It's about the little things: the case for small data

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Big data cannot truly provide insights into who we are and what we desire, **Martin Lindstrom** writes.

In the past two years, humans have created 90 per cent of all data ever created by our species, but we forget that data is not the same thing as information.

These days, our computer screens are clogged with an endless stream of historic data. But does this data provide truly useful guidance? And can it help us spark that breakthrough creative idea?

In my experience, true creativity happens when we allow our thoughts to flow freely. The problem is, we resist the state of boredom. Picture yourself in a bar, waiting for a friend who is running late. What do you do? You pull out your phone, of course. But this has a frightening result. We lose the opportunity to observe our surroundings and squander the chance to think creative thoughts.

And that's exactly what we are doing on a broader scale when we focus on big data alone. We are just not getting close enough to observe our audiences or allowing ourselves the opportunity to think differently.

At a recent conference, I asked: "In the last year, have you spent any time in a consumer's home?" Out of 3,000 **branding** folks in attendance, two people raised their hands.

I'm convinced that the true foundation for breakthrough ideas is right in front of us. Everyone who watches detective TV shows knows we leave behind physical DNA, but we also leave behind what I call "emotional DNA" – the evidence of who we really are.

https://youtu.be/4YS29nETt84

These bits of information, which I call small data, include the way we place our shoes in the hallway, the way our toothbrush stands in the cup and how we have loaded our fridge. Everything we do leaves insights about who we really are.

Recently, a fashion chain asked me to spend time with its target group: families with 14- to 21-year-old girls. One thing I noticed was that these girls woke up, on average, 23 minutes earlier than girls just a decade before. I asked them why; they couldn't tell me.

So I began exploring their physical environments, searching for the answer to what was going on every morning. What had changed in the past decade?

I noticed that the bathrooms of today's girls are stocked with water-based face creams rather than the oil-based creams girls were using ten years ago.

The answer suddenly occurred to me. Oil-based creams may last longer but water-based ones do not reflect as much glare. I discovered that these girls were waking up earlier, applying their water-based creams (which make for better photographs) and using that extra time to take photos of themselves in different outfits. The average girl took 17 selfies every single morning and she would send them to her friends for their feedback on that day's outfit.

Why? Because we humans are fundamentally insecure. Especially in adolescence, we crave our peers' approval. Fear of being ostracised from the tribe is stronger than practically any other emotion. Getting an OK from friends meant that the girls could head off to school with confidence.

Fast-forward half-a-year and the fashion chain had used these insights to revamp its in-store dressing rooms. Large touchscreens in each room allowed customers to try on a new ensemble, show it to friends and get them to vote on the clothes they liked best.

This is just one of a number of **brand**s that have developed a breakthrough idea they couldn't have conceived through big data alone. But we are still at the beginning. It takes courage to explore small data when faced with the overwhelming dominance of big data. As an industry, it will mean a sea change in our way of thinking – although some agency-side marketers are already working to do so.

There are great advantages to **brand**s – small data has the potential to connect creative professionals to their consumers on a deeply human level, providing the counterbalance to big data that truly effective **marketing** cries out for. And what is the balance? If big data is about seeking correlations, then small data is about causation. Correlation without causation will always be an incomplete picture.

Of course, data doesn't create meaning. We do. Marketers need to be more than data analysts. We must strive to see the world from the customer's point of view. The chief **marketing** officer at Nestlé recently said to me: "We've been trying to connect with the consumer by remote

control." To which I would add: "It's going to take more than just changing the batteries to improve our signal."

Don't get me wrong. I'm not an opponent of big data. But it is in small data, the minutiae of our home lives, that the clearest evidence of who we are and what we desire are to be found. If we want to glean the profound insights that lead to genuine success, big and small data must be partners in the dance.

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