
Shaping Stories

**How to land thought provoking stories
about audiences**

Why 'Bringing Insights To Life' Is No Longer Enough

This report was prepared and presented to the Media Research Group (MRG) at one of their members' meetings. Crowd DNA was asked to present on how media researchers can plan and execute audience thought leadership with more impact.

We're all familiar with the call to 'bring insights to life'. So much so that it's become a cliché in both our industry and beyond. There's nothing particularly wrong with it. In fact, it's a brilliant endeavour to aim for. It's just become an overused term that's lost its oomph. It doesn't mean anything. It undermines creativity. And, far too often, it results in media brands not getting what they need when it comes to communicating audience truths.

The challenge for many brands, especially those in the media, is to allow advertisers and consumers to empathise with the people behind stories in real, meaningful ways. This is becoming increasingly difficult. There are more and more brands out there fighting for attention, not to mention the huge number of creators and influencers also selling their audience and competing for space. When we think of creating stories about audiences, the words 'compelling', 'fresh' and 'own-able' should be top of mind. So how can we create stories that really cut through?

In this report, we'll go beyond 'bringing to life' and share how to authentically connect, empathise and represent audiences through immersive methodologies. We'll explore the need to plan and execute outputs in better ways, walking through the components of a project at each stage: before, during and after. Slick, polished outputs never appear out of nowhere. The truth to creativity isn't as sexy as it seems – there's lots of spreadsheets involved too.

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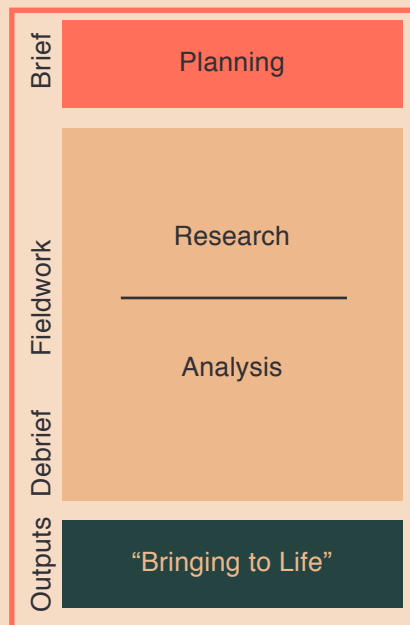
Before

‘Plans are useless but planning is everything’

A run-of-the-mill research project pays little attention to the outputs. A brief comes in, a plan gets made, the research takes up the majority of time, then content development is plonked on the end. But if the most important outcome is hard hitting outputs, you’re clearly going to need a different model.

Enter the editorial process. Much more focus is put on planning and story building throughout, which doesn’t necessarily mean more time, or money, it’s just a different structure to allow for better planning. Creating a story is all about having the right source materials or building blocks, and this is something you have to plan for. Remember: the same as if you’re writing a questionnaire, if you have crappy footage in the first place, no amount of editing will make it look good.

A standard project



Turn your project on its head



Five tips for story planning:

1. Nail the essentials

Plan what you’re going to capture – footage, characters, occasions, activities, media moments – but also how you’re going to capture them; is it via photography, illustration, video, copy, or something else? Also consider if you’re going to do the research first, or if you’ll collect the content simultaneously. Getting a producer on board who can manage the details from end to end is key.

2. Blend your teams

Make sure researchers and creatives are working on the plan together – a blended team is a strong team. If your creative bods come in at the end of a project, they’ll have no control of making sure the right materials have been gathered. Bring in team members who have multiple skills and interests, and make sure everyone works together from the offset.

3. The audience is always right

Regularly remind yourself who you’re creating the outputs for. This will help answer the big questions during the planning process, like deciding which content format will cut through the hardest, or what tone of creative you need to capture. If you can do interviews with someone from your client team, that’s even better.

4. Don’t just hope for the best

As with most things in life, you can’t plan for everything and things will go wrong. But when it comes to creating content, ‘hoping for the best’ will definitely get you stuck. Map out contingency plans, secure back-up participants, agree on a plan B, C and D – the level of detail that goes into capturing good shots is crucial. And don’t just cross your fingers for good weather, find alternative locations too.

5. Work your best angles

Once the logistic plans are in place, your story will need some fresh angles to make sure you’re saying something new. Before conducting primary research work out what’s going on in both your category and wider culture. What are the shifts that can help question the status quo or lead to new ideas? Use desk research, semiotics, and experts for a future perspective, and remember that consumers aren’t going to tell you something exciting unless you go looking for it, so design your research materials to stir up interesting conversations.

During

The research process

The groundwork is laid for an impactful project; you've thought about your final format, done your homework on the cultural context, and you've got batteries and a spare gender-neutral shirt in your bag. But before you shoot off into field, you need to find a foothold and design a structure for your research. During fieldwork you need to be constantly curating, reacting, and (if necessary) re-positioning as you go. With so much potential for change, here are a few scales to help you find your balance and dodge the curveballs.

Exploring vs storyboarding

When you're figuring out the structure of your fieldwork, the important question is: do you know what you want to say or are you trying to find new insights?

