



# DEEP LISTENING

**Simon Chadwick** talks to **John Seely Brown**, independent co-chairman of the Center for the Edge and ex-director of Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center, about why researchers should step out of their comfort zones.

**When you hear the words 'market research', what comes to your mind as to what this discipline actually does and what purpose it serves?**

I think of market research as looking in the rear-view mirror; often highlighting interesting things to consider but seldom good at inventing brand-new ways to probe fundamentally new types of movements that we haven't yet found good ways to characterise. OK, I know that is a bit unfair but ...

In a world of constant disruption and accelerating change, show me what techniques in the marketing arena have been invented that begin to understand and probe the unconscious, that can help us figure out what's apt to catch on, as opposed to those that have surfaced through what we call 20th-century lenses.

We have well-perfected 20th-century lenses and are constantly grinding and regrinding 21st-century lenses but we have to regrind these lenses almost weekly to make sense out of what's really going on. You might say the world doesn't change that much but there are pockets of things that change, that catch on overnight. It's very hard to give up the safe space we're used to, in order to move beyond our comfort zone, and embed ourselves in something that maybe makes no sense.

I didn't do a lot of work at Xerox PARC in the digital media world. When I had the chance to get out on my own I asked, 'How do I get out of my own comfort zone, how do I immerse myself in a world that is so little understood in the corporate world?' For example, how do you think about the gaming generation? How do they learn with and from each other all the time?

One of the first things I did was to engage in reverse mentoring. How do I find and apprentice myself to someone from this world? And fortunately as I was giving a talk, this major game designer, a 25-year-old woman, walked up

to me and said, "John, you make tremendous sense in what you say but it's also clear to me that you don't know what you're talking about. You know a lot about games, but you're not in them."

There's a huge distinction between knowing about something versus being immersed in those spaces, thinking like the people in the space. She took me on for a year and gave me a bunch of assignments. She started by shipping me off to an art museum, walking through, and asking me to comment on what I saw. This was almost a decade ago but it enabled me to enter a world which was completely outside my comfort zone. Most of the game designers were half or a third of my age; they'd never heard of Xerox PARC. I was a stranger and a bit strange to them. They wore metal; I wore a suit.

I had a tremendous amount to learn. We need to design the workscape of the 21st-century corporation so that hard-core gamers and, more generally, digital natives can work in ways that enable them to deliver real value. How do we take advantage of their ways of seeing, of sharing things and so on? It creates the opportunity of a tremendously rich dialogue, between the old guard and the digital natives; both have things to learn from each other. The real challenge is in bringing these two worlds productively together, albeit in productive friction. They won't necessarily merge nicely, but the new work practices that these kids are creating are going to shape the corporate landscape as we go forward.

In terms of marketing, you have coolhunters that can pick up new trends but they don't necessarily know their meaning or how new meaning is being created around them. And so part of what I am suggesting is that meaning is being created in places that are different than financial capital and are different than just being cool. There are going to be new social practices

coming online all the time. So how do we understand what they mean, how do we work with them, how does this change the world's perception of what might be possible?

The history of Xerox is that over 50 years ago, they went to IBM and offered IBM the (copier) patents. IBM contracted market research which said there may, in the lifetime of this product, be 5,000 copiers sold. And so IBM turned down the right to all the patents to do with xerography. How could they have blown it so much?

Basically, the mimeograph machine was cheaper and could be improved easier than the xerographic copier. What they failed to understand is that the power of a copier is making copies of copies in order to engage in broad-based communication, to spread the word across a corporation or a workgroup. Of course creating copies of copies is an exponential process with unlimited marketing potential. While a mimeograph can only make copies of the original, the copier was an exponential new work process that could unfold.

But that same example goes over to the internet. In the blogosphere you don't copy – you link, you extend. And your social reputation is built on your links and the trackbacks of those people who you link to. So we've got a whole new network culture that thrives on linking and sharing credit, as opposed to plagiarism and copying. The key is to pick up something and add a point of view and so it becomes a dynamic not a passive process. And that process, like the copier, has the chance of spreading exponentially which is why a simple observation or idea can spread around the world almost overnight. How do you come to understand that kind of dynamic in terms of 21st-century marketing?

#### **What about the art of listening differently and how we listen to consumers or bloggers?**

The art of seeing differently turns completely on the art of listening. When I look back at my own career invariably somebody would come and tell me a radical new idea and

some of those ideas would annoy me and I would feel myself tightening up. I learned that I had to listen to my body as opposed to just my mind, because often when I was reacting, there was something fundamental at stake that was contrary to how I wanted to see the world.

So part of this game is learning how to step back and be in a better position to see something fundamentally new that goes against the grain. It could be a really major insight into something. This kind of deep listening is requisite for seeing the world differently. That's why I said that marketing research is about looking into a rear-view mirror, because you're looking within the extant wisdom, and you're rarely out of your own comfort zone.

#### **Many market researchers would say there is a movement towards listening, particularly in blogs, in social media and in using more ethnographic techniques to listen.**

The PARC researchers who pioneered the use of ethnography in the corporate world in the early '80s had a very deep sense of how you see something that is outside your own 'religion'. They were hardcore ethnographers and ethno-methodologists before it was considered



cool to do this kind of research. We gained a huge amount of insight with them.

People listen to blogs, that has to be important, but they're still listening. But how much do they put themselves out on the edge? It's the difference between passive listening and exposing yourself. Andrew Sullivan's fantastic article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "Why Do I Blog", gives one of the most nuanced descriptions of a kind of a genre of blogging that turns on being provisionally correct, putting yourself in the game and then being forced to respond to the kinds of feedback that start to happen. This led to some major transformations in his own thinking. But if he had not exposed himself and engaged in productive friction, in authentic dialogue with people that he did not feel comfortable with, he never would have come to some of the conclusions he now holds.

