



forward thinking series

# ENGAGE, INSPIRE, ACT

THREE STEP STONES TOWARDS DEVELOPING MORE  
IMPACTFUL PRODUCTS

Tom De Ruyck · Stan Knoops · Niels Schillewaert · Gita Coenen · Soraia Rodrigues

## ENGAGE, INSPIRE, ACT

### THREE STEP STONES TOWARDS DEVELOPING MORE IMPACTFUL PRODUCTS

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#### BRINGING CONSUMERS INTO UNILEVER'S RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT CENTER

Great companies understand the importance of consumer insights when it comes to outperforming competition. Engagement in learning and keeping knowledge up-to-date through a constant search for new insights, engagement in getting close to consumers and immersed in their daily lives to inspire and understand their reality and the drivers of consumer value, has proven to be one of the most critical corporate competencies.

Such engagement ideally happens on three levels:

- 'Hearts' of employees: establishing a culture of consumer centricity and creating a mind shift among employees.
- 'Minds' of employees: delivering sparks of fresh inspiration through dialogues with consumers, in order to craft or reshape strategic plans, product development road maps or research agendas.
- 'Actions' of employees: concrete actions or changes in the cycle of developing new products. This level is about bringing strategy into action.

Engagement requires different strategic thinking. It requires 'co-ownership' of the consumer insights within the organization. This article describes a valuable framework of how to engage and inspire an (R&D) organization via consumer insights, let

them act upon the insights and move forward towards developing more impactful products and marketing. The last paragraphs look at how effective different elements of the framework have been in achieving a successful outcome, in order to learn and improve our initial way of working and to fine-tune our overall strategy.

#### CREATING A 'CONSUMER CENTRIC THINKING' COMPANY

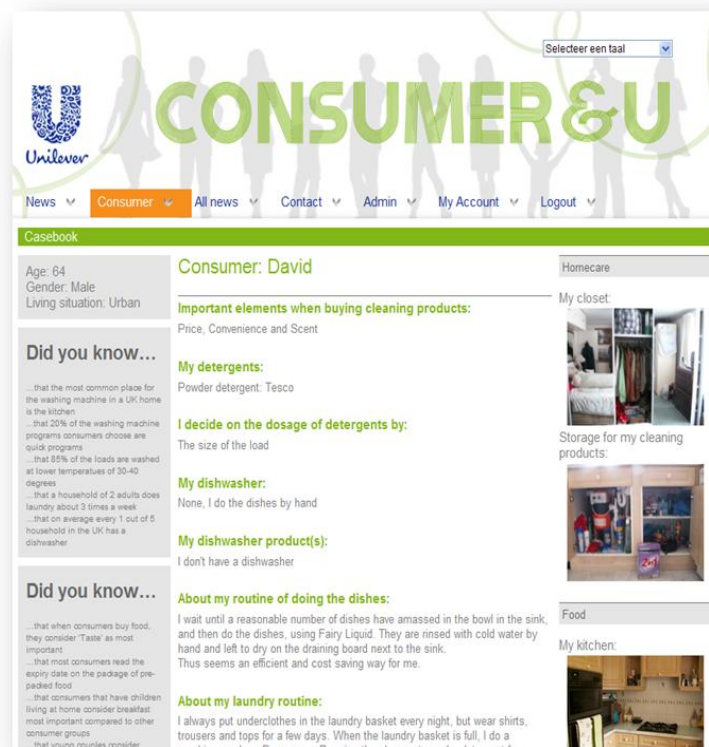
Unilever was one of the front runners in setting up 'Consumer Connect' programs. Unilever demands its R&D workforce to go out and engage with consumers to experience their everyday lives. This is successful because of a top down commitment from higher management (promoting 'consumer centric thinking' as a priority and leading by example) and bottom up commitment throughout the organization (executives feel the need to start the 'consumer connect' revolution within their company).

#### Engaging the internal audience

The distinctive feature of the approach described in this article is its commitment to presenting it in a way that will constructively generate impact on the 'hearts', 'minds' and the 'actions' of executives.

'Consumer&U' is pioneering in implementing the more classic 'consumer connect' activities within Unilever. It is an online platform that connects the Unilever R&D society with consumers through stories and visuals of consumers' everyday lives to form a compelling narrative (see figure 1).

