

SPEECHLESS TO SPECTACULAR: MARKETING RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY CHANGE THE NATION'S NEWSPAPER

BY CATHERINE CAPTAIN

The foundation of Integrated Marketing Communications assumes and requires recognizing the voice of consumers in an organization. But what if that voice is elusive, and therefore silent?

USA TODAY, the nation's top-selling newspaper, is a single-copy sale driven publication. Unlike traditional subscription-based newspapers, the majority of USA TODAY's readership makes an active purchase of the newspaper every day. While this business model is profitable and desirable for advertisers, it creates a readership that is difficult to reach. Most publications have a database of subscribers with names, addresses and phone numbers available instantly. A mail or phone survey would help to create an accurate measure of the demographics, and even psychographics of the true consumer. USA TODAY - like many non-subscription companies - did not have the luxury of tapping into a ready-made database.

Past Market Research Efforts

USA TODAY's Marketing Research department catches glimpses of its readership by subscribing to syndicated studies and conducting focus groups. In the past, we even conducted "in-paper" surveys - questionnaires were printed in the newspaper, and for respondents to complete the survey, it had to be removed from the newspaper, filled out, placed into a self-provided envelope, stamped, and finally mailed. The process was slow, burdensome for the respondent, and stole sacred space in the newspaper from reporters and advertisers. Also, since respondents were self-selecting, there was no way to insure that the sample was representative of the reader population.

Marketing Objectives

USA TODAY needed a stronger system with which to gather reader information and create an open dialogue with its consumers. We needed to be able to create customer segments and

create a dialogue with specific portions of our readership frequently and on-demand.

The USA TODAY marketing research department, composed of 14 people, was largely devoted to supporting advertising sales. Through various studies, we were able to prove that USA TODAY was a powerhouse publication with the audience and distribution necessary to deliver results to advertisers. Evidence of the newspaper's reach and breadth of circulation was sufficient information for creating an advertiser revenue base for USA TODAY for a number of years, contributing to impressive financial success. With continued success however, there was an incentive to improve the quality of information available about our consumers. We wanted to provide deeper insight into demographic and psychographic variables describing our readers, as well as a common vision shared throughout all departments within the organization.

Enter the Internet

The solution ended up being within reach of our fingertips after all. With the exploding popularity of the Internet, suddenly there was a communication channel available with an audience parallel to our own: affluent, educated, aware, and global. The Internet's potential for market research could be used to our advantage.

The first possibility was to tap into our internal capabilities. USATODAY.com offered an obvious online connection to people who were already committed to the USA TODAY brand in print, online, or both. But the obstacles outweighed the benefits. First, we needed to reach all USA TODAY newspaper readers, not just USA TODAY newspaper readers who also read USATODAY.com. Second, USATODAY.com was growing at

such a rapid rate that their resources were exhausted; and third, since online research was just gaining acceptance in the advertising community, we needed the credibility and expertise of an outside party.

We chose Socratic/Modalis Research Technologies as our outside survey vendor and partner in our mission. There were two options: tap into their existing online panel and speak to those who read *USA TODAY*, or create our own database of readers. We chose the latter.

The *USA TODAY* Reader Panel

In August 1999, we established the *USA TODAY* Reader Panel. We began recruiting in July by running advertisements in the pages of *USA TODAY*. We were looking for readers who would be willing to participate in marketing surveys on a periodic basis. Interested readers were referred to a Web site, with cash prizes as incentives, and an assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. The registration survey captured basic data: demographic questions, lifestyle questions, and product usage questions. Within one month, we had more than 5,000 readers join the survey team.

Increased Efficiencies

The process for surveying was simple. Because we had registration information, we could determine exactly whom we wanted to survey. Men only, women only, various age groups, specific income levels, heavy travelers, single-copy readers only, working professionals – the combinations and possibilities for sample segmentation were endless.

