
THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING HUMAN IN A CONSUMER WORLD



By Jim Chastain & Jim White

Let's get right to the point.

Talking to the human in marketing research is good for business, but a lot of people in our world don't see that. Many marketers and brand insight people see understanding the human as a "nice to have" in a world of much more pressing research needs. When we've proposed a more human understanding, these are typical of the responses:

"Gosh, that would be great, but we just don't have the money, time or opportunity to do that."

"We need to focus in on the category or brand. Our brand has problems we need to fix."

"We already have a consumer profile. We know who we're targeting."

Focusing on the human can seem like a luxury — something done on the rare occasion when a brand feels it's important to step back and assess. Or, more likely, it's not done at all because there's just too much to figure out in the short term. New brands need to be launched, ads need to be made, concepts need to be tested. There are deadlines and the realities of everyday life as a marketer and market researcher.

At the risk of using our company name in a schmaltzy, contrived way, we would say these people need a reality check.

There are some dynamics at play in the world of brands, brand marketing and marketing research that have been emerging over the past several years and like it or not, they are a part of our new reality. Here are some reasons why we need to reassess how we do ALL of our qualitative insight work, be it a big strategy or a positioning project or all the things we do on a regular basis. So, in today's reality:

People are drawn to brands that feel more human.

Mass market brands dehumanize people. You have probably noticed that a lot of mass market brands try to be more “human” and less “manufactured.” There's a reason for that. And it's impossible to do this by treating people like consumers.

Brands, whether products or services, create more growth and loyalty when they solve LIFE problems—not CATEGORY issues.

They do this by helping us manage tensions in our lives and feel better about who we are as HUMANS. MARKETERS need to talk more about people's lives than the product category, because that's where the most important issues, opportunities and tensions exist.

The New Marketing Model

Technology and societal development have created a new marketing model, but many in the marketing world are still operating in the old one.

The old marketing model works on the premise that brands/products/services are “sold.” The new marketing model is based on the premise that brands/products/services are “bought.” This shifts the focus of marketing from what BRANDS DO to how BRANDS can FIT into someone’s life.

**People now don’t want or need to be “sold.”
They want to know how you fit their life.**

Beliefs are just as or more important than benefits, when it comes to brand marketing.

People want to identify with what a brand stands for, what that brand believes in. They want to share beliefs with a brand, and it’s difficult to understand their core beliefs when they are TESTED as consumers. In the marketing world today, we do a lot of testing.

Belief Systems are more important now than before, because people feel they can only TRUST themselves.

Traditional belief systems have let them down.

This puts more pressure on us as human “buyers” to be right. People use their intuition more than brand marketers would like to think. What people seek are brands that share their belief systems. They want to align themselves with brands that are doing things the “right” way (from their perspective). They want to feel they are living the “right” way for them and need guidance or reassurance that they really are. This is far deeper than offering them a benefit.

Beliefs are different than emotions. They are more enduring and hardwired into who we are. They operate on a moral level. They guide us to live life the right way for us. Feeling “free” is different than “standing for freedom.” We would rather share the belief that “freedom” is important than offer up an emotional benefit that makes someone feel free. We’ll connect with that person on a deeper level.

A lot of companies pride themselves on being “consumer-centric,” and this is clearly a step in the right direction. But does this go far enough? We believe companies should be “human-centric.” It seems to me that taking this approach is a better way to solve a brand’s immediate problems and determine its long-term strategic path.

**Old School:
Selling Benefits,
Attributes**

**New School:
Sharing Belief
Systems**

How did we get into this “consumer” mindset?

Talking to people as consumers used to work. And we got comfortable with that.



As the marketing world evolved post WWII and into what we now think of as the *Mad Men* era of advertising, people were thrilled with new material possibilities. There was a sense of novelty and newness—excitement about the possibilities of new products that could help us live easier, better, safer and fuller lives. The “consumers” of this era were people who grew up in the depression with nothing. They had been through a war and lived to tell about it. They had lived hard lives.

The marketing culture of that era was awash in promises of going faster, getting clothes cleaner, doing chores more easily preparing better tasting meals that made mom the hero and more. These attributes and benefits—that people never had access to before—were new, unique and meaningful. They solved meaningful problems on practical and emotional levels.



Ad Giant Rosser Reeves believed the purpose of advertising is to sell.

The marketing culture of this era was rooted in SELLING. The world was saying “sell me,” and marketing culture did just that. This spawned the idea of using marketing research as a way to PROVE something versus UNDERSTAND something.

During this time, a man named Rosser Reeves invented the Unique Selling Proposition, or USP. Rosser Reeves was one of the early research pioneers at Ted Bates advertising, and his USP was meant to introduce the idea of differentiation among a crowded field of me-too products in many CPG categories. It was meant to be a discipline for arriving at an advertising proposition that would set a brand apart from the competition. He helped Ted Bates develop these early advertising propositions for a couple of major brands from the Mars company:

“M&M’s melt in your mouth, not in your hands.”

“A Mars (Europe)/Milky Way (US) a day helps you work, rest and play.”