Figure 1 - Consumer platform: compelling consumer narratives



The platform offers a number of key benefits:

- Engage with the consumer world. It's about getting to know the consumer who is behind the dry figures and discovering the insights in a longitudinal, engaging and fun way.
- Be inspired and gain fresh knowledge about the consumer in general and get sparks of inspiration that will be useful in one's daily on-the-job thinking.
- Lead to action, through behavioral change: being more eager to understand the real reasons behind certain consumer decisions and being more curious in everyday working life. Lastly, to bringing plans and potential actions to life.

Having these three elements is key for creating real 'co-ownership' of consumer insights within a company. Once the hearts of employees are changed, the next step is to capitalize on the mind shift and implement the new knowledge and philosophy into strategic and more tactical projects. Then, getting inspired through connections and dialogues with consumers becomes business as usual.

Creating real 'co-ownership' of consumer insights

In order to build real engagement with the project, both at the consumer side and at the company side, our data collection and reporting are set up as a longitudinal, fun and engaging process. Research results have more impact when turned into an experience in which employees are entertained with insights or when they - literally - can 'play' with the research results (>'infotainment'). Next to that, research participants deliver richer insights when taking part in research that feels like playing a game (>'gamification'). We embedded such technique into the research design of our project in order to maximize the return on information.

#### A staged approach for impactful insights

Our objective was to change the hearts and minds, and actions of the R&D executives by bringing consumers to the table where "R&D decisions" are made. Therefore it was necessary to get close to consumers and immerse in their daily life to inspire and help understand consumer reality. We therefore conducted an online research community with consumers (InspireUs) as well as executives (Consumer&U). (See figure 2).

Figure 2 - A staged approach for impactful insights

**InspireUs**

3-week community with 90 consumers who kept an online diary during a week.

- Groups of 10 R&D employees followed 1 consumer and played 3 “games” (one about each product category) including questions about consumers behavior and the life of “their” consumer.
- Based on their scores, R&D employees earned **badges** per game as well as overall (consumer newbie, consumer explorer and consumer super star) and **unlocked answers** about consumers’ daily lives.
- Based on how well the employees scored in the games, we developed a topic guide for an **online research community**.

**Consumer&U**

During the whole project a news website was online which was used as a reporting platform to the whole R&D organization:

- Feedback on the games** played.
- Crispy articles** about consumer behavior.
- Interviews** with participating consumers.
- Reporting back on **insights** that came out of the community in a journalistic style.
- Opportunity to **send in questions** to consumers. Every week we picked a few of the most relevant ones and reported back on them on the news website.

### 1. Engage - discovering the world of the consumer through playing games

To realize the objectives of this project we asked UK consumers (N= 90) to keep an online diary during a week on product categories relevant for Unilever (four chapters: meet & greet, food & cooking, you & personal care, you & home care). Instead of just presenting the results of this diary research in a traditional slide deck, we let the R&D organization engage and ‘live’ the results themselves. Each of the R&D employees was linked to one of the consumers (participants gave explicit permission for this). The R&D executives played three games (one about each product category) with question about the UK consumer in general and about the life of the specific consumer they were connecting with. Afterwards each R&D employee got a score upon which they could earn a badge per game: e.g. consumer newbie, consumer explorer and consumer super star. By

playing the game they unlocked the right answers to the questions and additional information about their consumer and the UK consumer in general to be able to do even better in the next consumer gamification.

### 2. Inspire - be inspired to think about your consumer and be triggered to pose questions

The ‘InspireUs’ community discussions were better fed with relevant questions as we used the executives scores of the games to develop topic guides. In running the research community we applied game-design techniques which made participating consumers go beyond ‘the usual’ in terms of input & insights generated (both in terms of quantity and quality). The following examples of game elements were used (see figure 3).

