



Brand Doctors

How Research Saves Scapegoat Brands[©]

Retaining Brand and Business Perspective in
Troubled Times (March 2008)

Chris Payne and George Davidson



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Preface

We live in times where the desire for perfection is so strong that disappointment seemingly cannot be borne. We are eager to consume, yet we deplore what we regard as excessive consumption. This may explain the fury expressed towards brands or institutions that are seen to be responsible for some prevailing ill.

The truth, negotiated or absolute, is often the first casualty of our fury. The scapegoating across brands and categories significantly affects true and useful research data upon which we decide our fate and fortunes. Scapegoating is possibly a symptom of the inability to reconcile imperfection, perhaps in ourselves, not just in corporations.

“For nearly all English people who have ever set foot in France, the words French bread evoke a golden brown baguette or a long thin ficelle, the crust crisp and sweet with its characteristic leaf-shaped surface cuts, the crumb white and pitted with irregular holes, many of them very large.”

Elizabeth David (1973)

Perhaps perceived imperfection is underrated?



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Introduction

If your brand is highly visible in its category it may already suffer from the phenomena of scapegoating by media, politicians and consumers even though it may be more sinned against than a sinner. Brands can generate their own victim status by succumbing to the scapegoating, and scapegoating costs the brand more than just money.

Contemporary angst and blame culture may fuel this brand witch-hunt – journalists and consumers may berate the brand, blaming it for some societal ill or, seeing it as the most villainous in a category. One of the affects of blaming is that data, and therefore research-informed decisions, may well be contaminated and driven by naïve reportage. The research community nowadays must have a brand perspective – they must understand brands not just research. Scapegoating insidiously creeps into the data itself and, we suggest, even the methods of collection.

Does your data – qual and quant – often seem suffused with unwarranted negativity? Do you believe that some research data is overly biased by scapegoating and hearsay?

George Davison, Business Strategy and Insight at McDonald's and Chris Payne of Brand Doctors have extensive experience of how research saves scapegoat brands. This is an insight, action and solution based paper. We make both strategic and tactical suggestions.

McDonald's experience of weathering the storm and addressing the challenge provides an illuminating business case. This paper is the genesis of a wider strategic discussion of the need to adapt perspectives because of the times we live in. It highlights issues of how we collect and interpret data and its ultimate value.



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It also sketches out how the McDonald's brand strategically managed such scapegoating. McDonald's Came, Saw and Conquered, before being ambushed by its success and the sea changes in food attitudes and culture. It still lives to tell the tale – pursuing redemption not atonement for its scapegoat status.

What are scapegoat brands?

Scapegoat brands or companies are those that find themselves the focus of media, political or consumer criticism. Brands and corporations, UBS and Enron globally, McDonald's and Tesco in the UK, have all found themselves in this position. Even categories can become scapegoats, for example: the nature of television, fast-food, cell/mobile-phones and SUV/4x4s. This contamination of the brand becomes an issue for both consumer and brand owner. Its more than bad press; it can mean brand erosion, even destruction, especially if the brand owners fail to respond wisely. Being a victim must be avoided at all costs. One of the affects will be a contamination of research information and clarity.

Scapegoating of brands or companies is often based upon category related issues that have been hot-housed by media attention and result in a tendency to blame a single entity for a wider perceived problem. Issues that may spark the genesis of scapegoating include, organic/free-range, food additives, healthy eating/obesity, energy costs, sustainability, carbon footprint/global warming, animal testing/exploitation, consumer or employee abuses, small shop/mult-nationals and global brand invasion. More often the brand takes the flak for the industry regardless of their actual culpability. The bigger the brand the more likely they are to be labelled the enemy by lobby groups.

A scapegoat refers to someone or something that is blamed as a way of distracting attention from the real culprit. Its Biblical origin is the literal placing of sins upon a real goat before it is sent into the wilderness, thus atoning for said sins. Nowadays we see scapegoating as the tendency to project responsibility upon a third party.



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This emotional buffer helps avoid one's own involvement and places it in the hands of another: “the manufacturer/retailer should not have allowed me to buy/consume... I need not blame myself – *its the wicked manufacturer* for tempting me/my children, my family.”

Always look on the dark side of life

Pundits and critics can become heroicised for speaking out against whatever issue/brand is in the media spotlight. Issues are sometimes harnessed to aid the critic, while the issue itself is not addressed.

