

## **Craig Redmond: Mining insights means eating a little coal**

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The consumer insight. That cherished nugget of emotive, insider knowledge that gets tongues wagging, brand affection blooming and cash registers chiming.

On occasion, that precious gem has been unearthed, polished and thrust back to the public thanks solely to the sheer intuitive brilliance of a mighty few.

Lorraine Tao, Elspeth Lynn and Emily Bain completely revolutionized the way we market to women in Canada with their campaigns for Special K and Fruit of the Loom, to name a few. Their insight? Appeal to what really sets women apart - their intelligence. While for almost a decade, Dan Pawych and his band of merry men launched tsunamis of Bud Light by telling guys to embrace their inner caveman. You might call it the insightful emancipation of Canadian men, emasculated by years of male bashing in marketing. Or you might just call it really funny shit.

But most of the time, finding that insight means eating a lot of coal and exerting tremendous intestinal fortitude before you can crap out a diamond.

So coveted is that priceless consumptive insight to advertisers that an entire, self-fulfilling industry emerged because of it. Back in the late '80s, strategic planners started popping up like agency mushrooms everywhere. Usually a refugee from the underpaid and underappreciated world of academia, the strat' planner was heralded as the unassailable and chaste voice of the consumer.

Soon, however, every agency had a planning department and we were forced to invent, coin and publicize our own proprietary insight-generating tools. We spelled the word "insight" every which way to Sunday and popped a "TM" on its right shoulder, relegating legions of really smart planners to the role of testing and assessing insights rather than sowing the seeds themselves in the first place.

Then it happened. Like lemmings just keeping in step, we took consumer insight to a perilous new edge. No longer was it enough to seek out those insights and play them back to consumers in a magically engaging and unforeseen way. Now we are asking consumers to think about our brands, produce their own commercials and give us permission to pollute the airwaves with them.

Consumer-generated content is advertising's inbred soulmate to the reality show. It's cheap, it's lazy, it's utterly unoriginal and like a bad case of crabs, it's not going away. But worst of all, it lacks any consumer insightfulness.

Perhaps it's why we're seeing a re-emergence of the small, strategically led agencies that were all but devoured by consolidation a few years back. Places like The Hive, a rejuvenated GWP and David Kincaid's LEVEL5 are gaining traction because not all marketers are prepared to let their consumers simply advertise to themselves. They yearn for strategic counsel. They yearn for smart creativity. And they yearn for that brilliant spark of a consumer insight to help consummate the two.

Our own firm recently uncovered some insight into the disappearing tradition of the family meal and its implications on family function. The BC Dairy Foundation in partnership with the B.C. government had quantitative data and analysis on the topic, but to their credit, wanted to hear it right from the horse's mouth.

Concerto's Nick Black conducted the Eating Together study using morphological research. Morph, as we like to call our licensed methodology, uses in-depth interviews to map out psychological tensions and determine consumer need states. In this particular case, the subject of family meals evoked some raw emotions. And needless to say, uncorked powerful geysers of consumer insight.

Those insights will be at the core of a plan to revive the family meal and restore all the benefits attributed to it. Without those insights, any messaging would ring false, or worse, come off as a lecturing to an already guilt-ridden parental audience.

The Eating Together project reminds us that in this attention-deficit economy, as my beloved mentor Jack Neary would call it, consumers need to feel like they're being listened to and understood more than ever.

And this doesn't mean offering them the novelty of generating their own content. That's like locking your kid in a dark basement with a video console instead of taking them to the park and chatting over a game of catch.

What it does mean is mining for those deep psychological triggers and emotional cravings that fuel consumer need. It means finding that product truth that can solder an inextricable bond between a consumer and a brand. But most importantly, it means feeding that insight back in such an engaging way, it feels like they're experiencing their own insight for the very first time.

As you've read a million times over, our industry is at a crossroads.

Media choices are splintering like hourly hairline fractures. Message inundation is turning consumers into chronically distracted brand moths. And product and price parody is handcuffing marketers like never before. Somehow we have to make ourselves relevant. We have to do what we know we do best - making that emotional connection with a consumer insight.

It isn't easy. But when you make a consumer proposition, it's better to propose with a priceless gem of an insight than with a fistful of generic, cubic zirconia mediocrity.

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