

**SPEAKER'S CORNER**

MARK SIMMONDS

# Springsight or thinsight?



Mark Simmonds describes how to turn insights into springsights.

**I**NNOVATION WITHOUT INSIGHT is failure. The Apple iPhone, Tesco, Nintendo Wii, Innocent, Jamie Oliver, *X Factor* are all winners because they are firmly rooted in customer insight. A large number of international brand-driven companies understand its importance and have undertaken programmes to upskill their marketers. However, participants on workshops that I run often confront me with the slightly sobering question: 'I know that insight is really important, but how do I know when I have found one'!?

A typical insight definition generally contains two core elements. For example, 'A penetrating discovery about underlying needs or motivations that creates opportunities for growth'. The first element refers to the customer, the second to the way in which this might usefully be exploited by the business. The sequence is also important. Marketers are encouraged to develop ideas from customer needs, not the other way round.

The definition of a springsight is 'a rich word or phrase, important in the life of the customer, providing an exciting springboard to solutions that address the brand issue at hand'. The added value in this definition is primarily the front end of the statement because it is the stimulus of creative language that can give brand teams a better chance of developing winning ideas across all elements of the marketing mix.

Some examples of springsights and the resulting ideas are shown in Figure 1.

It is important to stress that the springsight is not replacing the need for creative work, but what it is doing is defining the creative landscape within which exciting ideas might reside. The harder you work to develop the springsight, the easier it is to find these rich landscapes.

Looking more closely at the words and phrases used in the springsights in Figure 1, it is also important to examine the balance between functionality and emotion. 'Getting messy' and 'swigging' are functional words. 'Learning, having fun' and 'relieving midweek eating tedium' veer more towards the emotional. It is a myth that insights have always got to be deep, meaningful, penetrating and steeped in emotion.

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**The definition of a springsight is 'a rich word or phrase, important in the life of the customer, providing an exciting springboard to solutions that address the brand issue at hand'**

The most important criteria is that the insight points towards a tangible, exciting and differentiating solution for the brand task at hand. If this is packaging innovation (Calippo Shots), then the insight may well be functionally based. If the task is to develop brand positioning or communication (Persil), then the split between functionality and emotion may be more evenly balanced.

The opposite of a springsight is a weak and watery thinsight. The latter contains no richness of language or expression, leaving you struggling to see how the insight might address the brand issue at hand. No obvious springboards or bridges, very little creative direction. Thinsights often contain generic words such as 'quality', 'confidence', 'guilt', 'reassurance', 'trust', 'happiness' and 'loyalty'. Each of these may well represent fundamental and important customer needs or motivations, but they often do not contain the necessary 'oomph!!' to lead us into very exciting territories.

How do you get springsights?

The first stage is having a clear understanding of the 'space' within which you are looking for springsights. Which business issue are you trying to address? Which part of the category are you focusing on? Which target market are you going after? Which customer behaviour are you trying to change? What is the role of the springsight in brand development?

Sainsbury's were looking for a campaign idea that got every customer to spend a little extra each time they shopped ... to put one more item

in their shopping basket on each visit. Persil was searching for a positioning to differentiate itself from Ariel, the market leader.

Having a better understanding of this strategic space means, first, that you are more likely to be looking for springsights in the right place and, second, you will be in a better position to judge their quality and worth when you develop them.

The second stage in springsight development is to carry out a rigorous and holistic information trawl both inside and outside the category. The trick here is to make sure that you open up as many windows as possible – talking to existing customers, studying the competition, interviewing experts, exploring adjacent categories – partly because this is one way of exposing yourself to language, expression and ideas that might be new to your category. Adam Morgan, in his book *The Pirate Inside*, refers to 'Insights of Opportunity', which are often hunted down outside the category in question in order to find differentiation within. The Apple iMac puts romance into computers. Lush, the bath and cosmetics retailer, has 'stolen' freshness, colour and the sense of theatre from the deli counter to help it stand out from the crowd.

### Listening for springy words

The two key skills required in springsight development are those of listening and questioning. Traditionally the domain of the market research function, marketers are now being asked to get closer to their customers, and this means that they need to develop and finetune these core skills.

Listening first. Read the extract below. This company is looking for a new washing powder concept that is not about either stain removal or cleaning 'whiter than white'. The target customer is a mother talking about washing clothes, and you, the marketer, are listening to her.

*'I wash clothes every other day. I don't really enjoy it, it's somewhat of a chore, and I really wish that I was doing other things! My kids are always out and about, doing what kids do best ... getting dirty! I hardly ever buy any new clothes for myself. I wish I could but I don't. They are so expensive these days. Unfortunately, this means that my clothes look so old and tired, a bit like me really! I wish that I could spruce them up a little, bring them back to life! It's almost like they need to be re-energised, re-vitalised. Every month, I go to the spa, just for a bit of a treat.....does me a world of good. I sometimes think that my clothes should visit the spa too!'*

Which words or phrases above do you find interesting? Which ones might form the basis of a springsight? 'Spruce up', 're-energised', 're-vitalised', 'spa', 'does me a world of good', or a combination of some or all? Which concepts or ideas are starting to take root in your mind?

Listening is an important skill to acquire



Figure 1

because people often use their most creative language when they are talking. Conversation is a spontaneous and approximate act where metaphors, mixed metaphors, analogies, rich, rude and expressive language are often used, in unguarded moments, to describe key thoughts.

