

Foundation Research

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This paper tackles the perennial and thorny subject of how research can contribute positively to the creative development process for advertising. It isn't by any means the first paper on the subject; nor do I expect it to be the last. It is the sequel to a paper on 'Researching Creativity' I presented at the Admap conference on 'The Importance of Creativity in Advertising' in March 2001; and it looks towards a way of using research to help feed the development of - and give teams the confidence to support - more potent, impactful and ownable creative expressions of brands.

I'm going to start off with the case for thinking differently about creative development research, moving on to a brief look at some of the issues that teams developing advertising face, and finishing with some thoughts on a different approach.

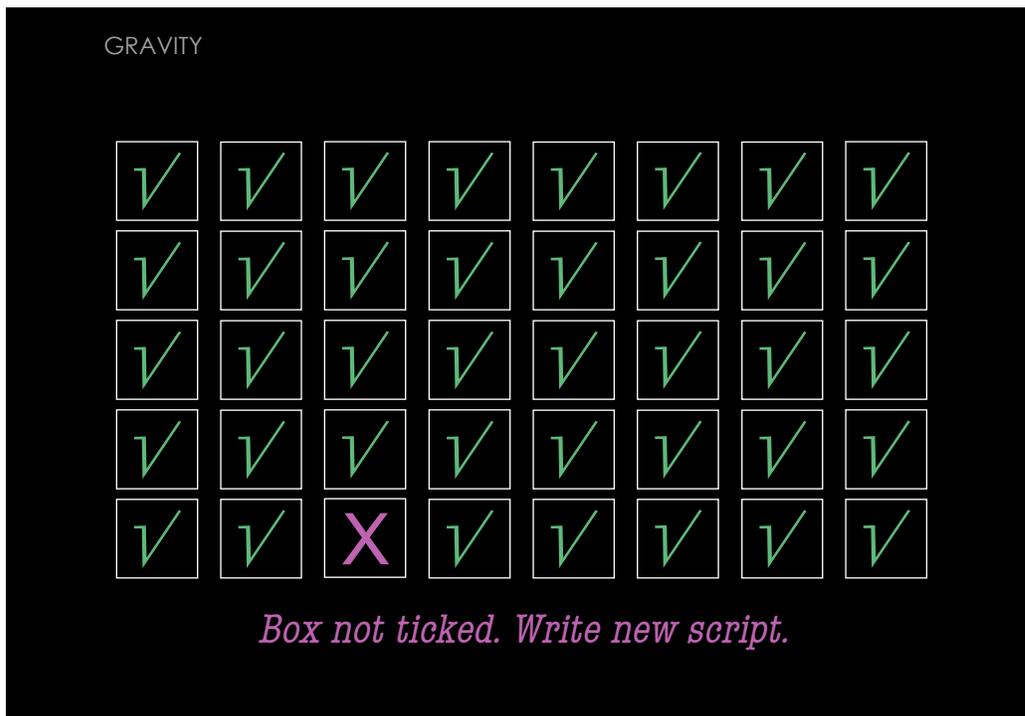
Creative confidence

I was fascinated to see this snippet from Opinion Leader Research turn up in my email last Autumn: '86% of clients would pay a premium for research that delivers better quality thinking.' At first I worried about the 14% who wouldn't - but perhaps they feel good quality thinking should come as standard. Then I started thinking about the question itself; how do we define better quality thinking, in whose terms? Without further delineation, it's a nebulous and daunting task.

The answer has to be to define 'quality of thinking' in the terms of the **users** of the research (I could write a whole new paper about why this is, but for now you'll have to grant me the point). One issue this raises immediately is that in many cases the users of research may not be buyers or even influencers of it.

In creative development, all the members of the team developing the advertising will use any creative development research to one degree or another, but arguably the key users are the creatives themselves. And they rarely get to input to the brief. Over the last couple of years, I have been interviewing the various members of creative development teams. In fact, I've spoken to representatives of over 100 different companies since 2001; including marketing and brand management, client side research management, agency account management and account planners.

I've also met with a dozen creatives, at different points in their careers, and working on a mix of UK and international briefs. From their perspective, research is often a black hole, into which their ideas, their babies, are dragged kicking and screaming; and from which – from their perspective – their work rarely emerges intact.