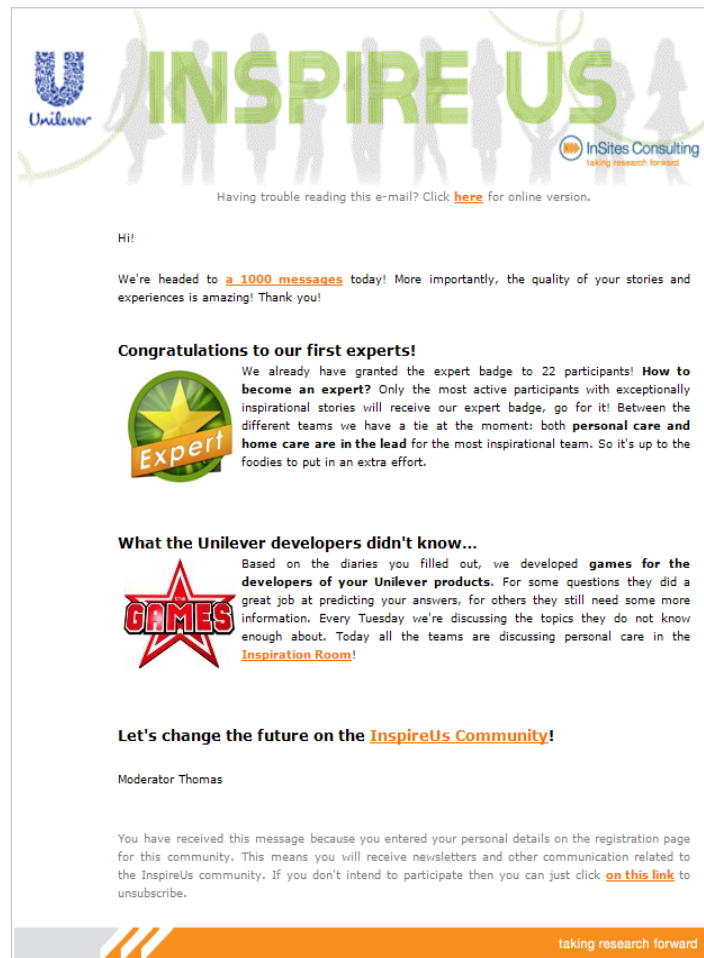
- Putting ‘challenges’ forward instead of ‘just asking questions’ (motivating them

on an 'individual level'): e.g. 'You are hired by Unilever R&D: what would be the next innovation you develop in the laundry category?'

- Rewarding achievements (based on the

number of posts made and the number of words used in each post) with badges leading to a 'ranking' within the community (again playing on the 'individual level'). (See figure 3).

Figure 3 - E-mail with feedback to consumers about the earned badge



- Creating teams (one team focused on 'food' products, another team on 'personal care' and a last one on 'home care') and asking them to compete with one another. The best team got rewarded by early access to the secret room (triggering 'groups' feelings);
- Unlocking exclusive content in 'secret rooms' in which new products from Unilever brands are discussed if a certain level of total activity in terms of number of posts made on the community platform was reached (stimulating the (sub-

community' to go for a common goal);

During the whole project a news website was online which was used as a reporting platform for the whole R&D organization. It contained crispy articles about consumer behavior in the UK based on the diaries, data from previous habits and previous attitude studies conducted by Unilever, interview with participating consumers and journalistic insight reports from the community. The website provided executives the opportunity to send in questions for consumers. The most relevant ones were elected and reported back on the website (see figure 4).

Figure 4 - The internal news website for R&amp;D executives



A project champion was assigned from each participating R&D department. Their role focused on motivating and engaging the R&D employees to participate in 'Consumer&U'. Moreover, offline activities were organized on site to increase visibility of 'Consumer&U', e.g. tastings, cross category discussions and videos showing consumer routines.

### 3. Act - deep dive into the assembled insights

The actionability was embedded in our gamified and infotaining approach. It stimulated conversations on the work floor which was also enhanced by internal communication, e.g. by printing out picture of consumer profiles and sticking them to the walls of coffee corners or helping each other out during the games with tips & tricks.

As a final round-up, workshops were organized in each department of the R&D organization to share knowledge and discuss how they could be turned into concrete actions for the future.

### **GAMIFY, ENTERTAIN AND CREATE A WIN-WIN!**

**Win #1: employees engaged with the consumer world through 'infotainment'**

More than 640 R&D employees registered for 'Consumer&U' of which 90% played at least one

game and 58% of them played all three of the games. Mean correctness score across employees in the games was 4.77 out of 10.

