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Tracy Tuten
East Carolina University, tutent@ecu.edu

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Creating Consumuments: The Use of Artistic Interpretation of Text as an Insight Mining Device in Advertising Courses

Tracy Tuten, East Carolina University
tutent@ecu.edu

Abstract - The goal of any approach used to gain a foundation of knowledge about a consumer segment is to ensure one can make decisions that are sound strategically and effectively serve the segment. This paper describes a new technique for profiling a consumer segment: creating a consumument. A consumument is an artistic interpretation of text which reflects insight into a consumer segment. The exercise, based on Tom Phillips’ (2005) A Humument, seeks to encourage students to mine for meaning, reflect on consumer perceptions, emotions, and aspirations, and ultimately express their understanding of a consumer group artistically.

Keywords – Segmentation, Consumer segment, Consumument, Humument, Consumer perceptions

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners - This paper describes a new technique for profiling a consumer segment: creating a consumument. A consumoment is an artistic interpretation of text which reflects insight into a consumer segment. The exercise, based on Tom Phillips’ (2005) A Humument, seeks to encourage students to mine for meaning, reflect on consumer perceptions, emotions, and aspirations, and ultimately express their understanding of a consumer group artistically.

Introduction

As planners, we are tasked with finding insight into a particular target market that can form the basis for an effective creative strategy. Several exercises exist in the planner’s “tool box” to explore the motivations, emotions, and lifestyle of consumer segments. For instance, one might use exercises such as lifestyle construction, means-end chaining, and profiling as a framework for exploring a segment. The goal of any approach used to gain a foundation of knowledge about a consumer segment is to ensure one can make marketing decisions that are sound strategically and
effectively serve the segment. Inherent in this goal is the need to go beyond simple demographic depictions of the market. Rather than assume an understanding of the market’s needs, wants, aspirations, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors from demographic data, the challenge is to mine the data, ultimately seeking to develop more than a superficial appreciation of the characteristics of specific consumer segments. In particular, students struggle to develop a deep appreciation for behavioral nuances of consumer segments.

The consumer is central to campaign decisions and this is reflected in our curricula. Because humans are consumers, students sometimes approach discussions of target markets and consumer profiles from a position of familiarity and comfort. For instance, an instructor might approach a class on target markets and consumer behavior with a discussion of the burgeoning video game market and its target market of young, technology-savvy males. In this situation, the class may feel they “know” this market. Indeed, they are the market in question. Even when discussing a market that is demographically different from our students, from their perspectives as consumers, the tendency is to assume an understanding. As instructors, how can we encourage students to dig deeper to develop more than a superficial appreciation for consumer behavior, particularly as it relates to specific consumer segments. One method of addressing this challenge is an exercise that mirrors the work of Tom Phillips and his A Humument. The exercise, creating a consumument, seeks to encourage students to mine for meaning, reflect on consumer perceptions, emotions, and aspirations, and ultimately express their understanding of a consumer group artistically.

What is a consumument? A consumument is an artistic interpretation of text which reflects insight into a consumer segment. The process of creating a consumument requires “mining for meaning” from various sources of data about the consumer segment in question. The exercise seeks to encourage the reflection of consumer perceptions, emotions, and aspirations, and ultimately, the artistic expression of one’s understanding of the consumer segment. The process will be described in detail and several examples will illustrate the value of creating consumuments, but, first, an introduction to the inspiration for the approach is warranted.

Inspiring a Consumument: A Humument

The notion of creating consumuments was inspired by the work of artist, Tom Phillips (2005). Though not his only accomplishment, Tom Phillips is best known for his artistic adaptation of a Victorian novel by W.H. Mallock entitled, A Human Document. Phillips “artistically treated” the text on every page of Mallock’s novel, systematically mining for meaning and expressing that meaning through his artistic treatment. In so doing, Phillips created a work of art with every page of the manuscript. Each page applies a variety of techniques including collage, painting, drawing, cartooning, and various others. Phillips’ creative work resulted in the book.
A Humument. One could say that a humument is a monument to the human condition.

Phillips continues to treat the pages of A Human Document. A Humument is now in its fourth edition, each edition reflecting new meaning. Pages have been featured in gallery exhibits worldwide and many are featured on Phillips’ website, www.humument.com. Phillips’ process of artistic treatment of text has come to be known in the art world as “humumentism.” Sackner (2005) explained that Phillips’ work is based upon the philosophy of Humanism, which denotes the notion that creative individual thought is the basis of personal truth.

What can the “truth” offer? It tells us what is really important to the target audience. It reveals emotions like sadness, fear, guilt, happiness, and feelings of fulfillment. Truth is knowledge of a segment’s motives. It drives the development of any “big idea.” When a slogan or strategic brand message “rings true” it is because the account team understood at a basic, intuitive level the “truth” about the segment in question. Given then that we seek the “truth” throughout the process of establishing an understanding of a consumer segment, developing strategy components, and assessing the relative effectiveness of each aspect, practicing the art of humumentism is a valuable exercise. In recognition of Phillips’ monument to the human condition, consumuments serve as monuments to consumer segments.

