

# Socrates vs Descartes

Is the rising emphasis on using analytics to guide marketing decisions stifling marketers' creativity?

Just over a decade ago Douglas Bowman launched an interactive consultancy called Stopdesign. His work for clients such as Capgemini quickly made him one of the most respected creative directors in web design.

In 2006 Bowman made a big announcement on his Stopdesign blog: he was off to Google to become its head of visual design. Bowman signed off the post: 'Here's to hoping and wishing for a successful adventure and many great things to come.'

Three years and several hundred blogs later, Bowman made another announcement. He was leaving Google for a specific reason: his time there had been blighted by a stultifying focus on data. 'When a company is filled with engineers,' he concluded in a blog this year, 'it turns to engineering to solve problems. Reduce each decision to a simple logic problem. Remove all subjectivity and just look at the data. Data in your favour? OK, launch it. Data shows negative effects? Back to the drawing board. And that data becomes a crutch for every decision, paralysing the company and preventing it from making any daring design decisions.'

Bowman might be working at the new frontier of marketing, but his experiences at Google are just the latest manifestation of an ancient question: is creativity constrained or catalysed by consumer data? In advertising agencies this debate plays out in the constant power struggle between planners and

creatives. In market research, it's the qualitative- vs quantitative-method tussle. For brand managers, it's when you either trust your gut or commission another survey. And if you want to go all the way back, it's Plato's conviction that creativity is sent down from the heavens versus Descartes' belief that any challenge can be best answered by breaking it down into its constituent parts. Unfortunately for marketers, we can legitimately find ourselves attracted to both schools of thought.

The prime directive of marketing – to listen to consumers – impels us to agree with Google (and Descartes) and use as much market data as possible to guide our decisions. Websites such as Google rarely make any bold decisions any more; instead they roll out multiple iterations of their site and opt for the one that tests the best. Bowman cites

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one example where Google tested 41 shades of blue before it decided on the colour of its toolbox. It's a similar story at Wal-Mart and Tesco where analytics, not marketers, drive every decision from stock levels to direct mailshots.

All well and good. But this clinical process seems bereft of the passion and synchronicity that many marketers aspire to. Don't great products come from accidents, serendipity and flashes of Socratic inspiration?

The biggest brand of them all, Coke, was built not from market analysis but by a potty pharmacist brewing medicinal tonic in his back yard using nothing more than instinct and a three-legged brass kettle. Chanel maestro Karl Lagerfeld, meanwhile, claims he gets most of his ideas in his sleep. For many marketers, then, there is an intrinsic belief that truly great consumer advances can be made only without the direct intervention of the consumer in the process. Data dulls creativity.

Perhaps both perspectives are correct. At some stages of the product life-cycle, you may need disruption and inspiration. At other times, with your brand and consumers well established, a more analytical route might work better. Bowman would disagree. He has had enough of analytics and has taken a job at Twitter, where he says customer data is treated with respect but also with a healthy 'grain of salt'.

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## 30 seconds on... analytics versus creativity

- 'A big part of our innovation process is **iteration**. We try something, get a lot of **feedback**, then try something new. We let the **maths** and the **data** govern how things look and feel.' *Marissa Mayer, vice-president of search, Google*
- 'You can't just ask customers **what they want** and then try to give that to them. By the time you get it built, they'll



**Quantitative** approaches to marketing risk losing the spontaneity of creativity

- **want something new!** *Steve Jobs, chief executive, Apple*
- 'Long-gone is the day of the **gut-instinct management style**. Today's business leaders are adopting **algorithmic** decision-making techniques and using highly **sophisticated software** to run their organisations.' *Ian Davis, worldwide managing director, McKinsey*

- 'Let me suggest an **alternative trend** – the rise of **heuristics** over algorithms; **qualitative** over quantitative research; **judgement** over analytics; **creativity** over crunching. Smart executives are recognising that the analytic approach to business has **overreached**.' *Professor Roger Martin, dean, Rotman School of Management*