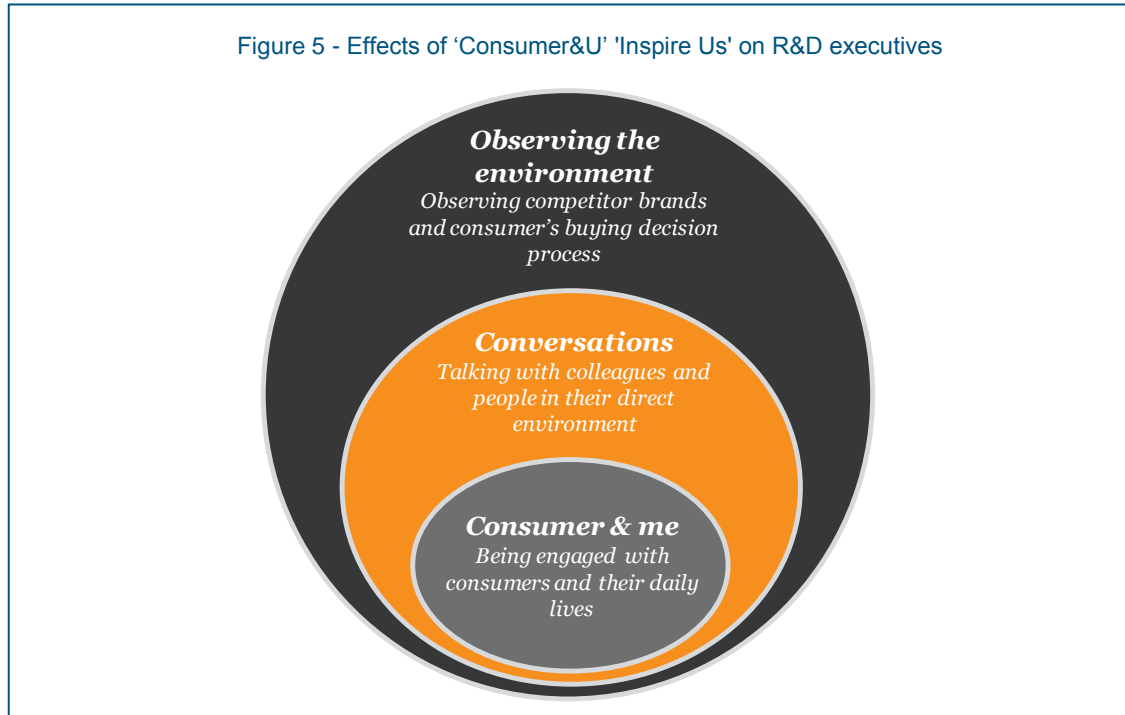
"I think it's worrying that a lot of the real' R&D'ers had bad scores in the games. Maybe this is because they are so focused on their own everyday activities. It's important not to lose your gut feeling and logic thinking" – Consumer&U participant

We needed to complete the loop that brought us from problem to solution. We need to collect the lessons learned during the engagement and inspire phases: what made the transformation a success? To get a feel about the impact we created on the hearts and minds of the R&D employees we conducted a pre- and post-survey among all participating executive measuring their perceived consumer knowledge and their usage levels of the study. Using descriptive and multivariate statistics we assess if there was a mind shift in term of consumer knowledge.

What factors contribute the most to a knowledge impact? In order to have a qualitative understanding on the effects of the 'Consumer&U' project at Unilever R&D Vlaardinggen, we also conducted eight interviews with Unilever

executives. R&D execs with both high and low scores were selected and during the interview general impressions, effects and triggers causing knowledge learnings were discussed.

Figure 5 summarizes the effects which 'Consumer&U' – 'InspireUs' has had on the attitude of R&D executives, by means of comparing the top-2% before and after the study



**CONSUMER & ME:** Being engaged with consumers and their daily lives. There is a significant increase in product knowledge and knowledge about consumers' path to purchase. Comparing Top 2% on the statements 'I know very well what products are on the market for the category I work for' and 'Within the categories I work for, I know how consumers decide which products to buy' increased with respectively 10% and 13% in absolute terms. For knowledge about decision processes this implies a relative increase of 81%! Based on the in-depth interviews we concluded that the games played an essential role in gaining this effect. Having a holistic in-depth and illustrative view of a consumer instead of an aggregated picture of a group of consumers (typically reported in consumer research) triggers important insights:

"My consumer wasn't very consistent in his answers. They don't always know how they act. Through this project it became clear to me that the logic we follow isn't always the logic of the consumer".