Creatives have a relatively cynical, not to say jaundiced, view of the contribution of research. The chart above is a polite reproduction of what one team drew to express their feelings on the subject. Their expectations of research are so low that good research is often simply research that says yes rather than no. I'm not advocating that. But given how expensive in both financial and emotional terms creative development is for all involved, I did take the point that I could

fruitfully explore how research might contribute more positively from a creative perspective.

We all know that a key reason research is bought is confidence. But confidence can mean making stronger decisions, or making safer ones. I'd like to introduce a key theme here – creative confidence. We all know what strategic confidence means, and I'd say that as an industry we're fairly good at helping achieve it. I don't think creative confidence needs much explanation; but I do think it can bear more examination than it gets currently.

- To put it very glibly, in creative development, the research is either going to amend a good idea to help it fit the creative confidence of a team, or to increase the confidence of the team to encompass the idea.
- We would argue the latter is likely to be better value, however, for various reasons, in creative development work we often end up achieving the former.

Issues for creative research:

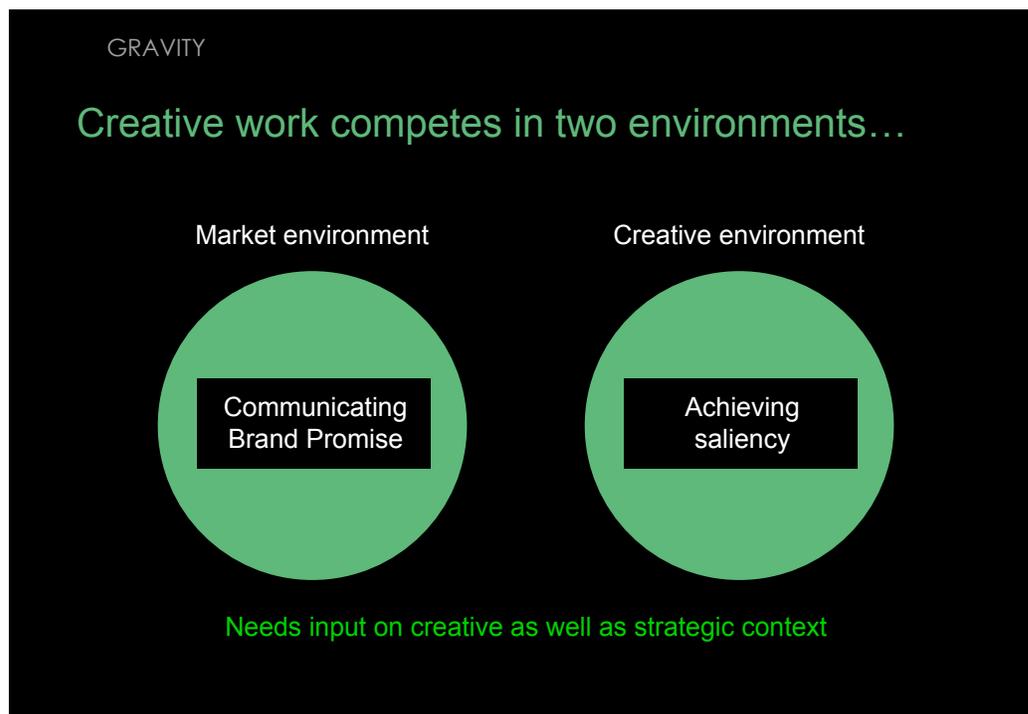
Most agency/client teams use their existing research to hypothesise the (re)positioning of a brand for communication, and many will use further research to refine the desired content of the advertising – often expressed in interlocking terms such as 'consumer insight' and 'essential message'. This message content forms the bones of the creative brief along with targeting information, style and tone guidelines etc... Creative teams then develop 'vehicles' for the desired messages, the relative merits of which are debated by the client and agency team before a route or routes are put forward for 'creative development research'. Very often this phase is a time and budget pressured one, where respondents are effectively being asked to 'select' a preferred route', while agency and client team bite their nails, hoping they can make their production deadlines. Sound familiar? This kind of research may go under the guise of 'development research', but even at its best, it is hard for it to be other than reductive.

