, light may be improved, and so on). The purpose is to re-create a holistic understanding of the consumer’s thoughts and feelings about the topic, which is stored digitally and used
eventually by the marketing researchers to illustrate the consensus map. In step 10 of Table 3, researchers create the causal model by linking important constructs or concepts from all personal interviews. That is a map built mainly on two criteria linked to the mental constructs. Constructs - or ideas that can be summarized as a concept - are included in the model according to first the number of participants who mention them, and second to the number of participants who mention a relationship between two constructs. This map becomes the transcription of what most people think and what they think about, most of the time. In that way researchers seek to organize the data under a structure that can guide marketing managers to devise the best advertising strategy. In the table the whole process is detailed following the ten ZMET steps. Table 4 provides detailed information about the kind of questions required during the probing with its three types of laddering.

An application of ZMET: the Zen Co.

To better understand the value of this methodology, let us explore one example of a well-known beverage company that used ZMET. The name of the company, however, is disguised for privacy reasons. Table 5 provides an additional illustration of what companies learned using this technique, experiences that could hardly have been done with traditional marketing methods based on literal language and solely rational explanations.

The study was conducted in 2001 in Europe and the USA. Small groups of paid volunteers in northern, central and southern cities of this country were asked to spend a week collecting a dozen pictures from any source they wanted, with the goal to find those that would best represent their thoughts and feelings about the Zen Co. product. Then, individually they discussed their images during the one and a half-hour private interview with the ZMET specialist.

Once the participant was seated in a special room, the interview started following the first eight steps described in Table 3. It is mostly during the step 4 that the storytelling about each picture occurs and where most of the probing is enacted. This part is the richest in terms of examples, metaphors, universals and mental schemes. The laddering process - the questioning that reveals the psychological consequences of outcomes of a construct or mental mode as shown in Table 4 - was key to unraveling the deep structures about the product. Finally, participants created a digital collage with their most important images and recorded a short story about its meaning. The data led the researchers to develop a consensus map which changed the meaning of the company’s advertising campaign.

First of all, there are some obvious attributes of the Zen Co. drink raised in these ZMET personal interviews. These attributes should not be a surprise to the reader with respect to the consensus map because we are talking about a drink that is rather common in most Western societies. Attributes relate for example to the sensory dimension of the drink. People talk about the Zen Co. product as a carbonated soft drink, with caffeine, sugar, and which contains something that “tastes good”. What consumers report is thus a tinkling in the mouth associated with the bubbles, a feeling of cooling down, together with references to the sweetness of its taste that remains nonetheless unique because of the special identity of Zen Co. All these aspects are vital in the construction of a mental map, but not enough.

Usually, when laddering down occurs and participants are asked to describe
some of the instances in which they use the Zen Co. product, they refer to social gatherings. These include parties, family reunions or meetings with friends where the Zen Co. product is consumed. This then immediately relates to the happy and fun feel produced by this drink. The sensations are mostly positive, like feeling good or better, becoming energized, and even rejuvenated. More so, there is also reference to comfort and security, because no matter where a person is in the world, around foreign people, the Zen Co. product allows this person to access a cozy drink that makes one feel safe. Consumers recognize it by its consistent and reliable taste. Most participants also acknowledge the fact that Zen Co. ads are everywhere. The color combined with the jingles and some of the most recent icons are part of most Zen Co. product consumers’ cosmology. People mention them as they see them as a universal preference. Some pictures are described in Table 6.

Participants are directly quoted in the Table 7. In their words, we can see that their comments differ from the data collected in a conventional personal interview because they have related the emotions of specific situations with the fact that Zen Co. produced them. This therefore directly tells the researcher, without need to re-interpret such information, what the users of the product experience, feel and associate with that particular brand. It is in fact the wording used and the metaphors that emerge from the storytelling that are so unique to the method.

“Metaphors” in ZMET are treated as the engine of imagination and the window onto the deep thought structures, organized in the minds of people as stories. Again, in this instance it can be seen that Zen Co. product is compared to a drink that gives peace, helps continue in daily activities, transforms and gives energy. These are quotes from other interviews: “Drinking it is like an oasis in the desert; it is like an intermediary, it makes people come closer and then wars could end; it is like a journey home, during Christmas one a year and everything changes that day; it is like a border thing: part of the everyday routine and yet special, out of the ordinary and for special events”. All these analogies show the importance of relating the drink to a series of complex emotions. This depth in the data would never emerge if you were asking the participants in a conventional interview to tell you what the drink does for them. They would probably all answer, and stop at that definition, that the drink quenches thirst, tastes good and energizes because of its sugar content.