Customers and consumers feed upon these utterings and become participants in what is a social process. So are their views wisdom or wind? Unlike some other information, we suggest that brand scapegoating is not necessarily about processing information. It may not necessarily reflect the brands people buy or indeed their intrinsic feeling towards those brands. It is more about social involvement. Joining in with the criticism may make the critic feel more powerful or simply less powerless. In this way people deal with their sense of powerlessness and alienation/separation with a kind of mobbing. Just as rooks mob an intruder bird, consumers may do the same in research. Their opinion is implicitly or explicitly validated for its vehemence and strength, not its wisdom or common sense. Often opinion may bear little relevance to what the consumer actually does, In market research this validation process is part of the activity. We thank and acknowledge for opinions expressed, whatever their value or authenticity.

The climate of criticism: Blame 1, Trust 0

Generally we buy, construct and conduct research to capture trends and predict or evaluate actions and their impact upon brands profitability, awareness and imagery. We seek to provide validation for a future direction. The world however is changing, *there's a lot of blame out there*. Blame attaches itself, or is attached



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to, more salient brands, and they become scapegoats. We now find ourselves in an emotional climate where big, often previously secure brands, are now subject to greater scrutiny and potential for criticism than ever before. In a blame culture some brands are treated like fallen idols, since they are after all the old gods that we once worshipped, but are now creators of bad, not good, and thus a target.

The sacred cows have been turned into so many burgers

In 2007 everything from Mervyn King and the Bank of England to Blue Peter found itself in media hot water. This continues in 2008 and there seems no end in sight to the idea of hunting and exposing villains of one type or another. The desire to find someone, something, to vilify seems, in the current climate, to verge on 1950s McCarthyism – the intense anti-communist witch-hunt in the United States. Is it the case that what was once perhaps revered may now be equally reviled? This does not seem like Ralph Nader Consumerism, but more like the first consumer blood sport.

Who is now bad who once was good?

Brands that are often leaders in their fields, such as McDonald's, Tesco and Virgin are high achievers that can also be treated as high deceivers [sic]. Visibility and ubiquity are part of this. Is it their success that is the provocative factor or is it individual reluctance to accept responsibility for health, parenting skills, decisions to shop differently and so forth? We suggest that brands have become increasingly scapegoated in the last 10 or so years. This may be an output of increased consumerism. Previously nationalised industries may have fallen into this role. BT, we mention in passing, ironically may have moved from scapegoat to dependable old BT not the other way round.

In a world where we sometimes feel powerless, does complaining and ganging-up make us feel more powerful?

We live in a feelings junkie world. The media asks *how do you feel about...* not *what do you think about...* Has research succumbed too? Perhaps it is not



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surprising that the emotional tenor of consumers, hence feelings, becomes perceived as most important. What we do may be of course more informative. *A man, like a brand, is a sum of his actions, not his intentions or feelings.*

Does the prohibition-driven social landscape, whether real or perceived, with CCTV and new and more controlling laws, create the need to vent more aggressively because life feels less free and the individual feels more constrained? The media takes delight in highlighting all the things you now cannot do or say, for PC and Health and Safety reasons; no conkers, rough play, snowballing and bonfires, because the insurance is too expensive. These issues create a feeling of being out of control, or certainly not in control. The latent desire to express this frustration may foster underlying resentment and tension. How will this be expressed?

If we cannot get even maybe we can get angry?

There is no doubt that brands are the new scapegoats where once other groups and institutions were the targets for such cathartic expression. Whatever is causing the shift, it seems to require a call to action by anyone who wants clarity and does not want their business to suffer because of a blame culture.

The impact of scapegoating on brands and brand data

Scapegoating of brands contaminates and we lose clarity. Public opinion and scrutiny is not the problem; it's how we deal with this stuff of potentially contaminated information. If your brand is in the scapegoat zone you will know how this affects management confidence in the research findings. There is no technology to stop people using surveys to off-load even though this may be entirely separate from what is being surveyed. We suggest there are different ways of asking and different paradigms through which we should view our interpretation of that work.



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The Road Less Travelled?

Researchers must have creative intelligence; they must comprehend the meaning and the implications of their words upon an audience. If they want to be taken seriously they must know the brand as well as, perhaps even better than, the brand team. This requires wisdom, not naivety nor ignorance disguised as objectivity.