This separation in the development of 'message' and 'vehicle' is well established and rarely questioned. Large amounts of investment are put into informing the development of messages, while often little research is given to feeding the development of creative vehicles until they are already more than half formed. There may only be one budget for 'creative research' in any one project. As there is already a

great deal of understanding available to feed into the strategic thinking and creative briefing, obviously the best time to use this budget is at the crunch point in terms of decision making isn't it? The point where teams have to start committing the big bucks? That's why we're always butting up against production deadlines.

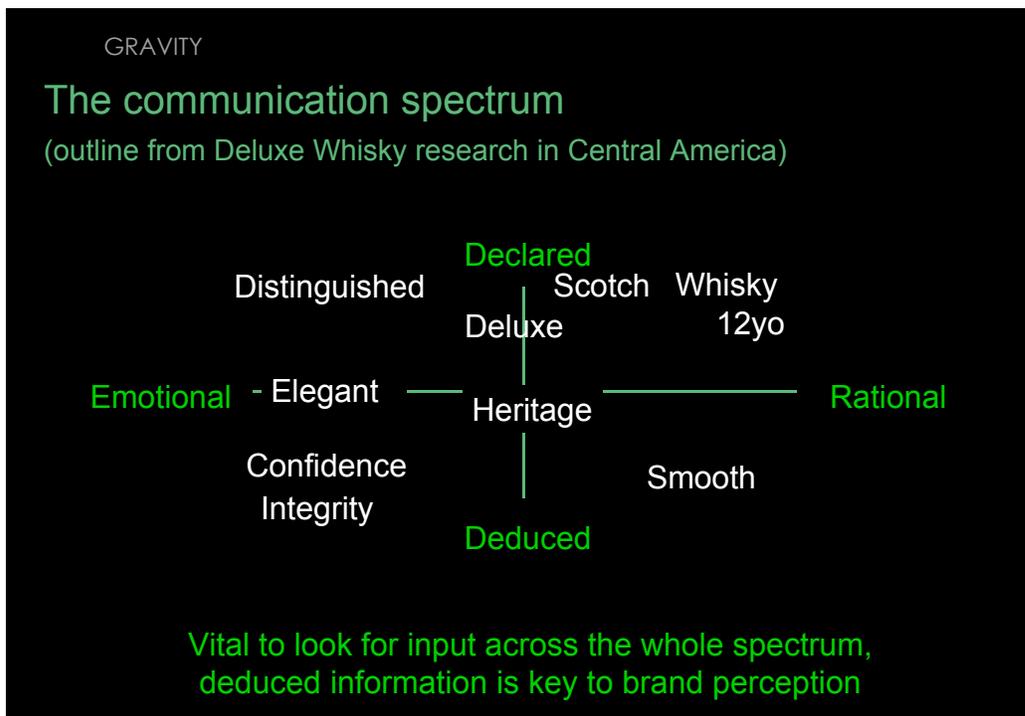
The problem here is that there is often a key element missing from the knowledge base informing creative development: the creative context. This is particularly true in international work. A creative team sitting in London working on a script for a UK housewife will at least have some idea of the creative context they are working in. If their work is also to be aired in Thailand, or even Holland, they're often working blind.

In these days of increasingly competitive markets, brands need to own creative space as well as, and in some cases more than, strategic space; but research practise does not reflect this currently. The communication context in most markets features more brands than ever before, and more information in more forms leading to more complex decisions. The proliferation of contact and purchase channels means customers can now make a decision to purchase and the purchase itself completely separately. The effect of the whole can be described as a contact glut, the variable quality and relevance of which inevitably makes our customers ever more cynical and communication-weary. Getting cut-through is unbelievably tough.



All creative work has to compete in two environments. There is the market environment, composed, for the sake of argument, of direct competitors for the same spend. And then there is the creative environment, which is not just composed of direct competitors, or even other advertisers, although that's certainly a large part of it. Customers will also look at your advertising in the context of the films they've seen recently, the music videos they've played, the magazines they've read. This makes it vital that we look for sources of potential saliency in communication and don't just analyse it for messages. It also makes it even more important that teams have input on creative context

My next thought under the heading of issues is that in order to improve our offer from a creative perspective, we need to think more about how communication *works* in order to help articulate and value better the components of the vehicle as well as the message.