**CONVERSATIONS:** Talking with colleagues and people in the direct environment. Interestingly the

project triggered conversations among executives in both the professional as well as in the private environment (which is in fact the consumer world). The games itself, supported by the offline activities – and the richness of the data

in terms of pictures, quotes and stories were the main reasons to talk about the project with colleagues:

"Consumer&U was really present in our team. Sometimes we were with 3 persons behind one PC, trying to figure out things".

"We printed out the profiles of our consumer to generate conversations in the coffee corner, people started to compare their consumers".

"It was an eye-opener for us, developing premium products, that while we pay attention to so many details, some consumers are just buying the cheapest products out there, that evoked some astonishment in the team".

In addition, the way the results were presented, the champions played an important role in making the project a success:

“Normally we would not have time for these projects, but our champion insisted that we participated, they got conversations going and we really made it a team effort to join. Once you applied, there was some kind of social pressure to finish all the games.”

The project had an extended impact beyond the working space. Due to our approach employees started a dialogue with the consumer world around them. A significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between pre- and post-measurement was found on the statement ‘I often ask family/friends what they think about our products, or how they make purchase choices’: a rise from 12% to 55%.

**OBSERVING THE ENVIRONMENT:** Observing competitor brands and understanding consumers’ buying decision process. Finally, employees were stimulated to explore the real-life competitive environment even more than before. On the statement ‘In the supermarket I always look at Unilever products and those of our competitors’ we saw a significant increase of 9% towards a Top2 score of 83%.

“My consumer was totally different than I am, she’s a real doll. When she goes out she first brushes her teeth with glitter toothpaste. When I travel to the UK I might look for it in the supermarket”.

There is a clear benefit in reporting results with a fun, engaging and longitudinal character. Exposing R&D to research over a six week period of time combined with the engagement with an individual consumer and the total community of consumers, makes the research findings stick :

“The way Consumer&U was organized, makes you spent time and makes it sticky, you really had to dive into the world of your consumer to score in the game”.

### **Win #2: engaged participants > more and richer insights through ‘gamification’**

The second phase for participants in the ‘InspireUs’ project, the online research community, resulted in a stream of stories, in-depth discussions with consumers about the findings of the diaries, answers to previously defined and ad hoc questions from Unilever employees. In total 4,547 posts were made by 90 active participants over a three week period of time. On average, this is a daily contribution per active participant of 2.4 posts.

If we benchmark this with all research communities conducted by InSites Consulting ‘InspireUs’ comes

out in second place in terms of ‘average daily contributions per participant’. If one realizes that the number 1 community was about a very popular TV-soap these figures from the ‘Consumer&U’ community are truly impressive (as it is about commodity FMCG products).

It seems that gamifying a research community (as described above) adds value by creating extra engagement with the project at the consumer side also when considering other metrics. In terms of absolute number of posts, ‘InspireUs’ is our all-time high (even across long term communities with a duration of e.g. three months). The user posts of the top 3 InSites communities in terms of contribution level (one with youngsters and one with brand fans) were content coded.

For these three communities manual coders labeled posts as being “off-topic” or “on-topic” as well as having “interaction or not”. We learned that the interaction in our ‘gamified’ community was not higher compared to the non-gamified communities. There are even slightly more off-topic arguments in on-topic posts and within an on-topic post there are slightly less on-topic arguments in this ‘gamified’ community. Still, this does not have a negative impact as it does not influence the gain in terms of overall insights (measured by the number on-topic arguments across posts). Each member contributed 7.2 arguments on a daily basis compared to only 1.1 to 0.6 for the other communities.

Next, we benchmarked the satisfaction scores of participants with the community experience based on a database of 1335 participants from 19 past communities. We observed a significant difference in terms of satisfaction between our ‘gamified’ ‘InspireUs’ community and the benchmark of communities with the same duration (three weeks) on ‘identification with the community’ (sig. 0.001 - 7.5 vs. 6.7) and ‘perceived information benefit’ (sig. 0.035 - 7.7 vs. 7.2). This strongly indicates that the gamification of a research community makes participants more engaged to the community (‘identification with the community’) and increases platform usage. Also, they seem to get more value out of it (‘perceived information benefit’). Both result in more activity on the platform and richer insights. This is illustrated by a quote from one of the participants:

‘It’s surprising how hooked I have got on it’; ‘I will really miss the interaction and everyone here’; ‘When I got my expert badge I bragged to my kids. It’s not often we get called such things so why shouldn’t we be just pleased with ourselves’.

