



By Richard D. Czerniawski

## **WHEN TO OVERRIDE THE DATA**

The data, the data, the data, the data ... We need the data. We crave the data. We bow to the data. Why not? The data helps generate hypotheses, make decisions, assess performance, and provide evidence of productivity. However, there is more to the data than the numbers—the stats. There's context. Then, there's even more to the data than context. There are our experiences and judgment too.

The data is part of the science of marketing. But marketing is science and art. The art is borne from a mix of experience and creativity. What does our gut tell us based upon our experience, customer understanding, ability to unearth a legitimate and productive insight, and what we might do given the data?

When I refer to experience, I'm not thinking about the number of years in a particular managerial position, or sector, or even category. Nor am I considering "credentials." These can be irrelevant to the matter at hand. Does one have 20-years of experience or 1-year of experience repeated 20-times? Are the experiences narrow or broad?

When I refer to experience, I'm alluding to those experiences that embrace a wide range of situations through direct involvement, the collective intelligence of the organization, and study stimulated by a burning curiosity to learn.

As per the art, this requires the ability to synthesize disparate pieces of data coupled with one's experiences, sound judgment, and creativity to imagine and achieve what is possible. It also requires "consequential thinking" skills. If one takes this action, then the consequences or, if you prefer, outcomes might be (fill in the blank).

Okay, let's move beyond the philosophical and get down to practical marketing matters. Perhaps, there's no more excellent example than the MasterCard "Priceless" campaign. It dramatized things people could purchase with MasterCard, with the one priceless moment that emerged from its use. For example, the first ad was a father and son attending a major league baseball game. The father uses MasterCard to purchase the tickets, hot dogs, popcorn, sodas, and even an autographed baseball. The priceless moment was the bonding between father and son at the ballpark. The key copy words to the campaign are, "There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's MasterCard."

When the “Priceless” ad idea underwent marketing research, it scored in the lower one third for performance. The data would lead one to conclude to scrap it. However, management chose to override the data and launch the campaign. It fueled double-digit growth for nearly 20-years. Note, there were no changes to the physical credit card. It carries the same dimensions, works in the same way, and is used for the same purpose as every other credit card on the planet. The only thing MasterCard changed was its advertising campaign. The marketing research data be damned.

Then there's the antibiotic Zithromax. It treats bacterial infections. Zithromax is not a powerful antibiotic. It does not have the powerful punch of competitive antibiotics. The outcomes data would lead one to conclude not to market it as superior performing products are available.

However, management chose to override the comparative outcomes data. They capitalized on physicians' desire to avoid overtreating with antibiotics. (Antibiotics are not effective for viral infections, and it's often difficult to discern whether the infection is bacterial or viral.) Instead, they positioned the drug as being sufficiently efficacious to fight bacterial infections without overmedicating the patient—particularly where the patient might be suffering from a viral infection. “Zithromax – 5 Days and You're done.” Additionally, they reasoned that patients would be more compliant to a 5-day versus standard 10-day regimen. Virtually all of us or someone we know has been prescribed and used a Z-Pak.

When the advertising agency “Cadwell, Davis, Savage,” created the introductory ad, “Inventor,” for the REACH Toothbrush, they did not introduce the brand name or show the packaging until the last 5-seconds of the spot. Marketing research indicates that advertising has higher memorability and persuasion scores if the brand name and packaging are revealed in the first 5-seconds. Accordingly, my senior management demanded to know why we didn't follow that proven principle derived from data. They wanted to know why we were choosing to override the data.

The explanation was simple in creating this art form known as a 30-second television commercial. We (the agency and me) believed that placing the brand name and packaging upfront would scream “commercial,” and viewers would tune out. We believed it would destroy the engagement factor needed to get the consumer to stay with the message. Also, placing the brand name and package at the end would reward the viewer for staying with the message. It provided a big reveal.

My management, to their credit, was open-minded. They challenged us to prove it. We tested the ad both ways—with the brand name and package in the first 5-seconds and separately in the last 5-seconds. In this case, the marketing research—the data—bore out our judgment. This was a case where they would not have allowed me to override the data despite the agency's and my artistic judgment. Praise be to the data for supporting our sensibilities.

When should we override the data? Consider overriding the data when your experience suggests otherwise, and your creativity offers a more productive route to success. Data should aid sound judgment, not replace it.

***Take your marketing to the next level.*** Check-out my new book, AVOID CRITICAL MARKETING ERRORS: How to Go from Dumb to Smart Marketing. It can help you achieve success during and post the COVID-19 recession. Learn more here: <http://bdn-intl.com/avoiding-critical-marketing-errors>

Stay safe and be well.

Peace and best wishes,

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