More often than not, clients and agencies used the USP as a way to determine rational product benefits and attributes (though we don’t think Reeves meant it to be used in this narrow way). And, to better understand which of these benefits and attributes were most compelling, we in the qualitative marketing industry responded by asking people for their OPINIONS.

We've ended up using qualitative research more for testing than talking and listening. And that limited us.

**Old School:
Creating a testing
mindset**

**New School:
Having an engaging
conversation**

This was the dawn of the TESTING which is still a part of our vernacular today. A lot of qualitative research has the word “test” attached to it. Copy testing. Concept testing. Package testing. Preference testing. We've even heard the notion of “pressure testing.” We don't even understand what that means.

The notion of “testing” does some dangerous things to us. First of all, it keeps us separated physically and empathically from the people we want to understand. They are in the lab. We are the highly sophisticated observers. It's one of the dynamics that elevates us as marketers and researchers to a place of SUPERIORITY. We know the answers to the test! We set up the test for God's sake. If respondents don't get it then there must be something wrong with them. Honestly, even the term “respondent” makes it sound more like you're taking a test than sharing your feelings.

TESTING is also easier. A test has clear answers and keeps us from doing deeper, more difficult THINKING; however, over a period of time, as our culture evolves and benefits/attributes become less differentiated and meaningful, this is not enough.

Empathy takes more work but it's how we start to understand and connect on a human level.

Old School: Listening for agenda

New School: Listening empathatically for understanding

If we think of qualitative research as an opportunity to have a conversation instead of administering a test, we're on the right path to connecting on a human level. In a good conversation we listen empathatically to the other person and pay attention to feelings, underlying meanings and learn what's important to them. In conversations, you listen on another level. It's intuitive unconscious listening. This is how you decide whether to trust someone even though you can't exactly put your finger on it. Or maybe whether you like someone or something. Or maybe even fall in love. Or choose a brand even though you don't really know why. This is something that goes on under the rational thought process and is put into practice on a regular basis.

When people feel someone is actually listening, they often open up. It happens all the time in real life. It's what Oprah did. She may have been one of the best qualitative insight people of all time. Oprah defined EMPATHY. She talked to humans. Not consumers. (And did a pretty good job of building herself into a power brand by using empathy.) Has your significant other ever said "you're not listening to me!" What they really mean is "you don't hear me, you don't see me for who I really am and what is really important to me!" Ultimately, they're really saying "you don't understand me."

Empathy is about understanding a person's FEELINGS—not just listening to their words.

It's about feeling what they feel. When you do this, you're bringing what is said into your life and FEELING it. You may remember something or think of something in your life based on what someone is saying in an interview. That thought or association is important because it is making you FEEL something. And it is helping you UNDERSTAND them on a deeper level.


Sharing a Belief System is creating the ultimate human connection.



Emotion is far more powerful (and complicated) than rational arguments. But the issue with emotion alone is that it can be temporary, fleeting or limited. Feelings come and go. Beliefs are more lasting and more fully DEFINE WHO YOU ARE. When we understand someone's belief system, we get to their core self.

“Are you a Mac or a PC?”

This was one of the most brilliant campaigns in recent history. Don't you know instantly which you are? The most powerful brands today (and maybe of any day) have really gained their power based on standing for something, for believing in something. People have belief systems and so do brands, and people are overtly seeking belief systems now more than ever. As we've said before, this is driven out of need to find other belief systems you can trust beyond your own. We have a feeling Steve Jobs understood belief systems.



What other belief systems can I trust beyond my own?

Like Oprah, he seemed to understand that when people buy into a belief system it trumps everything else about the brand or product.

Some brand people may take the concept of standing for something to mean that their brand needs to do good in the world. And while that's not a bad thing, in today's world it only scratches the surface of the deeper connection that someone can share with a brand based on the entire brand proposition.

Southwest Airlines is the "symbol of freedom." When they say "you are now free to move about the country," it is an invitation into their belief system. Share freedom with *us*.

Chipotle created a new belief system in fast food based on food "integrity." Integrity is important to people, and it's important to us. A shared belief. The recent Always "Like a Girl" campaign is focused on sharing the belief that it's more important to instill confidence in girls based on who they are, than what others think.

These brands are all sharing beliefs from HUMAN TO HUMAN - not BRAND TO CONSUMER. There is a massive difference between the two. By simply focusing on beliefs, it's possible to share a more human connection. It's possible to trust.

Qualitative insight work in today's reality should give people the opportunity to express what they believe in on a conscious and unconscious level. Then, brands can figure out how to express what they believe to create the most meaningful shared belief systems.

That's the way to do qualitative insight work in today's reality—think of yourself as a human, not a brand or a consumer.

- Have a good conversation instead of administering a test.
- Listen for understanding instead of agenda.
- Focus on sharing beliefs more than creating new benefits.

Think about how you can apply this to all the qualitative insight work you do. Not just the big stuff. When you apply this to all your work, you'll start to see a significant shift in how you view insights and what your brand can achieve.