Thanks to this depth, the study eventually led to a different advertising campaign. It brought about the new untapped meaning of the drink. Before it, most ads focused on the sense of calm, tranquility and relaxation. This new approach arrested the advance of other new age drinks by reinforcing in the consumers’ mind the idea that, what they need most, is a break from their hectic life, a break they can get by drinking their favorite brand.

It is true that the quotes in Table 7 highlight the feelings of invigoration and sociability, but that is not all. The company has already emphasized during the last three decades in its advertising campaigns these attributes of happy, lively and sociable feelings by either representing parties, sports events, music concerts or merry images of Christmas time. In fact, the company has perhaps exploited them for far too long. Its intention was to reconsider the product’s essence and exploit its greater complexity. Looking more closely at some of the attributes, researchers could also find notions of continuation, completion, trust and relaxation. The latter are definitely more personal and perhaps even more hidden dimensions of the product. It is by laddering on the stories associated to the pictures, that is penetrating the consumer’s
mind with the insistent probing, and making constant reference to the images, that this information was obtained. Our understanding of consumers’ behavior was changed when participants reported some of the concepts shown in Table 8.

From both tables, we see that the physical and psychological outcomes of drinking the product can be connected to a perception of the drink that until now has not been capitalized upon by the ads. What may thus seem to be a paradoxical essence of the fizzy drink, the sort of tranquility we would rather embody in a chamomile tea or a glass of milk, becomes the new focus which researchers and Zen Co. managers started to investigate. It is actually neatly summed up by a digital image taken from an actual ZMET interview (step 9 of Table 3). This digital image represents a Buddhist monk meditating in a crowded soccer field. “The big insight was that the Zen Co. product is really two drinks in one. The company had really been marketing half a Zen Co. product”. This is not just anecdotal. To impress the point on its division presidents during a meeting in Vienna, the complimentary Zen Co. bottles lining up the conference table, were deliberately served only half full. The message was clear.

In 2001, Zen Co. needed to launch a different campaign. The sales of its main brand had been eroded by domestic market saturation and to some extent by the war waged against its main rival. What was really hurting the company, however, was the massive introduction of new age drinks. The latter include anything from healthy fruit juices, to soothing exotic teas or infusions, mineral waters and to a large extent power drinks. Just to give some figures, sales for the energy and stimulant drinks market grew 366% between 1996 and 2000. This is such a significant growth that this $615 million market is now increasing at a faster rate than the other category. However, ZMET research showed that Zen Co. product could be positioned directly against new age drinks based on its relaxation dimension. Some outdoors advertising pictures in the streets of Spain during the winter months of 2002 showed the following: people laying down in the grass while admiring a beautiful mountain. A little girl watching a fishbowl with only one red fish in it, or a couple embracing whose two pairs of legs was the only part of their bodies shown in the background while a unique yellow daisy sits in a Zen Co. plastic bottle.

The story of one can

Finally, let us see next how a single case - although an extreme one - can exemplify the way in which special information is being revealed in the interviews and how that can be considered by researchers given the importance consumers attribute to a product. In the story below the participant shows how she projects feelings onto the container of the drink, that most consumers associate with its color red, and then uses this object to overcome difficult emotional times.

This is one of those stories collected during the last interviews in Spain and which, to my knowledge best exemplifies the type of quality that can be gained from a thorough ZMET application. I was faced with a teenager participant who brought to the interview “a picture with friends”. She described the image as a group of young people having fun and related such image to the Zen Co. product as the drink that makes you feel good and more lively. Then the discussion led to a situation in which the participant said that the good feeling was also a way of making a parenthesis from everyday life and forgetting unpleasant things. While probed, this participant provided an example of a situation she considered it would help me understand the way she thought and felt about the product. She remembered an instance where she
felt guilty. Rationally, she had no specific reason for feeling that guilt. Naturally, however, this kind of emotions brings her down. She said that this situation means that you need to start over again or to get back to life.

As an explanation for this circumstance, the participant then raised the following story. Two years earlier, her cousin died in a car accident. This family member was the participant’s best friend and had always spent a lot of time in her company. When the participant found out about the sudden death, she experienced numerous feelings. The most striking one was a sense of ‘guilt’. During that same day, however, she recalls sitting in the kitchen, pondering and meditating the dreadful event, while picking up a can of the Zen Co. product from the refrigerator. She drank it directly from the can. At that moment, the participant felt that the drink was having a peculiar effect on her: it was providing a slow but substantial relief from the burden of guilt. This action helped her to get back to life. It also made her reflect about her feelings vis-à-vis a death for which she was obviously not responsible. She finally attributed to that Zen Co. moment, her ability of having overcome the ordeal and she decided to save the can rather than throw it away after she drank its content.

