Get down with the kids

Kimberley-Clark and Kellogg have found fresh insight about their brands through co-creation tasks with children who are less inhibited, more honest and more imaginative than adults

By Bryan Urbick, Consumer Knowledge Centre

For many years, market research specialists have persisted with the creation of qualitative research scenarios that enable close observation of, and discussion about, consumer behaviour. There is little wrong with utilising qualitative methods, since the observation of consumers in one-time occurrence sessions, or indeed all other qualitative contexts, should inevitably lead to a deeper understanding of consumer attitudes and behaviour.

What is often lacking in qualitative research approaches, however, is that the researchers are not expecting consumer respondents to come up with ideas that would inspire marketers or brand managers to veer from a chosen course of action. There seems to be enforced a clear delineation between the role of the experts (the researchers, marketers, the product/brand developers and the designers) and that of the consumer.

Growth and value creation have become the dominant themes for brand managers, and even though companies continue to invest substantial resources in developing greater product variety, the result is that they have become less able to differentiate themselves from the competition. In numerous businesses, senior managers make a critical assumption that their companies can act on their own in the design of products, the development of production processes and marketing communications, and the control of sales channels, with little or no direct input from, or interaction with, their customers. A widely held belief is that consumers need only get involved with the product or service at the various touchpoints: viewing communication, participation in promotions, decisions at point-of-sale and the actual use of the product or service. This presupposes a simple model of deliverer (the company providing the product or service) and the receiver (consumer).

Traditionally, the process of value creation occurred almost exclusively within the company. The value chain was a concept that was first described by Harvard Business School Professor Michael Porter in his 1985 best-seller, *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*. The company and its customers had very distinct roles of production and consumption respectively, with the consumer having no role in value creation.

Today, however, that company-centric approach is under the spotlight, driven greatly by technology, access to the internet and the increasing use of social and other new media. Co-creation is a term which is becoming a new business buzzword. It implies a much closer collaboration in value creation between the company and the consumer. The term is not new, but has been popularised largely by social networking. We have seen a growing acceptance of co-creation by businesses, albeit at a very slow pace, for nearly two decades. One example is Fiat, the Italian automobile manufacturer. In 1999, the company was researching new design concepts for its Punto and invited prospective customers to take part. Several thousand visited Fiat’s website and selected the features they found most desirable in a car. As a result, the company was able to gather valuable insights into consumers’ likes and dislikes, then test a number of design concepts at a much lower cost. Although this exercise was largely a company-centric, rather than customer-centric, approach, given that the focus was on connecting the customer to the company’s offering, it did benefit both the company and the consumer. Fiat was able to profitably produce a vehicle that more accurately reflected consumers’ preferences; consumers got a car, which they actually wanted.

Even though the proposition that the customer can become a co-creator of value with the company (through interaction and dialogue) is gaining momentum, much is still unknown about how customers actually engage in the co-creation of value. One of the reasons for this is that co-creation can be interpreted in a number of different ways. However, it’s one thing for consumers to voice their opinions on social and corporate websites, but for this process to work most effectively, the customer needs to be placed explicitly at the same level of importance as the company.

An excellent example of the co-creation process with kids is the anecdotal story of Kimberly-Clark’s Kleenex brand of tissues. A market research programme was initiated where young children were brought together to evaluate several types of paper tissues. The focus of the project, as the story goes, was on the different colours and textures. During the course of the programme, one little girl made a comment that, at first, confused the researchers. She asked for a man to be put in the box of tissues.

On trying to more deeply understand this request, the researchers found that she and other children were having difficulty in getting the tissues out of the box. As most of us will know from experience, they either came out in a clump, or they tore. The company had not really spent much time on this aspect, yet based on the child’s comment, it was an irritating problem that people had simply put up with for years. Following the “man in
the box’ comment, the Kleenex brand team effectively set about creating, developing and ‘owning’ the folded pleat system – a part of the tissue-using experience that has created significant value for the company.

Corporate decisions are frequently made on the basis that ‘consumers aren’t creative’. This is a common belief because, I believe, that consumers don’t speak the brand or corporate language; they don’t communicate ideas to the company in a way that management can easily interpret. It is then simpler to disregard than to take action. It is incumbent on the market researchers and the marketing and production teams, as partners in co-creation with consumers, to find a way to put the metaphorical man in the box.

Certainly with children, one of the best ways of exploring brands and categories is to adopt a co-creation approach. The principal reason for this is that they are generally less inhibited than adults and, as a consequence, find it easier to be more creative. There is also an honesty and frankness that comes to the fore, highlighting challenges that adults often don’t consider or won’t voice.

In the 1990s, Consumer Knowledge Centre (CKC) began to develop ways of working with consumers to develop new products and communication, and develop creative methods of market research with children, an important market segment for many companies. What has followed from this work with children is a refined process of co-creation. The objectives were very different from approaches usually taken, the hypothesis being that by giving kids the time and tools to explore and create, they would be able to identify gaps and potential opportunities in the market – and develop products and communication to be able to ‘sell’ the idea to others. One of the catalysts of the methodology was the educational theories of Dr Maria Montessori, founder of the Montessori schools movement. Its guiding principles of independence, observation, letting the child lead, prepared environment and absorbent mind, are principles upon which CKC establishes many research projects. Using kids’ creativity allows the researchers to dig deeper in order to find unmet needs, then analyse their creative output to uncover important themes of opportunity. The ‘co-creation’ was initially intended only to be a qualitative research technique to explore a category or brand, but, from the process, good ideas were developed.

Stretching a brand or brand category is one of the ways where co-creation pays significant dividends. Today’s consumers will often tell you they have few unmet needs, having more choice of products and services than they have ever had. Yet judging by the use of social media sites to voice expression, they are not entirely satisfied. They are, however, in an ideal position to suggest improvements to a product or category that they might have been using for years. Traditional elicitive approaches with the intention to generate straightforward suggestions that can immediately be put into action are usually uninspiring, lacking in actionable insight, and broadly unsuccessful. Projective techniques (exploiting the unconscious expression of consumers’ impressions, emotions or feelings), as tools to spark co-creation to help the consumer bring to life a new reality of a specific brand or category context, have a much greater chance of providing the actionable answers that drive innovation.

Kellogg and its agency, Leo Burnett, successfully used co-creative techniques in the development of the highly successful campaign Stolen Colors, for the Froot Loops brand (this co-creation work was awarded AQR’s Prosper Riley-Smith award in 2004). Working with groups and pairs of children, the key principles of the idea (namely the use of a nemesis in the storytelling) and some important guardrails were developed. Of course, the excellent creative team at Leo Burnett did the hard part – they created the ad. However, the participating children and their stories were key to the inspiration, and indeed were co-creators.

In the past, value has been created by the company in its value chain. Today, value is co-created at multiple points of interaction and the basis of that value is the co-creation experience. The rewards can be substantial, particularly as a source of competitive advantage that encourages customer loyalty. The fallacy that ‘consumers aren’t created’ should be put to rest, and ways of sparking co-creation situations should strongly be encouraged and pursued. The brand and the consumer can truly be a winning team.