This is what I call the communication spectrum. It's not rocket science. You're all very familiar with the emotional/rational axis. The declared/deduced axis is relatively intuitive. Essentially, the declared element of the communication is what the advertising actually states or shows. The deduced is what the consumer makes of that, and the way that it's put across. Deduced communication comes from the

creative idea itself, the language used, the look, the tone of voice, casting, music, timing, lighting....

Very concrete product qualities can be deduced from details of the execution; creaminess can be seen in lighting quality, honesty can be heard in a regional accent. In fact some communication, of values for example, is much more convincing when declared rather than deduced. If you state 'we are honest', your audience may wonder why you felt the need to say so. If they deduce honesty, it has real credibility. The example above is an outline from some communication work for Diageo in Central America. Here integrity was a key value, and again, it's not one that can credibly be declared.

As an example of strong, deduced communication, take Honda's brilliant 'cog' ad. There isn't much declared information there; although you could argue that it shows things working. The way it's shown is innovative and brave, immaculately engineered and beautifully filmed. All of which can tell you a lot about the confidence of Honda in 2004, the values of the organisation and also about attention to detail and build quality.....

My final issue is one I'm calling concept drift. This happens because words, and the concepts they represent, rarely translate directly. Of course a cat is a cat is a cat, in physical terms anyway; it might be a revered pet, a pest or even a potential meal depending on where in the world you are.

Let's take the word comfortable. No word is an island. It has a package of meaning and culturally specific reference points around it. And this package of meaning and references is flexible, depending on context. Comfortable suggests one set things in relation to cars, another in clothes and another again in people. They are all similar, but not identical.

I could have picked a much more difficult example. There are several good potential translations of comfortable in other languages. for instance 'confortable' in French, or 'bequem' in German. Both contain attributes and associations present in the English word, but both also reference some parallel concept areas. 'Bequem' can suggest 'convenient' for example. This is a bigger topic than I can deal with in detail now. Suffice it to say that this 'concept drift' is a real problem for any international marketing work – and for creative teams in particular.

Building blocks for a new approach

The challenge for foundation research is to feed the development of and deliver the confidence to support a more impactful and ownable creative expression of a brand. Even where there is very clear and distinctive vision for a brand, there can still be a need to explore ways of expressing it.

Foundation research aims to build richness into the creative brief, linking strategic and creative context, giving creative teams more vivid space to work in, and, with luck and judgement, building creative confidence across the team.

The aim is to look for potential cut-through; distinctive, expressive territories that can help brands own specific benefits. Competitive context is key here: creative context, not just market context. We need to know how 'comfortable' is being put across by other voices; this will affect the way people respond to new expressions of it. Brands nowadays often need a very distinctive understanding of their brand territory in order to own it.

Creatives start to twitch at this point, but I'm not talking about handing responsibility for idea generation to customers. I'm simply talking about finding more resonant and distinctive start-points, not to mention avoiding dead ends that lack meaning or originality across borders.

Let's start with concept drift. A simple way of working with this is to map the associations and connections early on in the process so they can be shared and discussed around the network – creating a concept net. Different countries can then highlight relevant and less relevant areas and build on their own connections. These can be built in workshops by teams, or by individuals collaborating by phone and email. They can also be built on by consumers in groups, who can then add colour and depth to the areas that engage them.

