

The challenges currently faced by the coaching industry are not dissimilar from those faced by the market research in its formative years. Some of the basic skills of coaching share some commonality with market research interviewing techniques whilst each use 'data analysis' as a key means to aid the decision making process.

This article aims to examine the relationship between the two entities and extract key learning points that may aid the growth and development of coaching in the future.

Preface

Someone once asked a question - and the Market Research industry was born. At a later date, it occurred to a tennis coach that replacing instruction and advice with great questions led to heightened awareness and an increased sense of responsibility. We love questions of course we've been asking them ever since we made our first footprint: - Why am I here? Is there a God? Where are my glasses? What's for dinner? We've had a lot of practice and so it's a very natural human process.

So what is a question? In asking ourselves this we ask another and so on; as is its ever-enquiring nature, delving deeper into the endless space of Mind where the answer to every question that will ever be asked exists. This is the very core of Coaching; this is coaching's Primary Tool. The question is ... everything.

Introduction

The Coaching Industry is going through much the same learning and exploratory curve as the Market Research Industry did in the seventies and eighties. We tend to think of MR as a relatively new industry in spite of being able to trace its origins back to the late nineteenth century; although it was probably not until the 1930's when a gentleman named George Gallup started to attract attention by running political polls. He even managed to predict the 1936 presidential result which saw Roosevelt take the helm. "Question everything, be a radical", Gallup was alleged to have written. George, too it seems loved The Question, surveying his family over breakfast about their favourite pets and cereals.

In assessing the intrinsic nature of Market Research and Coaching conversations we can appreciate some uncanny similarities:

Table 1: The Comparisons

Market Research	Coaching
A structured or semi-structured interview between Interviewer and Interviewee (Respondent)	A structured / semi-structured conversation between Coach and Coachee (<i>in personal performance/life coaching is also the Client</i>)
The Interviewer asks a variety of open and closed questions to learn more about the respondent's views and opinions	The Coach asks a variety of open and closed questions to learn more about the respondent in terms of goals and commitment
The Researcher analyses the data provided by the respondent	The Coach and Coachee analyse the data provided by the Coachee
The Researcher draws conclusions from the data output and passes the interpretation to a third party (Client) who makes decisions thereafter	The Coach and Client draw conclusions from the data output and the Client makes decisions thereafter
The Client considers whether further research is required	The Client considers whether further coaching is required

Journey Goals

MR's journey into broader consumer, employee and customer satisfaction studies gained momentum in the fifties, sixties and seventies respectively. In 1974, Mori advertised for a research executive paying £2-3K a year whilst the 2007 annual MRS survey revealed total industry revenue in the UK of £1.35 billion. With TNS acquiring NFO in 2003 and GfK doing the same to NOP a few years on, suddenly the industry was a big player game, the gulf between the top names and the SMEs was widening. An extraordinary migration from The Cottage where returners to work began interviewing from their garages and kitchens in the eighties giving birth to the early CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) centres; companies such as the Independent Research Bureau were created from roots such as these.

Former IRB Managing Director Don Beverly recalls: "If I may borrow from Naomi Stadlen's best-selling Parenting book, we were desperate to demonstrate what quantitative researchers do, 'especially when it looks like nothing'" (Beverly, 2005).

With The Question as its power-tool MR went from strength to strength although learned a few hard lessons along the way; the question is only as good as its designer (The Researcher) and its deliverer (The Interviewer). Questions that are not clear lead to misinterpretation; questions that are not probed fully enough lead to insufficient data on which to make decisions; those that are too long to confusion and if too many in number the 'result' is bored respondents who stop thinking and switch on auto-pilot response mechanisms. Questions need to take many things into account, principally the audience.

Coaches have similar issues to Researchers and Interviewers, in ensuring they find the right question, the right question wording and the appropriate level of probing to ensure The Big Picture is constructed. The Coach is both Researcher and Interviewer; the Coachee is often both Respondent and Client. While market research interviewers probe to the negative, Coaches probe to the negative and beyond, encouraging clients to go to places rarely visited and this can have a life-changing effect.