Creating a Consumument

Just as A Humument is the artistic treatment of text to express meaning, a consumument is as well – except that a consumument seeks specifically to express meaning of a consumer segment. In physically developing A Humument, Phillips began with pages of text and the creation of a consumument follows suit. The instructor should begin with an explanation of the objective of the exercise to the students, which is to reflect upon the emotions, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the consumer segment assigned. In choosing the segment to study, the instructor may ask students to select a segment or may assign segments such as teenagers, gay/lesbian consumers, working mothers, the elderly, or Latino heads of household.

Materials may be provided by the instructor or the students including examples from A Humument, pages of text and art supplies. Several graphical images of treated pages are available on the website, www.humument.com. Students with an interest in graphic design may wish to digitally treat their pages of text. The text must relate somehow to the segment in question and may be drawn from virtually anywhere – newspaper articles, websites, magazine articles, books, diaries, song lyrics, movie scripts. It is the students’ challenge to graphically depict meaning from the text.

When approaching the text, the following questions can be useful. What do I know about this consumer segment? Are there things about this segment with which I identify? Are there things about this segment that are difficult for me to
fully grasp? What are they and why is it a struggle for me to understand? What is the context from which this page of text was drawn? Why is it relevant for the consumer segment in question? What clues to unraveling the consumer segment are provided in the text? After reflecting upon the emotions, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the consumer segment, and the textual clues, treat the page. The outcome should be an artistic expression of meaning that serves to ground one’s knowledge of that consumer segment.

After completing the consumument, students write a brief paper, answering the following questions:

1) Introduce the consumer segment. What did you know and/or think about this segment before the exercise?

2) What type of text did you treat? Explain the context for the class.

3) How did you approach your artistic treatment of the text? From your own previous perceptions of the segment or from cues provided in the text (or both)?

4) Explain the meaning expressed in your artistic treatment. What does it tell us about the consumer segment in question?

5) How can this information aid marketers seeking to target this consumer segment?

Students present their work at the next class period. Following the “show and tell” session, the instructor should recap the value of using different approaches to understanding consumers and the importance of developing more than a superficial knowledge of consumer segments. It is useful to consider different types of marketing decisions (pricing, distribution, promotion, and product decisions) and how those decisions might vary for the consumer segments studied based upon the insight derived from the exercise.

Illustrating the Value of Consumumments

What insights can be found in a consumument? Consider the following examples, which illustrate the effectiveness of the innovation in encouraging the reflection of consumer perceptions, emotions, and aspirations to ensure students can develop an understanding of a consumer segment a more than a superficial level.

Illustration 1: “Cool guys”

Using a page from the book, Arrogance by Joanna Scott, the consumument (see Figure 1) sought to depict insight into a segment termed “cool guys.” Cool guys are males under 35 with above average levels of education and income. Importantly, the demographic classification fails to capture what differentiates this segment from other young, relatively affluent males. It is the motivations of the segment that must be discovered to effectively target communications. The primary insight
reflected in the consumument is this: Perceptions of exclusivity are key to this market; they reject what is mainstream while creating the mainstream of tomorrow.

The artist, Danielle Spencer, describes her approach to the consumument: “the graphic I used has strong, black tribal art which provides meaning through culture. Tribal art is also used in tattoos. The pattern has order and lacks it at the same time. The art is not flashy or commercial; there is depth. Intellectual meaning, order and chaos, fierce nature, and beauty in destruction; these are the essences of ‘Cool Guy.’”

Spencer explains her treatment of the text, writing, “Three phrases are used to express the disdain Cool Guy feels when someone, with no point of view of their own, uses his style to show the world who they wish they were. In ‘Against the greed plebeians,’ greed is used to convey society’s current trend to eat up the current ‘big thing’ and quickly move on to the next without ever having something to say or a thought about who they really are as people. Plebeians are common people. ‘Provincial imitators catch sight’ is meant to give a feeling of being scoped out by the masses. ‘He is steps ahead.’ A Cool Guy is original; fashion starts with him. Everyone else is only trying to catch up. In keeping with the title of the book, ‘ego’ is highlighted. The phrase, ‘He is a canvas,’ lets the advertisers who want to target Cool Guy as a consumer segment know that this type of person views his self-expression as a work of art. From his clothes to his car to his tattoos, Cool Guy has vigilantly bundled this perfect package as an experience, an inspiration, a truth, the message that he, himself alone, finds most important.”

**Illustration 2: “Counter-culture youth”**

Using a page from an article entitled “Cloned Culture” from Adbusters, this consumument (see Figure 2) features insight into a counter-culture youth market. Like “cool guys,” teenagers and young adults who embrace an underground subculture are not best understood through demographic depictions. The primary insight offered by the consumument is this: No matter how hard counter-culturists fight against consumerism, they are still consumers. They may not buy Nike, but they all have their Nike... they all have brands they relate to and consistently purchase.

