



Twenty years of good answers to the wrong question

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I was good at this.

My job early on was to go through everything. The tracking data, the usage studies, the qualitative and quantitative research studies, the category reports nobody else had opened. You went in looking for something true that had not been said yet and when you found it, you built the work on it and the work performed. Mine did. It took effectiveness awards.

Here is what took me years to notice.

The answers changed constantly. The questions never did.

Clients would ask for a version of something that had worked for somebody else. Not the creative, the conclusion. Underneath that request sat an assumption nobody said out loud: that the two businesses were fighting the same problem. The diagnosis had therefore already been done, elsewhere, by someone else on another brand.

I did the same thing from the other side of the table. A problem would arrive and I would recognise its shape, and I would reach for the diagnosis that had worked on the last one that looked like it. It usually was close enough, which was the trouble.

And the same small set of problems kept arriving at the door in different clothes, across categories, across clients, across two countries. Consideration that would not convert. A product the market admired and did not buy. A promise nobody inside the company said the same way twice.

We would find a new insight, build new work on it, watch it perform, and eighteen months later some version of the same brief would resurface.

This is not a story about bad work. It is worse than that. It is a story about good work that was properly made but aimed at the wrong thing for years, by competent people who were paying close attention.

The UK made the shape of it clearer. There were clients who knew exactly what they needed the campaign to do and were right about it. What nobody had asked was whether that was the same thing the brand needed it to do. Two legitimate objectives on one campaign and only one of them was going to be served.

I would argue and question. I had years of pattern behind me, and I would lay it out carefully. My arguments would not land and eventually I understood why.

I had an opinion. They had a decision.

An opinion does not beat a decision.

There is a structural reason this keeps happening and it has nothing to do with anyone's competence. Agencies are engaged below the layer where most faults live. The brief arrives already diagnosed or hypothesised. Nobody in the room is paid to ask whether that diagnosis is right, and nobody can audit a diagnosis they made themselves.

I was inside that. I wrote those briefs. I presented that work. And when the numbers did not move, more than once, I said that these things take time.

There was no single moment of realisation. It came in layers, over years, and what eventually settled in my mind was this.

The fault was almost never where the symptom was.

Not once that I can now recall, was the thing that had broken the same as the thing that was hurting. Creative was blamed for a promise it was carrying faithfully. The promise was rewritten to fix a product truth that was based on internal agreement rather than tested against the market. The market had been chosen early by people close to the product and everything built after it inherited that.

Every fix was aimed at the pain. The pain is the one place the break never is.

The obvious answer is to get better at this. Twenty years of pattern recognition applied harder. That is the trap and I would rather name it myself than have it named for me.

Experience does not make you more accurate. It makes you faster and more certain. These are different things and frequently opposite ones. By year fifteen I could walk into a room and feel the answer before anyone had finished describing the problem, and I was right often enough that the times I was wrong were invisible to me and expensive for someone else.

The trouble with an intuition is not that it is unreliable. It is that it cannot be checked. Not by the person paying for it, not by a board that was not in the room, not against the record afterwards to see whether it was right.

So what was needed was not a sharper version of me. It was a discipline: something that produces a finding that can be checked, named plainly, resting on evidence the business already holds and able to survive rooms I will never be in.

That is what MAPS is for.

What I will not do.

I will not hand over a finding I have hedged. A diagnosis that arrives as three options and a recommendation is not a diagnosis. It is a way of not being wrong and passing the decision on to the other side of the table.

I will not repair what I diagnose. The finding names the decision that broke and the single intervention that corrects it. Carrying that intervention out is somebody else's work, and I have no stake in who is paid to do it. This keeps me objective.

I will not confuse the person who pays, with the client. There are three parties in every one of these rooms and only one of them cannot speak for itself. The brand. My obligation is to that one, including when it is inconvenient for the other two.

I am not asking you to meet me.

I am asking you to look at the last thing you changed and to consider that it may not have underperformed because it was executed badly. Look at the decision directly above it and ask whether that decision was ever tested. Or was it made early by people who were sure?

If the answer is uncomfortable, that is the conversation worth having.

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