They never asked themselves whether they should, they only asked themselves whether they could (Jeff Goldblum in Spielberg's Jurassic Park)

Think about the last time you wrote or read some findings... Did the findings and the author successfully distinguish the issues – the status of the brand, the climate, the degree she/he felt certain issues were over-exaggerated, un-represented and the impact upon the business reality? Did they capture predictive views of the new and expensive website/communications or just focus upon brand hearsay that you were already familiar with? Did they sound like a Daily Mail editorial or did they provide good orderly direction and solutions?

57 Channels (And Nothin' On) (Springsteen)

Jamie Oliver's work in challenging food standards in schools in 2004 seemed to create massive ripples like few other awareness generating campaigns. His attack was upon the ubiquity of virtually totally processed foods in many schools. The reality was that many children had lost sight of any knowledge or interest in the nature of food itself. They could not recognize or identify many normal foods. This challenge to an insidious status quo captured the public imagination – it was shocking. Charles Clarke, the Government Minister responsible for Schools, meets with Jamie and expresses an intention to look into this. Turkey Twizzlers became famous, many schools' food policies fell under parental and in theory, Local Government/Education Authority scrutiny. Government, especially local, struggled to marry Jamie's philosophy with the reality of food provision in schools.



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Jamie's School Dinners required a degree of cooking, which challenged staff who were used to nothing more complicated than reheating and assembling. Cooking for large numbers from scratch is labour intensive, thus costly, and the underlying issue was school meal budgets. Reducing food cost seemed simple if it was prepared off-site. Over the past 20 years Local Education had de-skilled school kitchens and employed willing, but largely unskilled staff. Children were simply eating what was provided and, we suggest, it was not the retailers fault that school dinners had become typically something assembled and in batter. But we digress: Jamie's legacy may not have been the one he intended. Food issues became an increasing media topic; obesity fever gripped the media and the thrust was very simple and brutal: *someone needs to be responsible or, to blame*. Vending machines disappeared from schools, latterly food advertising to children fell within greater scrutiny and Government began to penalise the wicked further. This trend and apparent movement against fast-food predates Jamie Oliver, but he became a key figure. This story exemplifies how issues become hot-housed and take on the life of their own.

What is the issue here? Is it British children not having a relationship with real food? Is it school meals funding and policy? Is it the British obsession with cheap food? This is how scapegoating starts.

The grinding sound we heard with Jamie's work was the rusty media and consumer gun turret swiveling to fire upon... fast-food retailers. Not those who really have an influence over what children are fed: parents and education authorities.

The late Anita Roddick changed much of the way we think about cosmetics and testing. But was the feeling towards food as overwhelming as the reaction to Jamie's programme suggested? We think not. McDonald's, as we shall see, had begun to respond to the un-healthy food lobby, so to speak, and had introduced fruit and other healthier items. But the key point is that Jamie Oliver had created a point around which all sorts of bodies and issues had coalesced. This kind of



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phenomena fuels potential for scapegoating. McDonald's was already in the firing line before School Dinners. But like global warming, but perhaps more so, the food and health consumer climate became hotter and more critical as a result of the awareness. This hot climate does not increase clarity. (Anecdotally, even some children we interviewed quoted, albeit erroneously, from Morgan Spurlock's 2004 documentary *Super Size Me*.)

Is brand perspective biased or useful?

It is mandatory, but it cannot be naïve. When our research focus is a brand that suffers from intense negativity the degree of affect, we believe, is greater than in the past. When we ask customers about an issue/communication their answer will be filtered through their brand perspective. Some brands may be highly influenced by the category issues, for example, energy costs or emissions, which may fall upon the brand most salient in the market.

Brand eclipsing

Big and dominant brands, especially visible ones, can eclipse and even shield other brands in the same category from the flak of media or political attacks. Subway, Burger King and KFC may benefit from McDonald's scapegoating – although overall the category focus draws negative attention. This is not the same as brand leadership and much less encouraging for all.

Further complicating things is the fact that levels of comprehension of a scapegoated brand may also suffer – is Transport for London the same as Congestion Charging London and The Mayor's Office? Which is the scapegoat? (When we look at TFL branding on some of the media activity you may find yourself wondering). Overall the risk is that the scapegoat affect will be apparent.

When a brand's marketing communications are researched is the likelihood that the brand attitudes and image will be what people talk about first after the



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obligatory U&A? This may not really be the most influential issue – image is not always everything.

What are we measuring?