The artist, Joe Hagel, describes his approach to the consumument: “The first section reads ‘Culture. Dead Art, is that our collective?’ This to me is how most players in this segment view media as a whole. The second section says, ‘serious analysis, not cloning science fiction.’ This represents the fact that you can count on them to seriously pick apart your marketing and advertising piece by piece. In essence, you had better hit the nail on the head or they will nail you to the wall. The third piece of text revealed says, ‘English clichés and all-too-human monstrosity.’ This refers to what is an instant turn off to this segment. They prefer that advertisers engage them intellectually.

I took 3 images of counter culture with which I identify. I chose the picture of my friend with a gun because I feel like if we don’t get it right, [the brand] is dead to
this segment. The second image is from a bike race. The picture is of an event called ‘whip lash.’ Two cyclists are tethered together and then ride together as fast as they can in opposite directions – the winner is the one who can stay on the bike. To me, this means that one can be very close to understanding a consumer segment, and still slip up. The third component is a stylized quote I made from John Donne’s Meditation XVII: ‘No man is an island entire unto himself. Everyman is a piece of the continent; a part of the main.’ This is to remind those involved in counter culture that no matter how hard they try to be against consumerism, they are still consumers.”

Illustration 3: “Female gamers”

This consumument, shown in Figure 3, used a page of text from an article called “Frag Dolls” in Wired magazine. Demographically, female gamers are primarily teens and young adults with above average education. Compared to their male counterparts, they are a relatively small market segment but one increasingly of interest to the game industry. Typically game marketers have sought to satisfy the segment of female gamers with different games from those targeted to males. However, this consumument emphasizes that female gamers require a far different approach. Its insight: Game marketers believe that female gamers want non-violent, easy to learn, casual games. This is wrong. If companies want to target women gamers, they need to get over the perception that women are inferior gamers.

Describing her approach to the consumument, Amy White notes, “Female gamers are a much talked about but misunderstood segment of video game consumers. Female gamers are one of the groups that developers hope to target as a new source of income in the game industry. I have been a member of this group for as long as I can remember. I grew up fighting with my older brothers for our Nintendo controller back in the 80s when it was still just the original NES. I have tested PC games prior to their release, and spent more time with a game controller than with a remote control. Being a part of this segment, I have discovered that while male gamers think it’s really cool that I play games, they simultaneously assume that my gender renders me inferior to them in the virtual arena. When using voice-chat technology in online games, I have more than once joined a channel, said hello, and be greeted by exclamations of ‘Dude! It's a girl!’ or ‘Are you on your boyfriend’s account?’”

White goes on to explain, “The primary visual I used is an image of Link, the main character from the first Zelda, a hugely successful Nintendo series. This is a true classic that hardcore gamers would recognize. The first part expresses the anger that female gamers feel at being characterized by their gender. ‘Women play easy games’ is a stereotype endorsed by much of the gaming industry. The last text, ‘Women defy categorization. Let women play on their own terms,’ expresses our desire to be able to play the games we find interesting, without the industry trying to force casual or non-violent games on us. When targeting women gamers, they must remember that they are working with a segment that is constantly on the defensive to maintain what little position they have in the gaming community.”
White took her consumument a step further, creating a print ad based upon the insight found in the consumument (see Figure 4).

These examples are a powerful illustration of the value of utilizing consumuments in the study of consumer segments. Still, they provide anecdotal evidence. To answer the question, How effective is this technique in developing a deep understanding of consumer psychology and providing a tool for students to study specific consumer segments?, student comments were analyzed to provide a qualitative assessment of effectiveness. Students were asked to reflect on what they learned and how their views of marketing has developed having created a consumument. Their comments (collected from 6 courses over a three-year period) were then content analyzed. The analysis revealed the following outcomes and perceptions. First, students found the exercise challenging to approach. The idea of creating a piece of art to express consumer meaning seemed intimidating but the curiosity surrounding the exercise was sufficiently peeked to encourage students to embrace the process. Second, students expressed surprise at the level of understanding needed for planning strategy and of the level they acquired having finished a consumument. Third, students acknowledged that they began to assess how well brands seem to know their segments and critique brands based on whether they did or did not do “their homework.” Fourth, students overwhelmingly noted the value of individualizing the approach to teaching consumer behavior and segment profiling. Because each student controlled the segment studied, the text chosen, and the artistic interpretation, the exercise became personal and individualized enhancing their motivation to perform and learning outcomes.

Concluding Thoughts on Consumuments

The illustrations offered are only a small sample of what can be discovered through the creation of consumuments. They are a valuable tool for profiling a consumer segment. Moreover, the insight one wishes to glean from a consumument can be found only when the consumument is developed by mining the plethora of consumer data that may exist about the segment. Ultimately, consumuments provide a rich depiction of consumer motivations, emotions, and perceptions.
Figure 1. ‘Cool guys’ Consumument

[Text content]

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Figure 2. “Counter-culture youth” Consumument
Figure 3.
Figure 4.

Work... family... chores...
sometimes it seems like your
to-do's never end.

You don’t have time for bad games.

So the next time you have down time, log in to World of Warcraft:
experience the best in online gaming.
References