Furthermore, she kept on telling that later some good friends disappointed her and made her cry, just the week before the interview. Accordingly, the participant reverted to her can - that is she picked up the same aluminum container from which she had drunk during her cousin’s mourning - and which she had preciously kept as a symbol of her recovery from guilt. She poured the drink in it and drank out of that same symbol-loaded can, because she believes that it is endowed with special recovery powers. Now, whenever she undergoes something unpleasant or simply similar to the feeling of being in the mood of meditating, she goes back to filling that very same can and drinking out of it to help her in the process. In the end, she concluded that the best way to make peace with her friends was to go to them and talk. She did so and eventually solved the misunderstanding. In that way, for her, it is the can of Zen Co. product that makes her ‘see’ things in a better light, that makes her feel good again about herself and eventually allows her to go to other people. For her, as for many other participants, the drink unites, makes people value other people, and make them be valued. Again we notice here deep metaphors and constructs about internal transformation, connecting with self and others, of renewal or rebirth, and of psychological balance.

This story is not unique. It is just more concise and perhaps lugubrious under the death circumstances. But it is not so singular because amidst the symbolic attribution, the many metaphors and the learning of the story, we encounter a common pattern already hinted at with the human universals. Reading this interview a researcher may face various interpretations. Here I list just a few:

1. The participant is mentally disturbed and requires psychiatric help;
2. Her story hides a deeper meaning for marketing researchers interested in the relationship between the brand and consumer behavior;
3. The can of product has a miraculous dimension, this is not a universal perception but may be exploited in future advertising campaigns;
4. The product including its package is not exactly miraculous, but has been endowed with morphological characteristics that provide a mirror for what the consumer experiences and how the consumer uses such product to fulfil its desires.
We opted for the last interpretation as it also fitted with the other data obtained from the interviews and the consensus map. The product borders the magic but needs to be positioned at a real level for consumers hence aiming at emotional transformation based on the peaceful sensation. What the Zen Co. product provides - going now backwards from the product to the mental constructs - is more than simple energy to enjoy life. Rather, it allows its consumers to transform an external situation into an internal process which constitutes the key turning point for being able to manage such a situation (e.g. in sports, at work, in personal experiences and emotional turmoil). This bracketing or meditation - like the monk in the crowded soccer stadium - are clues that shed a totally new light to the understanding marketers have had so far about the fizzy drink.

**Final remarks**

There are very few industries, if any, in which the consumer does not matter. Perhaps, in a simplistic way one could argue that the highly inelastic sectors are those which will set aside the role of the marketing function. Accordingly, the marketing function is important to most if not all organizations. The main advantage of ZMET is that customers collect their own pictures and they - not the researchers - are in control of the stimuli used in the guided conversation. It provides a meaningful support for customers to discuss their knowledge, beliefs and expectations about a product, by tapping into the previously unconsidered customer issues. Since ZMET makes extensive use of non-visual sensory images - addresses the metaphoric and cognitive dimensions of a product’s meaning to the consumer - it is a technique that in many ways changes our understanding of the marketing applications and opportunities.

Moreover, because ZMET uses trained personal interviewers and a fixed number of steps, with semi-structured questions, it reduces the problem of consistency amongst responses. Second, it is relatively inexpensive, considering that a project may cost between 20,000 and 40,000 Euros but offers substantial improvements on the kind of data obtained. Finally and most significantly, it pays attention equitably to both sides of the brain, the cognitive and emotional, by using the correct metaphorical language necessary to tap into not just the thoughts but also feelings of consumers. In conclusion, in today’s complex and rapidly changing environment, marketing and corporate strategy managers need more and better information to make effective and timely decisions. The main reason to use ZMET is that companies are capable of finding out about their customers’ real thoughts and feelings, can generalize about them, and use this information to better advertise.