### **THE DNA OF IMPACTFUL RESEARCH: WHAT**

## MAKES EXECUTIVES USE RESEARCH?

In the post-measurement, participating executives evaluated the research project and assessed to what extent they used the results in their decision making. These findings largely confirm the “win-wins” discussed above.

Executives rated all elements of the study positively, but valued some elements more than others (see table 1). The results of this study were perceived as ‘simple and easy to understand’, ‘illustrative of consumers’ every-day life’, ‘recognizable’, ‘based on creative methods’, ‘concrete and credible’ and as ‘a conversation starter’.

Table 1 – Study attributes as perceived by the Unilever R&D Executives

	Mean score*
Are simple	2.58
Were illustrative for consumers’ every-day life	2.59
Were recognizable	2.64
Are based on creative methods	2.66
Are concrete	2.76
Made me talk about it with colleagues	2.79
Are credible	2.79
Made me engage with how consumers really live	2.84
Are easy to interpret	2.89
Are inspiring	2.9
Are clear	2.93
Are unique	2.97
Generated insights worth sharing with colleagues	2.99
Are trustworthy	2.99
Generated useful insights	3.05
Gave me the feeling that I was close to consumers	3.08
Are based on solid methodologies	3.28
Generated insights I would never have thought of	3.29

This is in line with the objective usage statistics of the top 10 most popular articles on the news website. R&D participants were most interested reading the updates about the consumer they were connected to (the one they followed through the diaries and games). Executives preferred articles and content with pictures, remarkable quotes, real life stories and game results. The posts with detailed information, facts and figures about

consumer behavior (e.g. results from previous market research studies) were less consulted when looking at the visitor statistics of our platform.

A central question which remains is whether the research was actually used and ‘what makes R&D executives use consumer research information?’

Research usage was measured by means of four items and composed into one factor based on principal components analysis (see table 2).

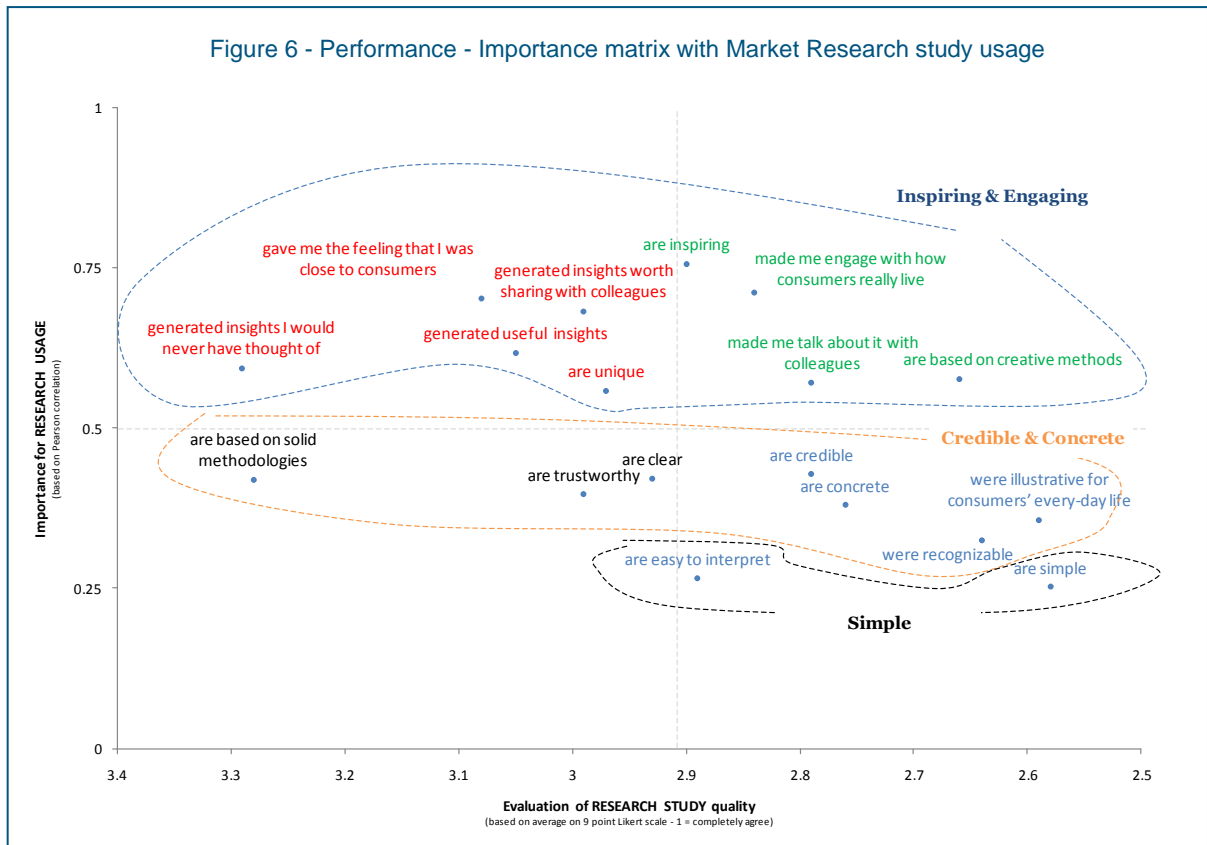
Table 2 – Study attributes as perceived by the Unilever R&D executives