We may still be measuring or hearing angst and rage projected upon the brand. This may be neither useful contextual data nor actually relevant to what we are trying to understand and explore. We need to identify and distinguish what we are actually trying to find out when a brand suffers from scapegoated status . Some in our research community are already doing this, or at least are aware of the importance of understanding how data is affected by a variety of misleading influences. These currently include brand response versus advertising reaction, product experience versus imagery, brand imagery/ad stand-out and advertising awareness compared with profitability. Research may, in the future, benefit from looking at scapegoating affects and distinguishing this from other data.

Avoiding misleading influences?

Goode (2007) used separate methodologies to discriminate between attitudes to Virgin Trains and responses to the Virgin Trains advertising. The paper also brilliantly illustrates how hard science and really clear thinking can help our understanding and confidence. If the study had only collected or attended to brand attitude data, the significance of the advertisings contribution would have been lost.

Ian Pring (2007) illustrated in a different context the separation between associations above ground and below ground for London Underground/The Tube, which echoes the need to understand different parts of a brand that may be split-off from one another.

Binet and Field (2007) in the IJMRS Viewpoint highlighted that *big shifts in standout, awareness or image scores do not generally correlate with big shifts in market share or profitability*. This related to advertising effectiveness. It was very



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robustly based upon analysis of 880 national case studies of the IPA effectiveness dataBANK.

They were looking at the shifts in positive terms. We are equally interested to look at brand imagery and associations in negative terms. Is a shift in brand image score in a negative direction unlikely to affect a business? Logically scapegoat status would be corrosive to a brand's business – it was to McDonald's in some respects.

Romaniuk and Nicholls (2006) paper about drawing erroneous conclusions from the standpoint of advertising effectiveness and brand attribute responses deserves revisiting in terms of what would occur if the brand had been scapegoated.

Keller and Lehman (2003) describe five dimensions as being important measures of the consumer mindset: Brand Awareness, Brand Associations, Brand Attitude, Brand Attachment and Brand Activity. Most of these, we suggest, will be influenced by scapegoating.

Slavish Adherence to the Data – S.A.D.

It was decided that Arthur would study medicine at Edinburgh University. He was responsible and hard working: in time he would surely acquire the stolidity patients liked to trust. (Julian Barnes, Arthur and George)

Sometimes really believing the data is great, providing we believe in the wisdom behind the way it was collected and interpreted. Is the answer S.A.D.? Mostly we should adhere, but not necessarily always to the method. We should be thoughtful not rigid. How we ask questions will always determine the validity of the findings. This is more so now. *Be slavish about adhering to the data, just be sure you ask the questions in a different way. (Dr Ali Goode – Duckfoot Research and Development)*



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Scapegoating Eclipses Xactitude – S.E.X.

Its all about S.E.X. Forgive the crude sound bite, but we need to look at how we work. How we ask questions, the sequencing and order of topics and the need to conduct parallel methods, ensures more robust findings to give us strong direction.

Scapegoating impacts upon our ability to predict, measure and interpret. What are we measuring? Prejudice? Brand imagery? The phenomenon of scapegoating is not simply UK local its a trend elsewhere too. Blame is infectious.

How much do New Yorkers distinguish between NY Transit Authority and The Mayor's Office in election year when the system shuts down in Manhattan? In London, how much do rail and tube travelers distinguish between whom they blame for the problems they may experience? How does our method distinguish between the morass of attitudes to an advertising campaign it may be running on a more neutral issue and the rage against the brand and category?

This may call into question how sound an investment research is, and so the boardroom audience for research may become disenchanted with the failure of research. Who can blame them? This damages all.

Who watches the watchmen?

We do, because we are the watchmen of the business world. Good research is an engine of discovery as well as a method of measurement. If we work for scapegoat brands© or categories our task is clear. Our methods, coupled with our thinking, will determine the basis for business decisions. Why else are we paid? Why else is sound insight valuable if cannot be leveraged?



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What happens when you become a scapegoat: the McDonald's experience

Can you recall the UK food scene before McDonald's? If you can, your answer is probably Wimpy, maybe The Golden Egg, or Lyons and assorted tearooms and restaurants. Children were rarely present in the UK restaurant landscape before McDonald's arrived.

The first McDonald's restaurant opened in Woolwich in 1974. McDonald's brought a slice of Americana to a recession-hit and gloomy UK. It offered hope, optimism and friendliness served up with golden fries and Root Beer. Consumer reaction to the brand was overwhelmingly positive. The brand thrived. In 1983 the 100th restaurant opened in Market Street, Manchester. It had taken nine years to open the first 100 restaurants. The next 100 restaurants only took another three years.