This is a radical contradiction to people who sit in the corporate world and say, 'Hey, I've got Google Alerts on, I'm in the blogosphere, let me look at every alert coming in that mentions my company.' They are functioning in their comfort zone. The person you give the results to might not be too comfortable about it, because what you're getting is raw, emotional responses to foibles in the products but you are still listening in your comfort zone.

**You've said when talking about radical innovation, that technology and marketing often need to be creatively coupled. Can you explain?**

The point is that any radical innovation is creating a new work practice, which means you're moving against existing practices and often it's hard to understand what some of these new practices might evolve to be. Many innovations end up doing things that are radically different from what the innovator ever thought would happen but that's one of the reasons why a close relationship between technology and marketing becomes critical.

People say, 'John, the Xerox copy machine was such a brilliant invention,' but nobody says, 'Oh wow, Xerox is today a company that has become a household word not because of the technological genius but because of a marketing genius.'

And for that marketing genius it was a question of how to get that first copier into the workplace, to let new work practices be invented and evolved. The 914 copier would probably cost 35 to 40 thousand in today's dollars. To bring in something to market that seems to be just slightly better than an existing product and that is about ten times more expensive - you'd have to be insane.

Someone said, 'Here's what we want to do - we will give the machine away and bear the cost, and we will charge you by the click.' This was one of the very first examples of paying

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by the click and it came with a very simple way for each department to be able to do their own accounting. The genius of that product innovation was at least as much in marketing as it was in technology.

**Even today 85% of new products fail. Why do you think that is?**

I think that many fail because of big company marketing. In many cases, for us, the marketing group tried to say how do you roll out this product, how do you position it, 'How do you price it?'

Large-scale corporations have never understood what we in the start-up world learned the hard way, which is that we have never started out with an innovation where we have found the sweet spot coming out of the starting block. No matter how good your intuition is, this sweet spot is very elusive. And what classical marketing departments would do is say 'you haven't done enough marketing, and if you'd just let us spend another \$200k we would have figured this out.' And a lot of senior managers would say that sounds very sensible to us, whereas in the start-up world we'd say we will get out there two weeks later with a new variant. We have interesting ways to get very deep feedback very fast; we'll have the designers out there with you, because everybody's now on the same team.

That's why the start-ups that really succeed are the ones that understand how to do these rapid iterations, don't overspend and realise that it takes time to find that sweet spot and learn how to engage in active listening. The deep entrepreneur is a narcissist and the catch is to have a productive narcissist, who knows just when to seriously listen - is there something deep there that we have really overlooked, or that we got really wrong? But what's really wrong is only going to be the weakest signal, the signal coming back won't hit you over the head - it's going to be your interpretation of that signal that will hit you over the head.

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**One of the things about Xerox PARC was the number of different disciplines that you brought together. Tell us more about pairing artists and scientists.**

The faster the world is changing, the more value you get out of pairing artists and scientists because avant-garde artists have a way to sense what's at odds with our current view and so they intuit things on the edge. So it's obviously very useful if they can communicate with the engineers and the scientists. Part of the catch is to create a common language and platform, so that all the groups get to appreciate each other. So if you can create a platform that has achieved that, already you're a long way down the path of knowing how to engage in deep listening.

**Some market research people come from quantitative disciplines and others from more psychology- or anthropology-based backgrounds. But if research is to be more conducive to the creative process, what sort of people should we recruit and how should we train them?**

If you talk about training, you've already missed the boat. What matters the most is what kind of questing disposition they have. Now hopefully you have people of a questing disposition from multiple fields and if you have that, then a common problem will bring them together very powerfully.

How do you ensure that your folks are out immersing themselves in the real world, in order to make sense of things which don't initially make sense? And then they've got to come back and tell a story. The people you have should be skilled storytellers because anything new gets understood through a metaphor or a sketch, which both have an artistic tint to them. With this, you will have no trouble getting across something that can be almost impossible to describe otherwise.

**If there's one message that you would hope researchers and marketers could take away from this, what would it be?**

There are reasons to believe that the 21st century is going to be a century of constant and rapidly-succeeding disruptions at odds with what we've perfected in the 20th century. The game will constantly be changing and so there needs to be a willingness to realise that yesterday's expert is today's problem. The biggest obstacle to innovation is wisdom, because I can always say, 'I tried that, it didn't work,' and now I have a set of beliefs that are based on a set of assumptions that are obsolete, but I don't know that because I've lost track of the assumptions. We're going to be invalidating assumption after assumption and so we're going to have to be constantly willing to challenge the underlying assumptions to our thinking.

We need a childlike attitude, where we're constantly willing to be a beginning learner. What does a child do? It constantly asks the question 'Why?' We are taught that we can ask 'why'

twice, and that's about it, but unless you're willing to keep asking and pushing, you won't get to the root of the problem.

A couple of us have just built something called the Shift Index that actually articulates just how dramatic these changes are, looking at the deep structures of the 21st century. It measures how we are moving from a 20th-century push-based model of the economy, where we build up large stocks of assets, protect them, and push them out, to looking at how you just participate in flows all around you. (Go to [www.johnseelybrown.com/shiftindex.pdf](http://www.johnseelybrown.com/shiftindex.pdf))

We plan to take this Shift Index and look at different industries, through these lenses, and be able to say where a particular industry is in terms of making the transition we're talking about. **RW**



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