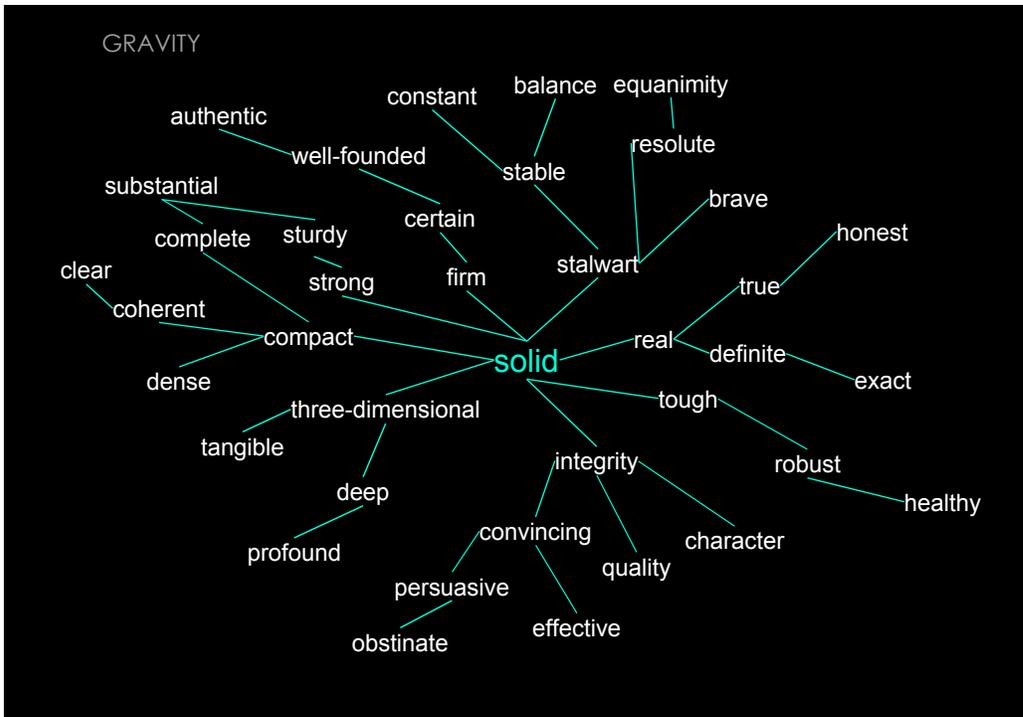
The concept net in outline



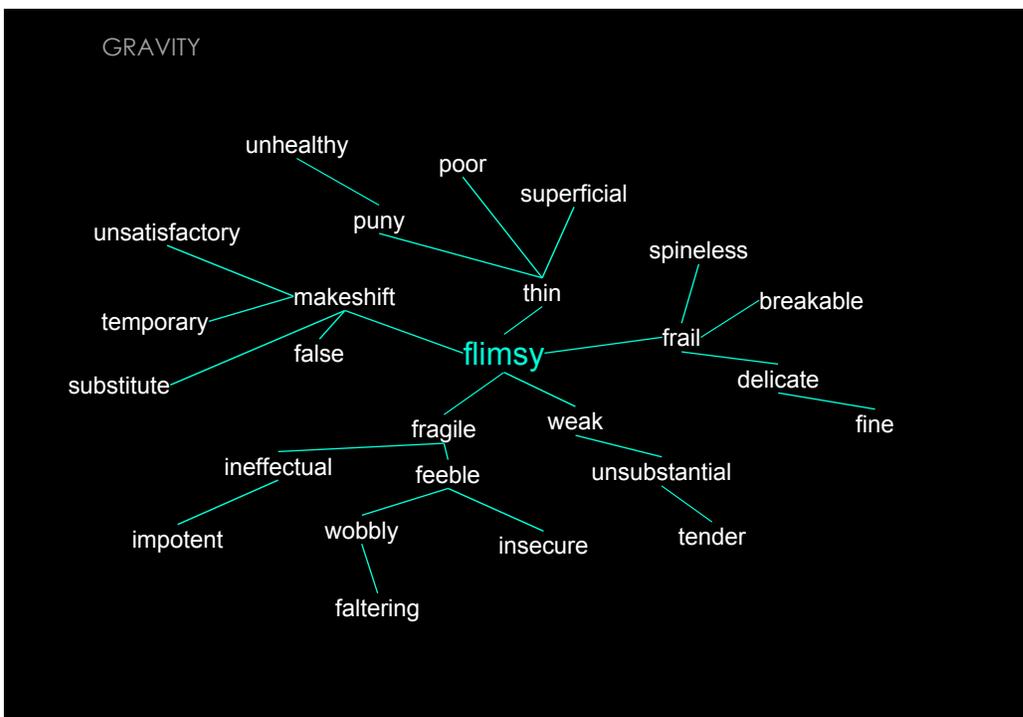
The English version 'the reliable airline' is not wrong, but it's missing quite a lot!