However, implementing the technique is not as easy as it may seem. Considerable interviewing practice is required to conduct the interview. The interviewer must be sensitive to the issue of customer fatigue - the individual interviews may last up to two hours, or to personal matters that may be traumatic or very private. The response rate for this type of interviewing is very high compared to most other techniques, and that is encouraging. Despite the cost and time involved it does prove to generate much richer and useful information for marketing managers. With respect to visibility the technique allows to lock-in, certainly in an inclusive way the customer. It makes him in fact the source of surveillance. Managers may want to assess ZMET relevance to their market before using it. Nonetheless, precisely because our modern era offers a sometimes chaotic and fast-changing world, we may need to go back and rediscover the value of good “stories”.

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Table 1: The origin of the technique

Zaltman dates his novel insight about vision and cognition to a 1990 vacation in Nepal with his wife. He was propelled there by three divergent interests: photography, cognitive neuroscience, and anthropology. The aim was to document through photographs, periodic markets that meet in rural areas of the Nepalese territory. It occurred to him that although he would seek objectivity, his photographs would eventually be representing his own view of these commercial activities. He then contacted Eastman Kodak that generously offered plastic cameras and 650 rolls of film. In this way, once in Nepal, he distributed the material and provided locals with the following assignment: “Assume that you are going to leave this village and move somewhere else. What pictures would you take with you to show others in the new place what your life was like here?”

The villagers were then contacted again through a translator once the films had been developed and prints were distributed to the original photographers. Zaltman explains: “We had people talk to us about what these photographs meant. What it revealed to me was the inadvertent arrogance of the idea that unsophisticated people did not have sophisticated thoughts. In fact the stories these people told about these images were amazingly complex”. For instance, he recalls most of the pictures showed people with the feet cut off. One could have blamed the photographers’ technical ability to operate a camera. But in the discussion of the images, villagers revealed that bare feet were a sign of extreme poverty and even though most of them went without shoes, they preferred to hide that piece of information to the outside world. This became another important message in the construction of what that community selectively and consciously chose to stress and value.

Back in the United States, Zaltman began experimenting with a new methodology drawing on the former observations and soon integrated his knowledge about some of the breakthroughs in neuroscience. In the end, he began to map a new approach to marketing. Following what has now become one of his favorite themes, namely that “Everything we see hides something else we want to see”, he progressed towards crossing those conventional disciplinary boundaries that often smother one’s academic orientation instead of enriching it.
### Table 2: Types of universal qualities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
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<tr>
<td>Need novelty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smile</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transform the human body</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impose order on the universe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish cause</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create a religion that holds serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moral “oughts” grounded in conceptions of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the way the world is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience inner states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropomorphize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use red, white and black to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>symbolize the same things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use words whose meanings are transparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and opaque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ 13 semantic primes in language:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I, you, someone, something, world, this,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>want, not want, think of, way, imagine, be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a part of, become”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: Core Steps Tested

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: Storytelling</th>
<th>Customer describes the content of each picture they brought in</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Missed images</td>
<td>Customer describes the pictures she was unable to obtain and explains their relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Sorting task</td>
<td>Customer sorts her pictures into meaningful piles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Construct elicitation</td>
<td>A modified version of the laddering technique (that is of probing with specific questions: see Table 4) are used to elicit basic constructs and their relationships; the pictures serve as stimuli for the in-depth storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5: Most representative picture</td>
<td>Customer indicates the picture that is most representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6: Opposite images</td>
<td>Customer describes pictures that represent the opposite of the task; e.g. “what is not Nike”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The six senses are used to add more depth to the concept and the effects that the product causes on to the consumer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 7</th>
<th>Sensory images: descriptions are elicited of what does and does not describe the taste, touch, smell, sound, color and emotion of the concept being explored</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Through the whole process of questioning from the researcher and storytelling from the customer, a mental map emerges highlighting the deep metaphors and roads that lead one concept to the other(s)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 8</th>
<th>The mental map: customer creates a map or causal model using the constructs that have been elicited through ladder ing (see Table 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Digital imaging:** a collage is created from the pictures into the computer that best exemplifies the mental map of the customer with yet a new digital image

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 9</th>
<th>The summary image: customer with assistance from a technician creates a summary image using digital imaging techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Mapping:** researchers gather the information obtained from both the right and left sides of the brain and create a map that will be used by marketers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 10</th>
<th>Consensus map: researchers create a map or causal model involving the most important constructs that may be used in marketing</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 4: Laddering as the questioning that revels the deep mental constructs of participants and typical questions associated to it

1. Laddering out: expanding horizontally the concept seeking for synonyms, parallels and other related issues. The questions ask about the concept with respect to other notions, or just repeat the concept so that the participant may just bring it back and talk more about it.

