

# Creativity 24/7



*Research World* talks to three entrepreneurs whose innovative services offer clients direct access to the consumer voice around the clock.

**DIANE HESSAN, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF COMMUNISPACE**

**How does your company engage with consumers?**

One of our Unilever clients once said, "My community is the equivalent of having 400 of my target consumers always in my office with their feet up on my desk, asking me what I want to discuss."

A community is a 'conversation engine', and these conversations happen on three dimensions. Clients ask consumers to take surveys, mystery shop, brainstorm ideas, send in videos, fill out diaries; consumers give clients unsolicited advice; and consumers talk to each other about topics of interest.

In the course of building and managing 350 communities, we've learned a lot about how to run this conversation engine and get consumers to engage with companies in an honest, trusting way. And that's key - consumers want transparent and mutual exchanges of information. They are willing to be open if companies are equally open with them, creating a reciprocal relationship. They love a chance to be heard by major brands and feel valued for their ideas and opinions. What makes this work is limiting the community to 300-500 members, which is the right size to grow the intimacy and trust but large enough for a diversity of voices on each topic.

This model allows respondents more room to reveal potential white space, surface unmet needs, and drive innovation whilst companies can get better, faster insights.

**How do client companies use the service?**

Most clients use their communities to gain a better understanding of their consumers in order to make better, more relevant marketing and innovation decisions. They find it is a fast, flexible and dynamic way to get real-time information and ideas. Tactically speaking, they get feedback on brand messaging, advertising, packaging, promotions, brand

perceptions and so on. But they can also do more exploratory work on surfacing unmet needs, generating foundational insights and generally bringing customers to life!

**Is your company structured differently from other market research companies?**

Like many research companies, we're set up to service our clients so our largest group (about 150 of our 220 employees) is client services, who work with clients and interact with consumers online every day.

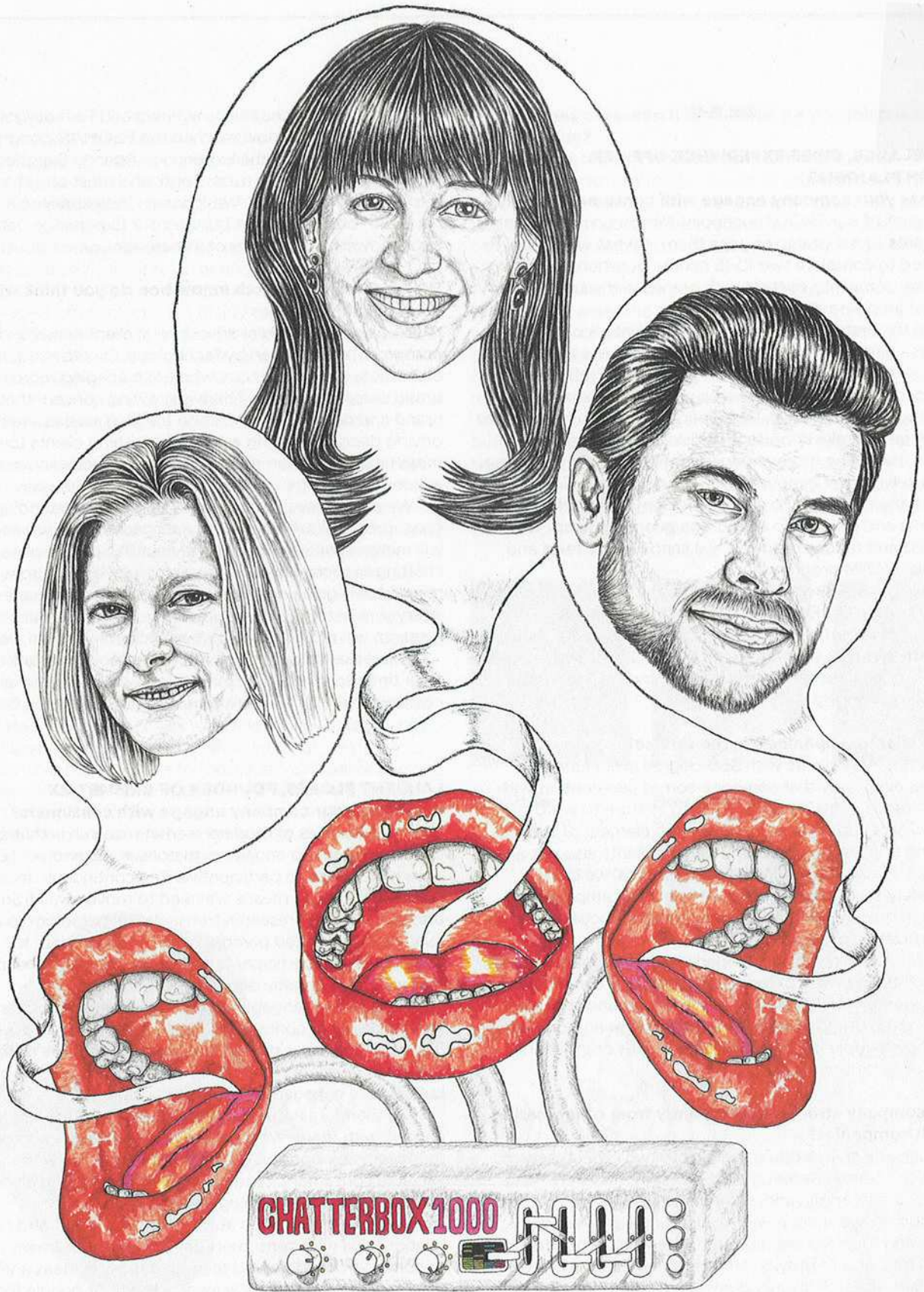
What is most likely different is how we work. Most traditional market research companies have a project-based approach; they engage for a project, get the data, do the analysis and reporting, and then they are on to the next project. For us, most client communities go on continuously, often for years. In a typical community, the consumers are engaged in three projects every week. The goal is that the community becomes a strategic asset that's always there for our clients, engaged to help them with their biggest business challenges.