The over-riding consumer reaction to the brand was positive. So much so that the brand became a quintessential part of the UK High Street. It was a major event when the McDonald's arrived in towns across the country. People really loved the brand.

McDonald's had brought a new style of eating to the UK. It was relaxed, fun, quick and cheap. A place for kids, a place for adults, a place for everyone. Well, perhaps not everyone.

NIMBYS emerge – the first signs of waning enthusiasm

Concerns were first expressed about the CFCs used in McDonald's packaging. In fact, by 1988 CFCs were removed from the foam packaging. 1989 saw the rumour of beef being grazed on land cleared from South American rainforests. A not dissimilar story based on soya growers de-forestation of the Amazon emerged again in 2006. A principal ingredient in chicken feed in the UK is Soya, hence Greenpeace



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linked this to McDonald's UK-sourced chicken and blamed McDonald's for the Amazon damage. Interestingly McDonald's response to this was not defensive as evident in the quote from Greenpeace's website at the close of this section.

These stirrings marked the beginning of something that grew apace in the next few years. 1993 saw Glenda Jackson lead a campaign against opening a McDonald's in Hampstead. She failed, but it had created another media focus. Valentino, the designer, did the same in Rome in a particular location he loved. By 2000 McDonald's had over 1,200 restaurants in the UK. There was a High Street store in nearly every town in the country and most of the retail parks as well. Things had changed. People had changed. Britain had changed. McDonald's had stayed the same. Why not? The formula worked, did it not?

Affluence makes the heart grow frailer

Consumer habits had changed and Britons had become more sedentary. There was less sport in schools. Britain and Britons became a bit better off and were able to spend it. Screens in many rooms, another scapegoat, beckoned an in-doors lifestyle. In our busy and busier lives we needed ready meals and fast food. We were less shy about consuming more.

However, this new lifestyle, and accompanying dietary change, led to concern about the drastic rise in childhood obesity.

Adults and children lived different and more autonomous lives – kids got their own meals. The generation who had lived through the rationing of the 1950s seemed out of touch. In 1980 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her Education Secretary, Keith Joseph, had halved spending on school meals and didn't raise it again, even by inflation, until 1990. Eating behaviour and meals have changed massively in the last 20 years.



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Government and media stakeholders looked for someone to blame. McDonald's, as the largest and most prominent QSR brand, came into the firing line. The media in UK appeared to become obsessed with diet. Of all the media coverage of diet and obesity in the UK, France and Germany 94 per cent took place in the UK.

The book *Fast Food Nation* was published, the film *Super Size Me* caught the mood; Jamie Oliver launched his School Dinners campaign with the Channel 4 series. The fox was loose in the hen house.

There then followed a period where McDonald's tried to deal with a changing and challenging media environment that was largely hostile. It is unlikely that many brands and businesses had ever had to deal with so much flak. There was lots of incoming, as they say.

People fell out of love with McDonald's. Worse than that, people began to really actively dislike McDonald's.

Salad, the silent killer (Steingarten, *The Man Who Ate Everything*) — ***what not to do***

McDonald's made mistakes. At first there was a reluctance to recognize what was happening. This is the *first practical point* — insist on good intelligence as bad intelligence leads to denial. Denial is the shock absorber of the soul, even if its a brand's soul. But it is not always helpful. Then McDonald's tried to fight back but did so perhaps clumsily.

Hindsight remains a wonderful thing.

Among other actions, McDonald's tried to sidestep the health issue, or at least recover the high ground, by launching salads. This is the *second practical point* — Do not sidestep; it's a dodging, alarm-based reaction that is rarely the best



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response). The critics were not going to go away. Salads might even be seen as atonement, allowing the consumer to say *we were right all along*.

Symptomatic of the scapegoating was the development of a lexicon of McDonald's words - McLibel, then McJob, even McGCSE in recent times.

McDonald's became embroiled in a protracted libel trial with two protestors, Morris and Steel, who accused the company of exploitation and ecological abuses. It looked like a David versus Goliath battle. Although McDonald's won in court, they lost in the court of public opinion. This is the *third practical point* – **Attack may not be the best form of defense**. It can look like bullying if you are bigger than your opponent.

McDonald's moved from being the favourite brand on the High Street, to being the High Street pariah. People deserted the brand and sales suffered. The business model for McDonald's become more and more difficult to sustain. Franchisee cash flow declined and pressure grew internally to do something.

Walking the walk

Research led the thinking. This is the *fourth practical point* – **ensure that you have a strong perspective so that you understand what is going on**. This research intelligence is part of the how the brand may be redeemed.

