

# Tried and texted approach to getting consumers talking

Get more from reduced budgets by using SMS in research when people are in leisure mode to improve the quality of response, say **Marie Lena Tupot** and **Tim Stock**

IT SEEMS WE ARE truly in the midst of a recession. But what does that mean, exactly? What does it mean to consumer research? It means panic to the energy company trying to gauge true sentiment while it's being pummelled in the press. It means fear for the diamond importer wanting to launch a new brand during controversial times.

For research, it means using an authentic organic approach to understanding the consumer in their world. Unfortunately, for some brands and agencies, it means taking shortcuts on research. The result is that recruitment loses its balance, time in the field is diminished and incentives dwindle.

There are no shortcuts when it comes to dealing with real people. Good research requires a relationship to coax information out of people and there's no easy way to do it. Optimising budgets is crucial in the current market conditions.

Of course, quick hits can be achieved. Email surveys, online communities and focus groups happen every day. But are these tactics giving the correct data to help a brand sustain itself through tough economic times? Typically, they're one-shot studies that do not help gain synergies. In fact, they add up to costing more than a comprehensive plan of attack.

It's vital for a brand to build relationships that buoy-up identity and allow the brand to emerge victoriously from the recession, strong and engaged. The good news is that a period of consumer prosperity is usually following right behind.

The key to staying engaged during a recession is to never lose sight of your consumers. It requires creative and efficient upfront planning. Today's consumers are tuned into the process and they will know when you're pushing an agenda too hard.

That's the worst that can happen. All it takes is one disillusioned participant to bail on your brand and tell a friend.

During a recession, research techniques that underscore consumer mobility can best foretell the ideal consumer narrative and see where a brand can authentically cast itself (or not). How do you communicate with friends? You talk; you phone; you email; you text. You catch the people you want to communicate with, using their preferred form of communication. You wouldn't sequester a friend into a closed room. Why would we attempt that with research?

### Get in step and lay low

When a person's mind is running in ten different directions at once, from health to finances, the last thing they want is to be trapped in a room with a moderator. They'll say what they think the researcher wants to hear and then they're out of the door and back to their real lives.

You need to take a step back and let participants get on with their lives. Then, you quietly jump in on the action. The research should be as mobile and flexible as the consumer.

During the first quarter of 2007, we canvassed female light beer drinkers for Miller Lite. We asked a female bar tender

### The age of mobility

- In 2008, text messaging has outpaced phone calls.
- The typical US mobile subscriber sends or receives 357 messages per month.
- The typical teen mobile subscriber sends or receives 1,742 messages per month.
- The average age of a 'texter' is 38 years, while 45-to-61-year-olds are the fastest-growing 'texter' segment.

Source: Nielsen Mobile, 2008

### Recession wise

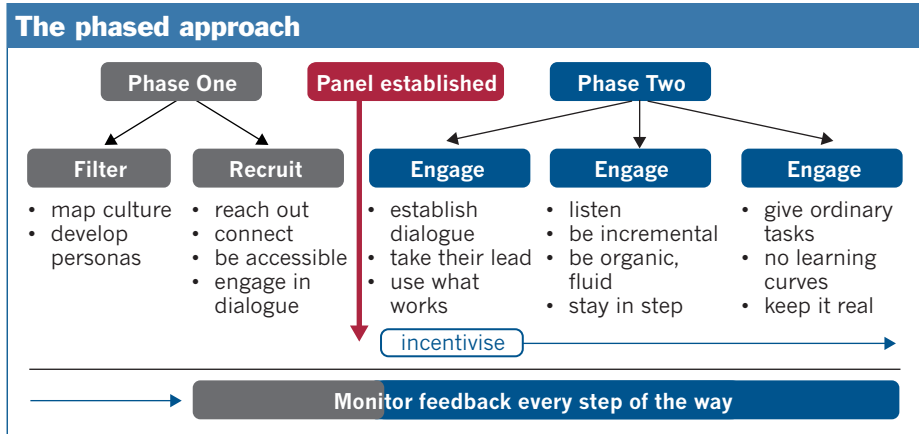
#### Research during a recession calls for Depression Era tactics:

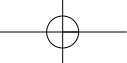
- 1 Know the influentials already in your court. Protect your participants. Keep them close.
- 2 Keep the participant pool engaged so that you can call on them at a moment's notice.
- 3 Be resourceful. Listen and extend a hand to existing and potential participants.
- 4 Use creative incentives. Don't dole dimes. Participation is not about money.

who conducts weekly craft brew salons to change the pace for a night and talk about light beer.

Her initial response was: "My girls don't drink light beer." But she asked at her meeting: Do you drink light beer? We dubbed it the "Light Beer Confessional." We stayed out of it and gave her a \$40 iTalk recording device for her iPod. She was floored by the responses. They all drank light beer, but in varied contexts.