**Which areas of research innovation do you think will grow most quickly?**

We think a few areas are poised for faster growth and we're already experimenting with some of them. The first is better ways of getting relevant information to the right stakeholders in a company at the right moment by creating an open and unimpeded link between the voice of the customer and corporate decision-makers. Ways to do that include communicating real-time insights through dashboards, SMS, and RSS feeds, and through rich-media displays.

Another area is text analytics that go beyond positive/negative sentiment tracking. While tracking basic measures of sentiment can be valuable, we expect that text analytics tools that enable us to analyse the variety of social discourse, behaviour, and subtle emotion present in online speech will become more important as the sheer volume of online content continues to grow exponentially.

I also hear from senior executives that they are tired of receiving large binders full of information that merely validates what they already know. The growth will be in any area that helps us discover the unexpected, or hear the important consumer voices that make all the difference.





### **FIONA BLADES, CHIEF EXPERIENCE OFFICER OF MESH PLANNING**

#### **How does your company engage with consumers?**

We ask a lot of our TROI (Touchpoint Return on Investment) participants so it's vital to engage them in what we are doing. They need to complete two 10-15 minute questionnaires, text when they come into contact with brands in their study, and complete an online diary.

From the first trial in 2006, we entered into a partnership with these participants asking them 'to become a researcher for a week as you go about your everyday life'. This language and respect for what they do remains in our culture. It's not simply about the incentive. Participants do research studies to help companies take important decisions. The more we can empower them, the more engaged in the study they become.

They tell us their experiences in their own way. Each text goes into the participant's own online diary, where they add comments and photos. To encourage people to keep motivated and reduce drop-out, we send regular texts and emails like a CRM programme.

Nothing beats direct client involvement. Many of our TROI projects include OurBoardroom, an online forum where our knowledgeable participants engage directly with clients, in three or four rooms with different topics. Clients' active involvement ensures that participants know their views are being taken seriously.

#### **How do client companies use the service?**

Firstly, it provides clients with 360-degree evaluation. By capturing every way that someone comes into contact with a set of brands, from TV advertising to in-store to word-of-mouth, clients can understand how each element of their marketing is impacting on brand equity. Clients also get an early read on campaigns. With real-time data, we can immediately see people's response to a new campaign and clients can quickly optimise their campaigns, focusing on the most motivating propositions.

The service also provides understanding about the market touch-points and ways different target groups connect with them to identify unexploited media channels and strategies. In addition, deep brand dives offer a quantitative and qualitative feel for how people are relating to the client's brand in the context of its competitors.

#### **Is your company structured differently from other market research companies?**

MESH Planning shares office space with two other research companies - Spring Research and Tuned In Research - and we also share IT, admin and, sometimes, people.