Firstly, it was important to understand the consumer perception in more detail. The initial step was to get everyone at McDonald's? to realize the extent of consumer distrust of the brand. New ideas such as salad, and apples and grapes (introduced in 2002), were not going to be enough to deter the critics – and they were more aggressively vocal than the supporters.

In 2004 the new CEO, Peter Beresford, led a listening campaign that included 40 qualitative groups across the whole country with consumers, franchisees, store



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managers and crew. Peter Beresford went to every session and took the temperature of the business and consumers. It was a deep brand audit. This intelligence was coupled with a wise champion, the CEO.

The fifth practical point: keep an open mind. This was evident in the depth to which data was mined and collected and new techniques tried. The same old thing no longer worked and the McDonald's team drew in new thinking. McDonald's began to understand quantitatively *who was leaving the brand and why* through segmenting of standard tracking studies. Critical was an understanding of the current consumer reaction to food. The necessity to be clearer about ingredients, nutritional content, provenance and processing was identified. This formed the strategic understanding of the consumer context the brand found itself in.

New styles of issue analysis research helped work out what to do. Using new techniques designed by American political polling experts Penn Schoen Berland, McDonald's began to see whom they needed to influence. The technique used a presentation of consumer issues and concerns together with potential solutions. The analysis focused on which solutions had most impact amongst swing voters (primarily mums with kids). It became clear this was the first target audience to focus on. Other audiences were identified to whom specific issues were addressed. This again highlights the open-minded, rather than a one-size fits all, approach in thinking.

The final and *sixth practical point* is **build a relationship with audiences in actions and communication.**

The research had led to action and a changing of the nutritional content of the food. McDonald's had introduced fruit bags, organic milk and free-range eggs. They removed trans fatty acids from food, removed GM from the food chain and ensured that they only bought beef from British and Irish farmers.



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Further, instead of dictatorial brand-to-consumer communications, McDonald's needed to get consumers to talk to other consumers. This was the genesis of the website *Make Up Your Own Mind* where consumers could ask anything about McDonald's, and frequently do, and of the co-created advertising where customers toured farms and abattoirs and then had complete editorial control of two-page adverts.

Redemption not atonement

The results have been positive. The number of people saying that McDonald's is involved in their community has increased by over a third since 2006. Sales are now flowing through the system and happy franchisees have positive cash flow. People are walking back through the doors and are happy to do so. Trust in the brand has rebuilt over the last few years.

Recently Jamie Oliver said:

'McDonald's, you know, they're doing quite well on the organic milk and the free range eggs, but their chicken is still a bog-standard bird.'

In recent press coverage both healthy sandwiches and speciality coffees were reported, in shocked tones, as having more fat than a Big Mac. The fat, salt and sugars in these products have increased whilst McDonald's has taken steps to ensure the Big Mac has less and less.

Progress will have been made when McDonald's is no longer the benchmark product in this kind of story. A lot has been done but there is a lot more to do.

McDonald's is always looking for more ways to tell what is actually a really good story about the High Street brand. On You Gov's Brand Index that monitors attitudes to 1,200 brands, McDonald's has always been the lowest scorer as respondents say they hear more negative things about McDonald's than positive, but the trend is upward. McDonald's is the type of brand that will always face this dichotomy.



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The brand has changed and consumer perceptions are changing, if very slowly. Looking forward, McDonald's must not get dragged back into the position they were in five years ago. It must see beyond the remnants of scapegoating and move forward. *The Odd Couple* is an example of this – with McDonald's working with Greenpeace in 2007 and Greenpeace crediting the business it once seemed to only vilify.

Carve their name with pride

An unlikely union of Greenpeace, McDonald's and leading UK supermarkets such as Marks & Spencer, Waitrose and ASDA, had successfully pressured multinational commodities brokers into signing a two-year moratorium on buying soya from newly deforested land in the Amazon. Business journalists have often been quick to accuse groups like Greenpeace of nurturing a knee-jerk hostility to global corporations. Well, yes, we do hold the view that multinationals are responsible for much of the environmental degradation blighting our planet. But our [Greenpeace] alliance with McDonald's and other food companies demonstrates that when business is ready to seriously tackle a crisis, we are ready join forces.