This is a summary of the associations with KLM's long-standing strapline in Dutch – *Betrouwbaar*. I believe they have changed it now, but it's still a good example. This is a resonant word in Dutch with strong links to trust and faith. It's related to the word for 'vow', and can also suggest dedicated, active, even purposeful. In addition, it can mean well-known, familiar and has overtones of personal affection, along with a real sense of confidence, conviction, even aplomb. You can see how they got to the English version 'the reliable airline', but it's missing a lot.

Concept nets are a useful tool even if you're only working in one country. If you work in English as a first language, there's a brilliant visual thesaurus online, which can help get you started: Visualthesaurus.com for those of you who are interested.



This is a concept net for solidity in cars, written from a UK point of view. I'm not going to spend any time on this, because I want to show you it's opposite.



Mapping the opposite or negative side can sometimes be helpful too, as it can show up dangers and potential areas of weakness. There can be connections between positive and negative at a deduced level. For instance, making your car brand ultra solid can suggest your drivers are flimsy; not very macho if you're trying to appeal to young, single men!

The concept nets can also form the basis of creative start-point research. By its nature this is a collaborative, interactive and iterative process. It can also be quite messy, as the intention is to expand and enrich rather than reduce the area of consideration. The stimulus materials and topic guide often carry on developing as the project progresses.

A key principle is idea sharing throughout; communication is vital to making this work. The creative development team need to *own* the findings, not just hear them. Workshops with the team before talking to consumers can start this process and also give an initial map of the territory, refine the approach, generate stimulus materials, and growing the overall space for solutions. Client or agency can also be directly involved in the dialogue with the respondents, or even take part in the groups as respondents.

The output from the project can be a classic debrief, but creative teams often respond better to an interrogation session where the impetus is more with them, or a workshop where they are hands on with the insights rather than sitting through a presentation.

Using a variety of lenses helps illuminate the subject area, providing different ways into the discussion, different soundings for potential resonance.

- Making it personal and particular adds real richness. You can ask people to bring a personal item that displays a particular quality, or remember a personal story that demonstrates a particular value. This also has the advantage of pre-sensitising respondents to the subject area, which makes the discussion richer from the outset.
- Motivation frameworks make interesting stimulus materials – looking at different modes and types of decision maker and asking how this could be a benefit for each. For instance, what would 'comfort' offer to someone who wanted control vs someone who wanted to express themselves

- Qualitative laddering makes more connections and helps elicit higher order benefits – do they want to connect solidity to responsibility or to confidence?
- Psycho-drawings can often provide a short-cut to deeper motivations, and can in themselves be stimulating output for creatives
- Five senses exercises often yield very rich associations
- Parallel markets are very helpful in starting to understand the creative context as well as enriching the concept net. What other types of product or service offer 'comfort', how do they portray it, which of these portrayals are relevant, which less so, why...
- Projections can also be useful in providing additional reference points – either through an existing reference point like a famous person or a place, or via a completely imaginary one. These can make useful clusters of attributes and values – for instance a solid footballer in one project recently turned out to have a combination of low centre of gravity, strength, reliability and equanimity
- Or it could be word mapping using the concept nets as a base.
- The final stimulus is the brand territory, and this is last (though not least) for a reason.

The magnetic attraction of the obvious is an issue for all research, but particularly so here. It's important to explore the concept area(s) freely first; gaining maximum breadth and richness before introducing the need, the category or the brand. Otherwise respondents can be inclined to limit exploration to the more rational and obvious, and you may miss more distinctive potential territories.

When you do introduce the brand, new details can be helpful; stories or facts that support the desired message, allowing respondents to make new associations, giving them permission to change their minds.

At the analysis stage, dynamic synthesis is a discursive process across borders and cultures. The team can often learn from and build on each other's thinking, putting findings in new lights and building a joint picture rather than a fragmented image.

The output collates key artefacts and language that bring to life the territory; drawings, pictures, words, phrases, sounds, people, film. It also reports on existing marketing collateral that touches on the same territory – within the competitive set, and outside. It helps illustrate how deduced communication is working in this area. It can also separate the associations with the territory into those that are linked with creating desire to believe and those that provide additional reasons to believe.

The project also produces a refined, consumer-ratified concept net, highlighting areas of overlap, engagement and ownability, and, with a bit of luck, providing the creative team with a springboard rather than a straitjacket.

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