In addition, we share a wish to do things differently in research and founded the Research Liberation Front 'to set research free' and to provide an alternative perspective to mainstream research. Its inaugural event was in March 2007

where we ran a Pecha Kucha evening and I am delighted that Pecha Kuchas have now reached the ESOMAR Congress!

We call ourselves the Experience Agency. Experience extends to the way we treat clients and most of us have 'experience' in our titles. We focus on the experiences people have with brands and are building our Experience Database into a powerful repository of knowledge.

#### **Which areas of research innovation do you think will grow most quickly?**

I think there are two real drivers here: client needs and new consumer habits driven by technology. Clients need 360 evaluation, especially those who are managing more complex brand communications. There is growing concern that big brand and customer satisfaction tracking studies are not driving decision-making and this is pushing clients towards more flexible programmes where they get quicker, more actionable findings.

We also believe that to gain a better understanding of new consumer habits, the research approaches that will succeed will mirror people's natural behaviour. People are already chatting in social networks, so communities will grow. Mobile research will grow, where it is used in situ to replace exit interviews or to give quick customer feedback, and multimedia research will allow people to feedback in their own way.

The research world is at an exciting point of transition. Over time, some of these innovations will become mainstream, creating a very different research landscape for the future.



### **LAURENT FLORÈS, FOUNDER OF CRMMETRIX**

#### **How does your company engage with consumers?**

One of the ironies of modern market research is that it's never been so difficult to engage with consumers and yet consumers have never been so participative. The continuous decline of co-operation rates means we need to move away from the traditional market research transactional paradigm to a more relationship-oriented paradigm. We need to relate to consumers and participants as people rather than respondents that are the raw material of our industry.

We believe in engaging with consumers at the brand's natural points of contact, from call centres to brand websites. Since our company started out ten years ago, we have pushed brands to consider that their brand websites are real marketing hubs where engaged consumers converge.

It is therefore natural to leverage this opportunity to engage with them. We measure brand websites and offer marketers an opportunity to value and engage with their most valuable consumers. In addition, participative and always-on and interactive methodologies such as communities and brandDelphi offer an ability to create closer and richer relationships with consumers 24/7. These consumers become part of the brand team and provide ideas and feedback continuously. We involve the right people for the

right tasks. For example, leveraging the theory of innovation diffusion, we identify and involve creative consumers in innovation tasks, influencers (opinion leaders) in developing and adjusting products and services as well as maximising the impact of communication strategies.

#### How do client companies use the service?

Clients really value flexible, smarter and faster processes. The ability to mix qualitative and quantitative always-on methodologies offers clients the ability to gauge consumers' attitudes and behaviours for richer insights. Our online services are either used to replace or complement existing research. Clients' feedback shows that they appreciate faster access to consumers, an ability to mix qualitative and quantitative, global reach, and actionable insights and recommendations.

#### Is your company structured differently from other market research companies?

We probably have a flatter organisation with less people between the client company and its consumers, allowing faster and more genuine insights delivery. There are less people involved in production tasks and more people dedicated to adding value to the data, and we are still more profitable than traditional research companies. Indeed, since the early days of the internet, I have always believed that in addition to speed and cost, the internet offers us an opportunity to rethink the way that insights are collected and delivered.

For many years, research companies have been organised around data-collection facilities, which led them to focus on creating value around these processes, whereas client companies have higher needs for business intelligence and place more value on what comes at the end of the process. That's not to say that data collection quality is not important, but we spend more time on making sense of the data and processing knowledge and intelligence.

#### Which areas of research innovation do you think will grow most quickly?

I believe that research as a whole offers multiple opportunities to be innovative. In a matter of just 10 years, this industry has never seen so many global innovative online players emerging and growing at double-digit rates annually; not just our company, but others such as Brainjuicer, Communispace, Metrixlab and OTC.

If we were to merge our respective businesses together, we would easily enter the top-50 market research organisations worldwide and still grow at the same rate. What we share in common is that the internet is central to our business models, not just as a data-collection tool but as a way to rethink the market research process as a whole.

This brings innovation and opportunities to develop better products to serve market needs. These include concept testing and advertising testing, but also opportunities to lead the way in new and growing niche markets, such as measuring websites' and online media effectiveness, for example with our SiteCRM solutions. **RW**



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