Overcoming obstacles

The greatest challenge for Coaches may well be the cynicism of a demographic already well-practiced in holding up the crucifix to MR. Traditionally Joe Public has always liked something tangible – he's been wrestling with the invisibility of God for thousands of years and it's driven him half-insane. New Age thinking however, is fascinated by spirituality, appreciates the power of meditation and understands that some science – like magnetism – does not always make itself obviously known; it's this group that has become fascinated with coaching but it's not always easy celebrating a coaching 'result'; 'especially when it looks like nothing'.

Although the sceptical public that stood in the way of Market Research needed to be won over, for every Mr Angry who viewed Double Glazing, Insurance Sales and Market Research call centres as one huge conglomerate out to ruin his evening, there were 4-5 happy respondents more than willing to take part and the occasional lady over 60 at home alone who would receive the caller with the warmth she might greet her daughter who now lives too far away to see her on a regular basis.

Coaching has its own public to win over. If The Coach doesn't provide Advice but merely asks questions why would anyone pay for that kind of service? Such is the powerful nature of coaching it is not until you've coached that you marvel at its strength and not until you've been coached that the light bulb is illuminated. The Coach is The Mirror we have been waiting for; a chance to see exactly what is happening in our lives, to enhance our awareness to a degree where we are truly empowered to solve our own problems and find a way forward. The Coach must respect the Cynic and understand where he is coming from if he is to win him over.

Table 2: The Sceptics

Market Research (formative years)	Coaching (formative years)
It's not really going to make a difference is it?	It's just a conversation isn't it?
Why go to a market research company?	Why not just talk to a friend?
What's the point?	What's the point?
Where's the science?	Where's the science?
You are taking advantage of the client and also the respondent's good nature	You are taking advantage of the client
How do you justify the costs?	How do you justify the costs?

Looking at the left hand column (Table 2) MR professionals have worked enormously hard to eradicate all of these in the latter part of the 20th century; probably only the 'taking advantage of respondent's good nature' is still outstanding although Online Panels are doing a good job of handling that one with the use of points and reward programmes.

Reciprocal learning & development

So how exactly can research help coaching? Aside from the evident and unlimited benefits of "Outcome Research" (Grant, 2008) there are other exciting possibilities such as satisfaction/importance graphs for the analytical client. Research in its simplest terms is feedback and it is the client who teaches the coach how to improve as much as discovering inherent qualities and skills. Questions extract information, emotions, meaning and enlightenment.

In comparing the former MR Cottage Industry having since become a global empire, one can only marvel at the huge call centres in India and the Philippines and wonder 'how did we get here?' From, a coaching perspective, in 20 years will we look back and chuckle at the charm of those early telephone coaching sessions in the kitchen or face to face meetings in Starbucks? Cities filled with Coaching Telephone Centres led by one central governing body with visiting quality inspectors?

Maybe this green-hat thinking is a little too random. Whether we reach the day when everyone is a coach for someone else or where every school day contains a coaching session remains to be seen but is fascinating – if not a little scary - to ponder. If my driving instructor had used elements of Coaching in my lessons, would I have been able to park effectively the next day after passing my test? As Decouvertes said, "It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question". To conclude, in the words of Tennessee Williams "Life is an unanswered question, but let's still believe in the dignity and importance of the question".

Coaching has evolved into a unique set of skills formed around The Question: 'active' and 'global' listening, the extraction of key values, the unpacking of limiting beliefs, exposure of inner conflict and the ability to inspire clients to find their own drive and motivation to reach their maximum potential as a human being. Coaching is indeed as much a spiritual process as it is a functional one.

Coaches must continue improving and retain dignity whilst perfecting their art. While they do this, Clients may well prove to be the supreme voice of coaching as they create positive ripples among a community looking for answers to questions that no one has yet thought to ask them. When The Community is ready it will seek The Coach and find The Answer.

Conclusion

The Coaching and Market Research industries face similar challenges in overcoming negative public perception. The skills of the MR interviewer are not dissimilar from the starter level skill-set of the coach. Each uses 'Data Analysis' as a key tool to provide a way forward for the client. The Researcher and Coach act as navigators for the client to elicit information and make decisions. Coaching can learn from the paths travelled by market research in the seventies, eighties and nineties and use those experiences to anticipate future direction.

Notes on contributor

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