The balance between fresh insights and pre-storyboarded content is a tricky one. If you go in without a vision in mind, you might discover something totally unexpected – but you'll have to be prepared to think on your feet, and accept that your output will need to be flexible. Make a storyboard beforehand, and you have more control; you can plan specific locations, know exactly which shots you need, and get right down to the core of your question. You may also miss out on new and surprising insights.

A happy medium is to do your due diligence first. If you've spent time on desk research and you know the terrain, you can afford to be a bit more spontaneous on location without getting thrown off course.

Numbers vs the power of one

Volume is a powerful tool in telling a convincing story. The scope of quantitative research is what delivers those jaw-dropping moments, where we realise the reach of a particular truth. But refining each stage of the research process means that even when we're going for scale, that needs to be deliberate. Be specific about who you want to learn about; be brave and decisive about who to talk to, and what to ask them in your quantitative survey.

For your story to really resonate, though, we firmly believe that personal connections are the most powerful. You need characters who have something to say, and who the audience can empathise with. The good news is, you don't need masses of participants (or resources, or time) for that – just a little leap of faith to believe in the power of one stellar voice. Go and speak to the people who have a fresh perspective, at the forefront of culture, the superfans.

And some quick tips for in the field:

More action, less talking

Make sure you're filming the action B-roll (that's the secondary footage - the street outside, the environment, unpacking the groceries). This serves two purposes: it grounds your insights in their context, and gives you fluidity in the edit. Less isn't more (at this stage) – capture as much atmosphere as you can.

Silence is golden

Nobody likes an awkward silence. But learn to get comfortable with those long pauses. Give subjects room to breathe and reflect, and to naturally offer up more detail or go deeper into a story. The results are worth a beat or two of discomfort.

Lean into the tension

Similarly, don't shy away from difference and conflict. Seek them out; stage multi-generational interviews or think about discordant settings, to find the tensions that play out. Discomfort, tension and discord are often where you'll find the most interesting stuff.

After

The editing process

We've been weaving in the editorial process through the planning and researching phases – so you have the material you need, star participants, and some compelling insights. When you release your final output into the wild, it's going to be competing in an overcrowded space – so a few extra creative flourishes won't cut it. Good editing is about finding the story that needs to be told, and – equally important – the most impactful way to tell it. Here are our top tips for shifting towards an editorial mindset.

A genuine story vs reporting back

Good storytelling lies in the connection between things that seem totally distant. The more we get separated from one another in society, the more refreshing and redemptive it is when we find those connections.

For your story to be impactful, you need to surprise the audience with new ways of thinking. Demonstrate that you understand the status quo and surrounding preconceptions, and then strip them down one by one – explicitly myth bust! Finish with a punchy resolution, keeping evidence woven into the narrative throughout.

Make sure your story has momentum that keeps the audience going after it's finished. You want to end on a positive, forward-thinking way. Always ask yourself why; why bother busting this particular myth, or challenging this status quo? What does that mean for your participants, and your audience?

Provide evidence

There's still so much reliance on data in our industry. Stakeholders and advertisers want hard facts, so use this to complement rather than restrict your storytelling. Build stats, quotes, and data into your creative output. Make a statement early, and then spend the rest of the narrative evidencing that statement. Grounding your story in facts makes the reader feel secure.

Be ruthless in the edit

Everyone likes to think they're good at editing down. Generally, they aren't. And for good reason; ruthlessly getting down to the core narrative is hard. You've spoken to amazing people, with insightful things to say, and you want to make sure everyone's story is heard.

Tough! Editing means being selective. Not every element is meaningful, and not every insight has a clear voice. Filter out the interesting-but-unnecessary stuff by asking, 'So what?' And if the answer doesn't relate to the story you're telling? Ditch it. It's tough, but this is where you have to go for depth over breadth, and prioritise the coherence of your narrative. You can't tell all the stories; you need to tell the right ones.

What you leave out is as important as what you leave in

Warning: this isn't about selective deafness. We're not advocating that you ditch any insight that doesn't confirm your initial theory. Keep in the tensions and contradictions – they're part of the texture – just make sure you're telling one story at a time.

Experiment with formats

Think about how many messages, stories, narratives and advertisements you see every day. Now think about how many you ignore. (Now triple it, etc...). It's no good having a beautifully planned, crafted, and executed story if it can't rise above the noise – you need to think about the format that's really going to cut through.

Think big, and then refine. Go for the less obvious – da long-form documentary, a short snap video, an interactive installation. Think back to the blended teams approach, and use it again to come up with something unique.

Finishing touches

Once you've got the format, there are hundreds of tiny tweaks you can make to amplify what you have; style, colour grading, pace, music, all those little finesses contribute to the power of the story. No cutting corners at this stage – once you've got this far finish the job and make it stand-out through careful post-production.

Thanks for reading.

Crowd DNA is a cultural insights and strategy consultancy with offices in London, Amsterdam, New York, Singapore and Sydney.

Formed in 2008, operating in 60+ markets, we bring together trends specialists, researchers, strategists, writers, designers and film-makers, creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world's most exciting brands.

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