	Market Research Usage*
I use the information and learnings from this study in my daily job	0.874
This study is more valuable than other consumer research studies I was confronted with in the past	0.797
This study inspired me while making plans for the future	0.877
Due to this study I will make more consumer focused decisions in the near future	0.914

The quality characteristics of the study (from table 1) where correlated with this market research usage variable to assess the drivers of what made executives use the results of this study in their daily profession and decision making. The most important items contributing to the use of this market research study are the fact that the findings were ‘inspiring’, ‘made them engage with how consumers really live’, ‘gave them the feeling that they were close to consumers’ and ‘generated useful insights, worth sharing with colleagues’.

We mapped this ‘correlation with research usage’ (an indication of importance) against the evaluation of the study (an indication of performance) to get an insight in the ‘Critical Success Factors’ of the study (see figure 6). The success of ‘Consumer&U’ was due to the usage of ‘creative methods to

generate insights’, ‘the feeling of engagement with real consumer life’, and the fact that research functioned as ‘a conversation starter with colleagues’. Interestingly, at the other end of the spectrum, ‘traditional method metrics’ (e.g. solid method, credible, easy to interpret ...) were of less importance for the R&D executives to use the findings as fuel for decision making. Relatively speaking it seemed somewhat harder to achieve insights that were truly unique. Still, one needs to put things in perspective and acknowledge executives are human beings who in hindsight tend to underestimate the “utility of information”. While not bad, our study may have provided even more leverage if internal conversations and closeness to consumer was more actively stimulated – for future studies internal marketing along these lines may prove useful.



In summary the market research study was used by executives if they found it to be 'inspiring & engaging' and (to a lesser extent) also 'credible & concrete'. Simplicity was not a driver for usage.<sup>1</sup>) The combination of games and news streams as knowledge channels indicates that market research providers need to go beyond classical methods and let executives engage with the consumer world. Executives need to be able to observe and engage in ongoing dialogues with consumers.

### POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS FOR UNILEVER R&D

As argued earlier, once a company culture of customer centricity is created, one needs to keep the spirit alive and translate the philosophy of such a project to more strategic and tactical day-to-day projects. During the post-hoc interviews some suggestions for strategic follow-up projects were made:

"This should only be the start. The UK consumer is different, but we still have an image of how their life could be. It would be even more challenging if we could connect to consumers in India and define our strategy for this type of new markets based on it"

"We have been developing spreads for years now and we still make a lot of assumptions about consumers. It would be great to connect with consumers in the same way about the products within our very own category on a more strategic level"

Up to the next research game level!

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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### FOOTNOTE

This conclusion is based on a principal components and regression analyses. The study "quality attributes" were subjected to a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation and generated three components: "Inspiring & engaging", "Credible & Concrete" and "Simple" – 71% explained variance. The composite measure of market research usage was regressed on these components as well as gender and seniority. The model was powerful ( $R^2=0.68$ ) and "Inspiring & engaging", "Credible & Concrete" were found to be significant. Female executives also used the study results significantly more than their male colleagues.

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