When a survey project design was determined, Modalis, which also hosted our database on their server and ensured the integrity of our studies, sent e-mail invitations to our target, whether random or detailed. The e-mail invited participants to take the survey and provided a link to a Web address. Once on the Web site, respondents simply clicked on their responses, and the results were tallied in real-time, giving us the ability to watch results as they came in and monitor response. The process of obtaining proprietary survey results had previously taken as long as three months, but now it was unfolding live before our eyes. Entire projects, from survey design to field to results, could happen in as quickly as two weeks.

Case Studies

In the year since its creation, the *USA TODAY* Reader Panel has had dramatic effects on both our department and the entire organization. The two studies summarized below illustrate the power of our Web-based surveying efforts.

The Page One Survey

In the fall of 1999, *USA TODAY* was on the verge of the first major redesign in its history. The pending change offered an excellent opportunity to take a hard look at the front page of the paper to evaluate which elements our readers considered to be critical and which needed to be refreshed. As a single-copy publication, the front page of our newspaper is crucial in driving the purchase decision. The articles, the headlines, the photographs and the design of page one make the difference between a purchase and a pass.

With the *USA TODAY* Reader Panel in place, we were able to tap directly into the minds of our single-copy buyers. We were able to probe the factors driving their purchase motivation, their buying behavior, and relevant aspects of their lifestyle. For example, we asked:

- How often has a photograph on the front page of *USA TODAY* prompted you to buy the paper?
- On the days you do not purchase *USA TODAY*, what usually is the reason?
- What time of day do you typically purchase *USA TODAY*?
- How does *USA TODAY*'s front page – the stories, the design, and the photographs – compare to other newspapers that you read?

Within days, the results of this study enabled editors to move forward with clear, distilled information about which visual treatments work best, how *USA TODAY* compared to the competition, what tone the total *USA TODAY* package conveyed, and where improvements could be made.

The results were instrumental in both redesigning the front page and for ongoing story selection and treatment. We were able to bring immediate reader reaction to an editorial department that had previously made decisions based upon assumptions and anecdotes.

The Travel Category Survey

The pages of *USA TODAY* are filled with travel advertisements. Airlines, hotels, rental cars – our "on-the-go" audience is their target. We have massive data about the *USA TODAY* travel audience from syndicated studies, but the studies do not provide the level of detail desired by potential and current advertisers. We wanted to expand and deepen our profile of this key audience, but most importantly, we wanted to deliver insightful and unique value-added information to our advertising clients.

To a random sample of the *USA TODAY* Reader Panel we asked questions including:

- In the past 12 months, have you selected your airline flight based on bonus miles, upgrades or special airfare offers?
- Which types of travel-related Web sites have you accessed in the past 12 months?
- Is the express rental program an important factor when choosing a car rental company?
- On your last leisure trip, did you select the same hotel chain you would normally use for business travel?

The results painted a picture of truly dynamic readers with strong opinions and extreme savvy in the realm of travel. We were able to approach our advertising clients and share the results for which they were hungry. Simultaneously, we proved that our readers were indeed their targets, thus reinforcing the effectiveness of advertising in *USA TODAY*.

Technology enabled us to pioneer a new research methodology at *USA TODAY*. Without a legacy in-house database, we took advantage of a new medium with which to collect information about our customers, and we not only created a resource for gathering new information, but we also were able to gather and analyze the information at a pace unheard of previously. The Internet changed the way we do business. Our consumers' voices now resonate through the halls of *USA TODAY* and make us a better product for both consumers and advertisers.

CATHERINE CAPTAIN joined *USA TODAY* as *Manager of Strategic and Competitive Planning* in 1997. In 1999, she became the *Director of Marketing Research*, responsible for the organization's research efforts supporting the business and marketing side of the house. Captain is a 1996 graduate of the *Integrated Marketing Communications* program at Northwestern University. She holds a bachelor's degree in *English and Journalism* from the University of Iowa.