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HOW MOBILE QUALITATIVE TEED UP AUTHENTIC RESEARCH WITH MILLENNIALS

Feeling Mutual were approached by the entertainment company 'The Institute of Competitive Socialising'. They wanted to evaluate the opportunity to expand their Urban Golf concept: 'Swingers, the Crazy Golf Club', into America. They had to evaluate whether the name 'Swingers' might provoke negative reactions, given the potentially sexual connotations; and how likely Americans would be to attend.

The founder Jeremy Symmonds had seen lots of Millennials research when he ran a Youth Engagement agency. However, he had concerns about traditional focus group method and challenged us to go further to get authentic insight.

We took a mobile approach that included asking millennials to share video feedback of their nights out. We also got them to share screen recordings of mobile interactions along with verbal commentary. And we went the extra mile to develop stimulus that really brought the experience to life. This included mocking up Facebook ads and magazine reviews as if it had launched in their city already. This helped participants judge the concept more meaningfully and allowed them to express themselves on their terms, both of which inspired the client to proceed with their launch.

Synopsis (1500 words)

THE BUSINESS CHALLENGE

In recent years, The Institute of Competitive Socialising have successfully launched 'Swingers - The Crazy Golf Club' across two sites in London. Swingers is a premium, mini-golf experience for Millennials that turns over £20m a year. They now want to expand globally, starting with America. So research was required to ensure that the concept (and its potentially controversial name) would be a success if it launched.

On this project, the client and founder - Jeremy Symmonds (winner of Young Gun Entrepreneurs Award 2018 and a former advertising executive), came to Feeling Mutual with a healthily cynical attitude to traditional qualitative research methods. In his advertising days, he specialised in brand experiences for Millennials, but had reservations about the validity of traditional qualitative methods.

The client had two concerns. First, he felt that group discussions with Millennials, often feel artificial; not just because young people are not used to talking in such a formal setting, but also because they are more likely to be influenced by the others. Secondly, he was concerned that if we took a typical approach to creating stimulus (using just written descriptions and photos of the event), there would be a risk that participants might fail to imagine what the experience would really be like. And so their judgements would not be as predictively accurate.

It was essential that our research would enable the client to accurately judge how likely Millennials would be to attend Swingers, if it launched in America. Not just to convince the client but also their investors. So they challenged Feeling Mutual to design a method that they felt confident making decisions off the back of.

OUR APPROACH

In order to achieve this, Feeling Mutual took a 'mobile first' approach to understanding Millennial youth culture and went further to develop stimulus that would help them imagine the concept as realistically as possible.

Feeling Mutual used the mobile research app 'Indeemo' to manage the discussion. This allowed people to give their feedback via mobile video, text and by annotating photos. Communicating by mobile is far more natural for young people, than in a viewing facility. We were able to use a feature that lets people can record their mobile screen as they interact with a site or other app, while they record their voice commentary of whatever they think and feel. This takes the researcher far closer to real world moments as they unfold. This meant their feedback was not as post-rationalised, filtered or based on erroneous memories as it might have been with traditional focus groups in a viewing facility.

A sample of 12 young people were recruited based on their social behaviours, interest in competitive socialising, income, where they live and work (see appendix 1). They took part in the mobile qualitative study across a week. We looked at their level of social influence in their peer-group based on social media followers and engagement online too. This meant we knew we had truly socially influential 'taste-makers' taking part. We recruited them in Facebook so we could geo-target on an interest in golf and based on where they live. A series of exercises were designed to take us closer to their lives. Overall, we received over 10 hours of feedback from them. All feedback was in private (reducing any research effect).

They were asked to keep a mobile video diary of the steps they go through when deciding on where to go on a

night out with friends. They shared conversations with their friends, screen recordings of social media interactions, local city reviews of where to go out, and more. This allowed us to understand the criteria they use to decide on where to go out. We also got them to share videos and pictures of their night out. This allowed us to develop a model of their decision making process. It was clear which criteria mattered most to them. We used this as an evaluative framework for assessing their reactions to Swingers, which gave the client more confidence in the conclusions and their potential application in the real world.

In the second part of the study required we shared the idea of Swingers with them, as vividly as possible, so that they could really imagine it and therefore judge it meaningfully. The client was worried that written descriptions of the experience and photos alone would not be enough to achieve this. So we worked with their video and design teams to create stimulus which made it look as though Swingers had already launched. We drip fed this stimulus to them (replicating how they might have realistically come across the venue in the real world). We were able to get their gut reactions to genuine touchpoints, in the same context and via the same medium in which they would have encountered them in reality.

The stimulus of the venue, included a mocked up journalistic review from a local night-out review (see appendix 2) site, and a mocked-up Facebook ad (see appendix 3) - as if it had already launched. We also used video footage from the existing London venue. This meant that they were responding to content about the venue, as it would appear to them in the real-world as if it had already launched. This made us more confident about their judgements than had we shown them typical written concept descriptions.

Throughout the research we listened for mentions to do with negative sexual connotations associated with the brand name 'Swingers, The Crazy Golf Club'. Although, some issues were raised, when they saw how impressive the quality of the venue was, these soon disappeared. They were able to appreciate this because of the video of the venue that helped them feel like they were actually there.

The third part of the study was dedicated to tuning the brand experience into the local culture, while staying true to its original conception. To do this we got them to suggest local food and drinks brands and to review our suggestions for local partner brands. We got them to share ideas on how the mini-golf course design might be developed to fit with American tastes. The participants were carefully selected to be social taste-makers and so represented a harder audience to convince.

The research method created a template for evaluating risk and potential reward pre-launch. This will be rolled out across other markets as the brand continues to grow around the world.

THE IMPACT

Jeremy their founder, said this about the impact we had on their investment decision and our approach:

"Before launching Swingers, I worked for an ad agency, targeting Millennials so I know what a hard nut to crack they are. You have to understand culture first and get into their actual lives in order to truly understand them. Call me cynical but I do not trust traditional methods which can be too artificial and hypothetical. Tom's approach allowed us and our investors to make more confident decisions about the global roll out.

He challenged us to mock up content to make it look as if the venue had already launched. This meant they were reacting to stimulus that they would likely have encountered in the real world. Also it was great to see feedback in video; it made the study a lot more compelling. The fact they answered by mobile, in a real world context and responded to stimulus that mimicked real world touchpoints, gave us far more confidence in their feedback.

The research gave us confidence to proceed with the launch. It helped us stay true to our UK brand identity while also understanding local nuances. We had concerns with the name 'Swingers' given the possible connotations - and these were allayed. It helped us to commit to a particular site within the city - since we had detailed local insights.

I like the idea of letting young people express themselves in ways that are natural to them. Mobile feedback is far more natural than traditional focus group settings with their two-way mirrors and the group discussion context. We plan to roll this method out across future launches around the world".

I believe our approach deserves recognition through the ICG / MRS award for a number of reasons. Firstly, it shows how mobile qualitative research is evolving. We not only got video feedback but also captured their screen interactions 'in the moment' as they unfolded. This represents a positive example for the ICG to promote because it is genuinely progressive. Secondly, it addresses some of the criticisms leveled at traditional qualitative research (that of artificiality and the corrosive effect of herd behaviour on validity). Thirdly, it shows how quality qualitative research can go the extra mile to be authentic, by investing in quality stimulus materials and pushing clients to deliver it. Finally, it shows that to engage Millennials on their terms, they require more tailored modes of inquiry. Given that Millennials are now a bigger group in the UK than Baby Boomers - a shift in methodology towards

media that are more natural for them, is an important development for the industry to recognise and encourage.

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