

Where did all the research go?

 By [Desiree Gullan](#)

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In traditional agencies, research is a nucleus - it's the alpha and omega of brand strategy. It means a deep, reverberating comprehension of products or services, the people who make them and the people buy them. It means crystallising strategy and campaign to align with this understanding.

In this know-everything, do-everything digital age, some agencies scorn the value of brand immersion. They ride out into battle without the right cavalry. And because there are a select number of digital channels, with rules and algorithms governing each, these agencies believe they're commandeering their troops in the most efficient way.



The truth is, research and brand immersion still matter. Smart advertising doesn't exist without it – regardless of whether you're playing in the digital or traditional ad space. No truly innovative campaign can be birthed without it. There remain key areas of research every agency should be driving, and encouraging their people to do so too.

Research lives everywhere

'But we don't have a research department – and we can't afford one.' This is the first obstacle agency leads will present in trying to fight against the necessities of research. In truth, it doesn't matter. Research should be endemic in every department of every agency.

Every employee – creative, client service or development – should make it their mandate to understand their clients better than the person sitting next to them. If you're marketing a sock brand, your people should be wearing them. Marketing a coffee company? You shouldn't be sipping anything else.

Agency teams should constantly search for real-life insights from the people around them – both on and offline – and use these to inform their work. If they don't know the brand, they shouldn't have the audacity to try and send an email to the client or put a word on paper – they don't have the right.

It's not only up to the client to conduct research about their own brand. Your research as their agency can add a useful and colourful layer to the clients' research that they'll thank you for.

The easiest place to start with research is to get all people involved – including client – in one room, and don't let them leave until they've told you everything they can about their brand. These brand immersions can do so much, but only if the people in the room are tuned in. Don't let team members sit in on a brand immersion if they're going to steal oxygen – they should be taking notes and asking questions. Valuable team members will.

Areas of focus

Research does not mean a swift scroll through a client's Facebook or Twitter page. It should be a controlled and systematised process. Key areas that will inform advertising work for the better naturally include the reputation of the brand amongst both its real target market and aspired target market. In fact, in-depth research might help you identify and redefine the target market – it happens.

It includes current, past and international advertising – both digital and ATL. Discuss digital campaign ideas and novel concepts with the people you'd like to target. Ask them if they've seen any that resonate with them – and why. Find out what's important to them.

Identify the competitor products they're using, follow on social media or have noticed in the digital space and why. Formulate a knack for spotting whether there's a disparity between the desired brand promise and what consumers are actually hearing or seeing in the digital space.

Truth hurts

When formulating a research model, make sure to build in research about your agency's reputation with your clients. They won't always divulge their grievances when faced with a fresh-faced account executive, but give them a neutral, anonymous platform and they'll tell you harsh truths. A client satisfaction survey is a quick and easy way of gaining insights into what your clients really think of you.

Just as with brand research and immersion, it's what you do with the information that's key. Turn it into a workable and easily implementable action plan.

"Agencies mistakenly use research like a drunkard uses a lamppost – not for illumination but for support." The words of David Ogilvy still ring true today – more so for digital agencies than ever. Let us not forget them. Let's illuminate ourselves with research.

ABOUT DESIREE GULLAN

Having worked at the 'Big Three' advertising agencies in SA and proving her creative mettle abroad, Desirée has won multiple local and international awards for her work - including Cannes Lions and Clio. She believes in the importance of craftsmanship - that it's not in the designing, but in the redesigning. Not in the writing, but in the rewriting.

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