(Source: The Odd Couple – Greenpeace Website)

Practical principles for beleaguered brands

Our suggestions are both strategic and tactical:

Strategic – six point summary

1. Avoid denial or victimhood
2. Try not to sidestep or attempt to fob-off the critics
3. Do not attack, however tempting, especially if you are much bigger
4. Audit the brand using clever In-the-box methods and thinkers
5. Be open-minded about research methods



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6. Build relationships with customers/suppliers using real action, marketing and communications

Tactical – six points in detail

1. We cannot ask the questions as you did yesterday – funnels focus flaws

Forget funnel, think peak!

The order in which questions are asked is obviously influential. Many surveys and even qualitative discussions consciously and commonly use a funnel approach to questioning. After a warm up, or demographic check, listing broad attitudes to the brand and category is invariably the first port of call. If you are a scapegoat, this early part of the interview process will be suffused with much of that brand and scapegoat stuff that may well be interfering with your business. Then, and this is the clincher, your new idea will be shown and, because of the preceding reinforcement of the scapegoat image, it may well be struck down by brand or category baggage.

In effect the general technique used by the industry in terms of questioning structure reinforces potential negativity and criticism.

This funnel needs to be inverted. So it is now a pyramid. The entire order of the questionnaire has been turned on its head. After classification perhaps, we begin with the subject of the survey, for example a new product idea from a brand, rather than background brand information, which will come up later in any event.

2. Context and climate are distinct from brand and reaction

Context, climate, consumer and consequences

Brands such as Starbucks, Tesco, British Gas, Royal Mail, Everest and The BBC have silos of negative imagery. Parts of the brand will be safe while other areas



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will be more controversial and, potentially, toxic. This toxicity will be affected by category or current issues.

We need to start from a different place in our thinking. Going out and just doing the work is not the answer. The conversation needs to be had about dealing with scapegoating and how it will affect data collection. We need to consider how we separate data from different viewpoints. We are not simply saying avoid reportage to research practitioners.

How we construct the research, how we order the questions and interpret the answers are all relevant topics in the briefing and briefing documentation.

We will first want to define the context and climate in which we are working. We distinguish between these issues and brand issues and the subject – the new product or whatever we are looking at. This is why the supplier, not just the client, has to have a brand perspective.

3. Look at the relationship with the product as well as with the brand

It can be much more important to explore product interviews before exploring brand interviews. Some time ago BT conducted a series of interviews with customers about their calls. Each interview went through the bill in detail. The level of response reflected enjoyment and perceived value of calls made regardless of bill size. This interactive approach highlighted the gap between distant and up-close responses to the brand and the value it was seen to offer. Customers were able to illustrate how to substantiate a product-based brand offer, not just a brand image. BT was wisely measuring the meaningful bits not just *do you feel good or bad about our brand*.



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4. Treat your data (and customers) as you do your children – value them profoundly but listen selectively

You cannot listen to everything they say or want. Be selectively deaf. Sometimes we listen wholeheartedly to customers, sometimes we listen partially and sometimes we may ignore some of the data. But always remember who you are talking to and distinguish between uncommon sense and noise.

As an example in qualitative work, we have heard it said that allowing the respondents to initially rant will dissipate the scapegoating. We strongly disagree with this well-meaning suggestion. Less trained moderators may be sadly justifying their inability to deal with this group dynamic. The problem is still in the room and letting them rant may make it worse. It signals that purely judgemental comment is implicitly welcomed. Good facilitators get deep data but do not let the respondents rule.

It is also worthwhile considering gender styles, for example, men are usually more authoritarian than women. This too will affect how blaming works. Both sexes will take part in scapegoating, but will go about it differently.

5. Brand perspective is more important than brand imagery

In 2006/2007 and latterly in 2008 the Brand Doctors undertook McDonald's brand positioning work. We began each group discussion with a conversation that began with these words: *can you tell me about the first time you heard about McDonald's and the first time you went there?*

Spontaneously, most immediately accessed their childhood memory. We witnessed a series of idealized eulogies about the excitement and anticipation of the first time. Sentimental twaddle perhaps? No, it had a larger purpose. It allowed us to have a conversation that reflected the passage of time and the nature of change of their relationship to the McDonald's brand. From innocence to maturity perhaps. It also allowed us to hear customers, both those enthusiastic and those ambivalent



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about the brand, talk about their own process of change, so that we established a reasoned context for our discussion. If we were to criticize this gambit we could say it changed the dynamic of the discussion. But sometimes that is what we need to do – to replace detached objectivity with something more practical.