Unfortunately, our own human nature often conspires against effective listening for a number of key reasons: we are more often interested in ourselves; we spend most of our listening time, mentally preparing for our next questions; we tend to listen out for things that confirm what we think; we are suspicious or dismissive of linguistic eccentricity. We are often not really sure what it is we should be listening out for!

### Questioning to root out springy words

If exciting and rich language does not automatically spring forth from the mouths of customers, then skilful questioning is required to find the golden nuggets that underpin springsights.

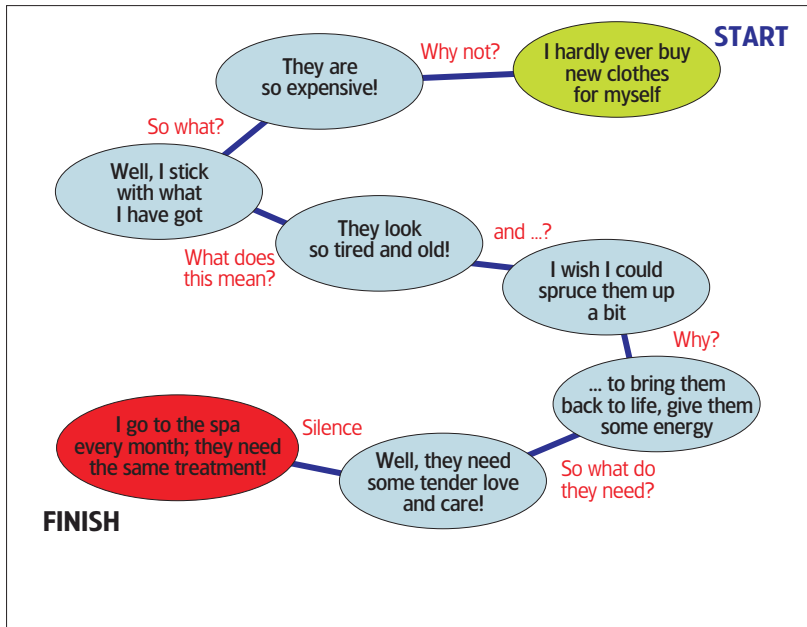
If we take the previous transcript from the mother, it is probably fair to say that most of the interesting words and phrases do not emerge until the last few lines. Up until the point that the mother says 'I hardly ever buy any new clothes for myself', you would be hard pressed to find any creative clues or springboards.

Therefore, in order to encourage the customer to enter exciting new territories, it is important that the interviewer has the ability to ask a number of exploratory questions that will take the discussion down paths of potential.

Figure 2 (on page 66), shows how the interview might have progressed.

In order to find nuggets of interest that might underpin high potential springsights, the

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**Figure 2**

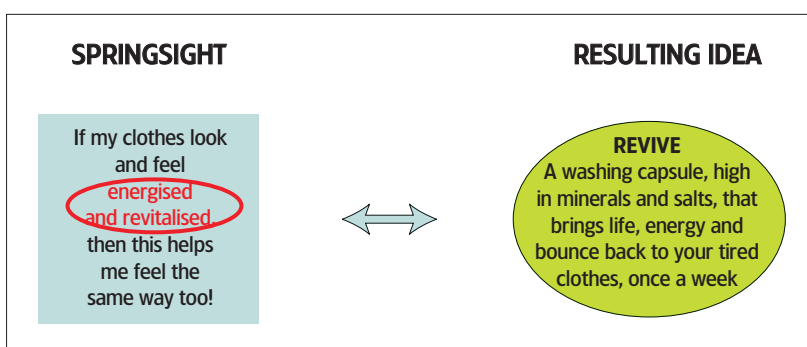
interviewer needs to interrogate the target customer with the skills of an inquisitive detective. He/she needs to:

1. have a clear vision of what a springsight 'nugget' might look like
2. use a range of appropriate questions to move from one answer to the next (Why? So what? What do you mean? ....and? Silence!)
3. listen extraordinarily hard to the answers, missing nothing
4. celebrate and explore enthusiastically words or phrases that stand out, jar slightly, feel out of place or unusual
5. drill down as deep as possible, but accept the fact that there will be dead ends from time to time.

Once the drilling is done, using one or more start points, stand back, reflect a little, and locate nuggets with potential. Which combinations of words or phrases excite you and provide seeds for ideas that might address the brand issue?

Obviously a hypothesis is required for illustration purposes, so how about the example shown in Figure 3?

**Figure 3**



**Although a springsight is not a replacement for creative work, it does pinpoint the creative territory within which ideas can be found and developed. This is important because, at the end of the day, it is ideas that customers buy and not insights!**

**Summary**

Insights underpin all elements of successful brand development.

A springsight is 'a rich word or phrase, important in the life of the customer, providing an exciting springboard to solutions that address the brand issue at hand'.

Although strategic considerations are undeniably important, the tactical skills of listening and questioning required to unearth and develop springsights are crucial.

And even though a springsight is not a replacement for creative work, it does pinpoint the creative territory within which ideas can be found and developed. This is important because, at the end of the day, it is ideas that customers buy and not insights!

**Final thought ...**

Next time you are asked that slightly troubling question, 'How do I know whether I have got an insight?', you will have an answer: 'Is it a springsight or is it a thinsight?'

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