2. Laddering up: looking for the consequences caused by the feeling or thought mentioned by the participant. The questions seek the origin of the phenomenon by asking why, and then elaborate on the advantages or disadvantages of it.

3. Laddering down: looking for the causes of the phenomenon. The questions try to bring about other issues that would lead the participant to feel or think that which is under investigation and other similar circumstances the researcher may relate to.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ladder Out</th>
<th>Ladder Up</th>
<th>Ladder Down</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Repeat the word “X”</td>
<td>Why?</td>
<td>What leads you to “X”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you mean by “X”?</td>
<td>What are the consequences</td>
<td>What is the cause of “X”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of “X”?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you talk more about</td>
<td>How does “X” make you</td>
<td>Can you tell me of some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“X”?</td>
<td>feel?</td>
<td>instance in which “X”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a relationship</td>
<td>What do you gain with “X”?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>between “X” and “Y”?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are “X” and “Y” similar or</td>
<td>What does “X” give you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different in any ways?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Glenda Green, a market research manager at DuPont, which manufactures fibers for women’s hosiery, said: “Conventional research told us that women most hated wearing panty hose. We did tremendous research - telephone interviews, mall-intercept interviews, everything you can think of. Nonetheless, we thought there was a dimension of this we were missing”[^1]. Then professor Zaltman was invited to take a closer look at the issue. As usual, he first asked: “What are your thoughts and feelings about buying and wearing panty hose?” To answer, women initiated the process of selecting about a dozen pictures from magazines, catalogs and family photo albums that best represented their thoughts and feelings. During the individual interview with the ZMET researcher these pictures were used to undergo a thorough interrogation of about two hours, followed by a session with a digital imager to produce a general collage of the most significant images.

It is reported that women brought images of steel bands strangling trees, of twisted telephone cords, and of fence posts encased in a tight plastic wrap. This is a straightforward link to the uncomfortable perception of hosiery, but they also chose picture of two African masks hanging on a bare wall, of an ice-cream sundae spilled on the ground, of a luxury car and of flowers peacefully resting in a vase. Here is the much more subtle part that requires great skills and a solid method to figure out what was meant by these consumers. When the subjects discussed each picture with the specially trained interviewer-cum-therapist, the discovery was that: women do indeed hate wearing panty hose. Nonetheless, it is more complicated than that: it is not so much that women have a black and white vision of nylons, namely love-hate relationship. Rather they have a like-hate relationship which enables the company producing them to gently play around the many hints revealed by the method.

Green recalls. “We got intensity, texture, and depth that we had never gotten from other studies. This was the first time we heard positive things that we could act on”. What became evident was that the mixed relationship showed aspects of the product that could be used to improve its image. For example, the person who picked the image of the fence posts encased in plastic wrap also chose the picture of the vase of flowers: wearing the panty hose made her feel thin and tall. The expensive car represented the feeling of luxury. Finally, the images also brought out subtleties related to more intimate sexual issues. As Green remembers: “Women would say, they make my legs feel longer, why is it important to have long legs? Because men like long legs. Why do men like long legs? Because they are sexy. And eventually women would say they wanted to feel sexy to men. You do not get that in a straight interview”[^1]. These findings then led hosiery manufacturers and retailers to alter their advertising contents to include not only images of super competent career women but also images of sexiness and allure.
Table 6

Typical pictures: mascot from the Expo of Seville; child having the drink; a light bulb; a picture of a road next to the sea in a Northern city of Spain; picture of a mother; of friends during a party at home; lakes from Finland; football stadium with lots of people; view of a beach in a sunny day; USA flag; glass with ice cubes; numerous empty glasses.

Table 7

Everyone can drink the Zen Co. product regardless of age, everyone likes it; people know what it is, it has been there for such a long time; it is perfect; Zen Co. product… it is a bit of love, something you do not want to let go and do not want to give up; Zen Co. product is part of life; it is not going to change, I know it is good, I know this for sure; there is no doubt in the brand Zen Co.

Table 8

I drink the Zen Co. product to relax; it makes me calm and happy; it provides a ‘quiet’ moment during the day; erases stress and represents a break; allows me to get some peace; I can then continue working and feel good; drink it and you are able to do homework; allows you to continue with doing an activity; can give me something like love and faithfulness.


Ibid. p. 65.


Ibid.

Ibid.

OZA is a consulting group founded with marketing professor Gerald Olson of Pennsylvania State University and whose headquarters are in Boston, MA.