One of Brand Doctors' definitions of qualitative research in particular is *a research consultant-guided conversation with an agenda set by the brand owner*. It should not be confused with a therapeutic forum. Sure, we can let the consumer set the some parts of their agenda, but we need to meet our agenda too.

We are, I believe, engaged in the business of *research consultant-guided conversations* whatever the method of collecting data. This is a general rule and becomes critical when discussing scapegoat or indeed saint brands©.

6. Time lags –Brand attitudes are not predictive

Brand imagery is important, but may lag behind the communication of a new positioning, local or global. The relationship with the new product and service we are launching is more relevant much of the time and brand attitudes may lag far behind. This is not about denying the problems but about focusing on keeping things going in a defined strategic direction.

While this seems obvious, it is so easy to allow the day-to-day disturbance of a critical climate to insidiously subvert things. This includes what you are trying to achieve in marketing terms, what you are trying to find out in the research and what is given attention. The important research implication is obvious.

As an aside it also means that research should be *ordered like a limo, not treated like a skip*. When too much is thrown in and asked of it, because of anxiety, the result may look like the contents of a dumpster!



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Conclusion

A Timex in a digital age? (Die Hard 4.0)

This paper aims to make some very simple suggestions. Principally it is that researchers and research has to understand the brand perspective. If you leave this paper with one thought, especially if your brand falls into the scapegoat zone in some respect, I would personally like it to be this:

In order to help you maintain or create the best perspective on your marketing research and your brand, you only have to do one thing when you are back at your desk. It is criminally simple – turn the typical sequence of questions upside down.

What's first is last and what's last should be first.

Look at the next brief, topic guide or questionnaire whatever the method (CATI, face-to-face and so on.) and invert the flow. Explore the last first and so on. You might simply begin the discussion or the questionnaire with the product, positioning, design, advertising or website. Question and collect attitudes to the brand, hearsay and prejudice for example, at the close of the interview. You may ask about the relationship of scapegoating issues depending on their response. Essentially, you need to mark and identify with your customer what you are actually asking them. We no longer live in a time where we can just blindly ask.

Heaven is a new pair of glasses...



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Epilogue – sainthood has its drawbacks too

If there are scapegoat and sinned-against brands are there also saint brands?

Yes. Saints may be easily seen in ethical businesses, such as charities, but with the tendency of interest groups to create extreme stereotypes the polarity between good and bad is magnified by politicians, lobby groups, and general media activity. Richard Branson was once a hero – but this does not safeguard his rail product.

In a climate of emotion even the best have problems

You will know of a number of saint brands. You may have your favourites – Dorset Cereals, The Serious Food Company, Hugh, Jamie and Gordon – brands that rarely, if ever, do wrong in your eyes. If you have some green interest you may know about David and Clare Hieatt's clothing brand, Howies. It takes 27,000 gallons of water to produce the average cotton T Shirt*, but Howies source and manufacture with sustainable goals in the forefront. The brand has a loyal, web-based following. They have undertaken guerilla and viral ways of marketing. They held a free conference, Little Big Voice, to give marketing guidance to small organizations focused on environmental causes and issues. They tax their business and use the money on philanthropic projects, such as Little Big Voice. All good things – however, their ethical status could mean that when researching some marketing actions the problem might arise that no one wants to criticise the decision. Only the most courageous may criticize. This prism through which the brand is viewed can contaminate reaction as equally as much as the ardent anti-fast food consumers attack McDonald's. Howies sold a large share of their business to Timberland about a year ago. Will this affect how the brand is treated and viewed? Is the core and hardcore audience for Howies likely to question this trading partner? Fund raising brands – charities like The NSPCC and Action Aid can also suffer from the tendency of people not wanting to criticize them. Perhaps only the most ardent supporters will question their approach?



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Bernice Hardie, of B.H Market Research, when interviewed last year said *when we quantitatively interviewed supporters of a much-revered charity to talk about a magazine the data suggested they thought it was great – except it was clear that no-one was reading or using it. So a different survey method, more qualitative, was explored.* Here it emerged that reluctance to criticize was affecting responses. Some admitted that it *felt like having to criticize Gandhi.* Not surprisingly the data had to be collected differently to avoid this saintly affect.

Who will tell the emperor that he has...

In fact to criticize any company might seem ungenerous particularly in the light of its ethical or humanistic presence in our culture.

There remains a risk that blind devotion for a brand, if not identified, can give organizations and marketers the impression that they can do no wrong. Rather like some well-meaning but naïve researchers have probably given fast-food marketers and other scapegoat brands© the impression that they can do no right...

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