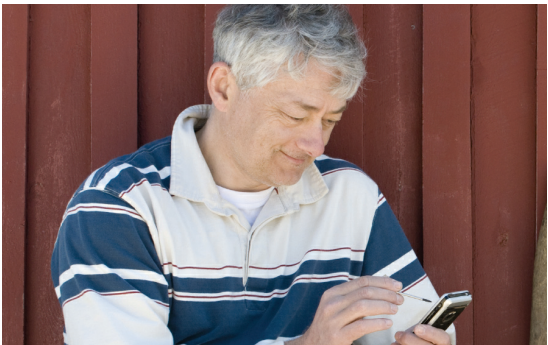
Sometimes it was only when they went home to their families. For others, it was the last beer at the end of the night. Or they chose light beer because it was the least offensive choice when they were afraid to bring the wrong beer to a party. They ended up having a blast and conducted their own taste test... and Miller Lite won as the most drinkable. We could not have staged it better.





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- 5** Waste not. Exhaust all the data. Early-stage info is relevant.
- 6** Ration your resources. Don't burn participants out. Let them breathe.
- 7** Know the plight of the consumer. Stay on the street. See the context.
- 8** Work in tandem with participants. Don't give them laborious tasks or surveys.
- 9** Capture the nuances. Follow the threads of connectivity. They'll gain momentum.
- 10** Accept manual labour. The web is not a silver bullet, and online trolling is not a substitute for leg-work. Real people want to be in touch with real people.

No one was put off by the project. Instead, they were encouraged by the dialogue. The exercise left an indelible impression that made the group a more frank and open one. It's important to leave behind a trail of goodwill.

In other cases, we have given participants Flip cameras, which are fairly inexpensive and very easy to use and upload online. Such cameras allow us into more private, intimate spaces, such as the bedroom or the pre-coffee breakfast table.

These tools and techniques are playful and insightful, but one of the most fruitful and sustainable ways to gain information is SMS polling. It's the ultimate way of getting into the natural course of a consumer's behavioural pattern.

A typical US mobile subscriber sends or receives 357 text messages a month, compared with placing or receiving 204

phone calls, according to Nielsen Mobile (Q2 2008). The second quarter of 2008 was the second consecutive quarter in which the average number of text messages sent was significantly higher than the average number of phone calls placed.

The type of text messaging platform that works is one in which you can create a true dialogue of broadcasting and receiving incremental questions and answers – typically to a maximum of five questions. It's not the place for long-form surveying. This is about serving smaller bunches of questions over a month or a year.

#### Ageing texters

SMS polling is not confined to the youth market. Nielsen's research shows that the typical US teen mobile subscriber (ages 13 to 17) sends or receives 1,742 text messages a month (compared with making or receiving 231 mobile phone calls). Yet the average age of a 'texter' is 38 and our mobile studies reflect the trend toward the mid-to-late thirties age range.

What's more, the 45-to-61-year-old age group is the fastest-growing segment. And there is a push-pull dynamic across generations. We hear of 20-somethings training their elder counterparts to text. One 28-year-old accountant in Texas said she had trained her 50-something mother to text her on special occasions.

The more complex issue is how to get people participating in a mobile poll study. It's not difficult, but it takes longer. In keeping with the theme of recession, you need to take recruitment back to basics. There are no mobile phone lists to buy and you can't serve up to a targeted list as you would an email campaign.

You have to look beyond demographics and into the passions that drive smaller markets. It's these smaller niche groups that form the tightest-knit panels. Their feedback is all-powerful and what a brand can learn from them will resonate among larger audiences that feel their influences.

There are a few ways to go about building a panel. First, you need to let potential recruits know you're out there and allow them to initiate the texting, lest you be thought of as the annoying friend texting at all the wrong moments.

The most obvious way is to reach out to existing constituents through calls-to-action at events or via marketing collateral. That will bring in all the fans of a brand. What will be missing are those incidentally aligned with a brand.

To capture them, you need to appeal to their desire for social credibility. Why would a successful doctor be compelled to sit in a focus group? Is it the \$300 or \$500 he needs? Not likely – it's the power of his credibility to you.

Tell participants why they are important to the research. Ask direct questions. Let them know how close they are to affecting final decisions. No one likes to give information that sits in a pool.

Participants in a Kodak inkjet study in 2007 knew the brand in question was only weeks away from launch. The mobile surveying reached out to consumers who were immediately in the market for an inkjet printer. They were quick to respond to participation prompts.

#### Creating credibility

Unlike anywhere else in the world, social credibility drives the US population, captures its imagination and gains its interest. Gaining credibility among SMS participants requires respect among their peers. It's pretty cool to say: "Hey, look – there's that printer they were asking me about."

Finding consumers where they are at their leisure and at the height of their passions catches them in the best moment. We aim to catch them off-guard and intrigue them and their friends into joining SMS conversations. Every call to action requires a clever angle to rise above the noise barrier, whether it is custom-printed coasters distributed to the hottest local bars or asking niche bloggers to tell their followers about you.

If you think of the research journey through recession as taking a journalistic approach that shows you care about the subjects you're talking to, you will learn infinitely more. The result is a knowledge base that gains steam.



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