

## One word or two? The fine art of asking questions

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Sir John Major (former British Prime Minister) tells a story\* about Boris Yeltsin, who led Russia for most of the 1990s. 'I remember walking with him once in the Kremlin, this would have been in the mid 1990s. I said to him, "Boris, in one word, what is the state of Russia?", he said "Good". I was surprised, it was falling to pieces. I said "Tell me in two words", he said "Not good".'

How could one word make such a difference to the answer? What would Boris Yeltsin have answered if John Major had allowed him even more words?

At MMRG, when we conduct for stakeholder research for our clients, we take French philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss's approach: 'The scientist is not a person who gives the right answers, he is one who asks the right questions.'

The right questions allow you to develop a wide-angled view on your market, and beyond. They challenge assumptions and allow you to think strategically and broadly about all the people of interest to your business. They can help open doors, expand opportunities and flush out the people with connections and influence that might otherwise be forgotten.

Too many times, we hear of pharmaceuticals companies asking: "Have we got a list of all the doctors who are working in this area?"

We like to ask: "Have we identified all the people with any sort of interest in this area – and associated areas?"

### WHAT MAKES A GOOD QUESTION?

When we conduct stakeholder research for our clients we use questions that

- Focus on the customer's perspective, not the seller's
- Think about all the possible definitions of customer in the market (payers, patients, prescribers, politicians . . .)
- Consider all possible and desirable outcomes, rather than one solution or an expected answer
- Take account of existing answers to find new questions and explore new areas
- Reflect the problems and challenges that already exist, without getting bogged down in them
- Take a broad view of the complete environment

### OUR THINKING

2018

Using likelihoods and tendencies could mean building a business on precarious foundations.

## One word or two? The fine art of asking questions. **Cont'd**

Ask limited questions and you may get what you expect – but that may not be what you need. Or as Steve Jobs put it: 'If Ford had asked people via a focus group or sample surveys what they wanted, they would've said, "Faster horses."'

### OUR THINKING

2018

### WHY CHOOSE MMRG TO ASK YOUR QUESTIONS?

Our clients tell us we've reimagined stakeholder research. We use our distinctive way of asking and thinking to deliver stakeholder understanding that supports successful product launches, creates champions and influences influencers.

**Ask Peter Joshua about finding the right questions for your business.**

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\*Taken from Sir John Major's Speech at Yale University, 30th November 2010,  
[www.johnmajor.co.uk/page4050.html](http://www.johnmajor.co.uk/page4050.html)

#### Other sources

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