



WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIONAL THINKING? AND HOW SHOULD WE USE IT?

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1498 WORDS

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Good planners tell good stories about the truths of brands to the people who want to hear them.

“Transformational thinking” helps us be good planners. But it can’t be a one-time thing. It’s a continual process. Society, technology, even people - we’re never ‘done’.

In this essay I argue that we should borrow from the growing transformational movement in mental health treatment. Phenomenology looks past checkbox typologies to understand the individual frames of reference that build a person’s world, treating patients more effectively.

I challenge today’s mass media, ‘one size fits all’ planning forgets this crucial subjective human lens. Largely, the ‘objective’ is unhelpful.

To be transformative, we shouldn’t just understand the subjective, but embrace it.

Good planners must understand *the world as people are living it*. This is more than basic ‘audience understanding’. Understanding *lived worlds* makes understanding people a continual process. Identifying relevant or meaningful opportunities is easier, and our creative better succeeds in saturated markets.

Currently, doctors use ‘objective’ diagnostic checkboxes: tiredness? Appetite changes? 5/6 - depression. Here’s some pills, take two and call me in the morning. Treated - check.

**Sound familiar?
“Here’s your mass-market TV always-on Facebook. Take two and call me with results in the morning.”
Campaign - check.**

In Europe, some dementia care communities take a subjective approach. Rather than *telling* patients the ‘objective truth’, they’ve literally built time-capsule 1950s villages. They understand that the basic truths of the world patients live within have changed.¹

This way of thinking is called ‘phenomenology’. Phenomenology (to brutally simplify, risking the wrath of my former philosophy lecturers) proposes the concept of the *lived world*. It argues that our experiences and perceptions can’t be extracted from the world. Someone hallucinating a pink rabbit doesn’t mean they’ve a ‘mistaken belief’. The basic structure of their world simply *has* the rabbit present. My experience of tables at hip-height is at odds with a toddler’s experience of tables as monoliths.

The table size or rabbit’s existence is as much a fundamental truth as “Paris is the capital of France”.

The way people live is oriented around these truths. This makes the ‘objective’ unknowable - for some, like dementia patients, incomprehensible.

Dementia villages have accepted patients’ *lived worlds* as true, meaning they’re able to understand and treat people



holistically. This approach also could potentially transform how society treats mental illness. No more “chin up” - we’d understand the laws of a mentally ill person’s world are different to more ‘commonly shared’ ones.

It’s a transformational approach for planners, because *lived worlds* don’t just apply to mental illness - but to all of us. Although many truths overlap, everyone has their own *lived truths*. We never see the world ‘as it is’. My perception of the *The Sun* is very different to the truth of my Liverpoolian colleague’s. Neither of us are fans - but the truths behind our opinions differ, creating distinct behavioural structures around our interactions with it.

The danger of writing about ‘transformational thinking’ is that it stays just thinking. To *be* transformational, planners should tap into subjective truths. People don’t transform all at once, they evolve - today, faster than ever. Advertising must evolve alongside, regularly investigating *lived worlds* to move away from the mass-media-mass-message campaign, getting under the skin of who we’re trying to talk to.

Who do we want to talk to?

As I’ve said: ‘good planners tell good stories about the truths of brands *to the people who want to hear them*.’ Targeting is a hot topic, challenged by Byron Sharp’s research demonstrating mass marketing as the most effective brand growth driver.² Last year, Bruce McColl, Mars Global CMO, decried targeting - “Our target is seven billion people.”³

I think this misses a crucial lens of human understanding.

Nowadays, adblock is second nature, we fast-forward ad breaks, and brands are always on. People are oversaturated. Fed up of blanket targeting. They might remember the ads they see over and over - but often it’s “remember not to choose *that* annoying brand.”

People want advertising to be easily understood in their lived worlds.

To differentiate themselves, brands must play an obviously **relevant** or **meaningful** role in people’s lives.

‘Relevant’ answers “what does this brand do for me in my life, easily, right now?” ‘Meaningful’ addresses “what does it mean, authentically, to and about me?” To achieve this, we have to understand the people who will *want* to hear our story.

We must look at what people want from brands, not what brands want from people.

Return to the brief. Imagine it’s for chocolate sharing pouches. Consider who buys them, and why? Where? When? When and where are they eating them? Where are they stored, what next to? Where does the bag fit in their *lived world*? More than the customer journey, we must look at the customer world - whether the brief’s POS or TV. How do people interact with the product, brand and at-shelf comms? Knowing how oversaturated people are, what’s important is being relevant or meaningful at the point of purchase. For some brands, that’s a well-placed wobbler to remind people of a social post. For others, a large scale brand-building activity to embed a meaningful relationship.

Susan Fournier’s Brand Relationships theory transforms people-brand interactions.⁴ She highlights varying relationships, from secret affair to teammate to enemy. Understanding your brand truth to the person best suited to your product pinpoints the most meaningful or relevant relationship.

Relationships aren’t static - they evolve with us, from day to week to time of year.

A chocolate pouch might be a friend with benefits on movie night, but a secret affair when gorging on the quiet.

Understanding this leads to more effective planning *and* creative. It helps establish the most relevant point within the customer journey to deliver the most relevant message.

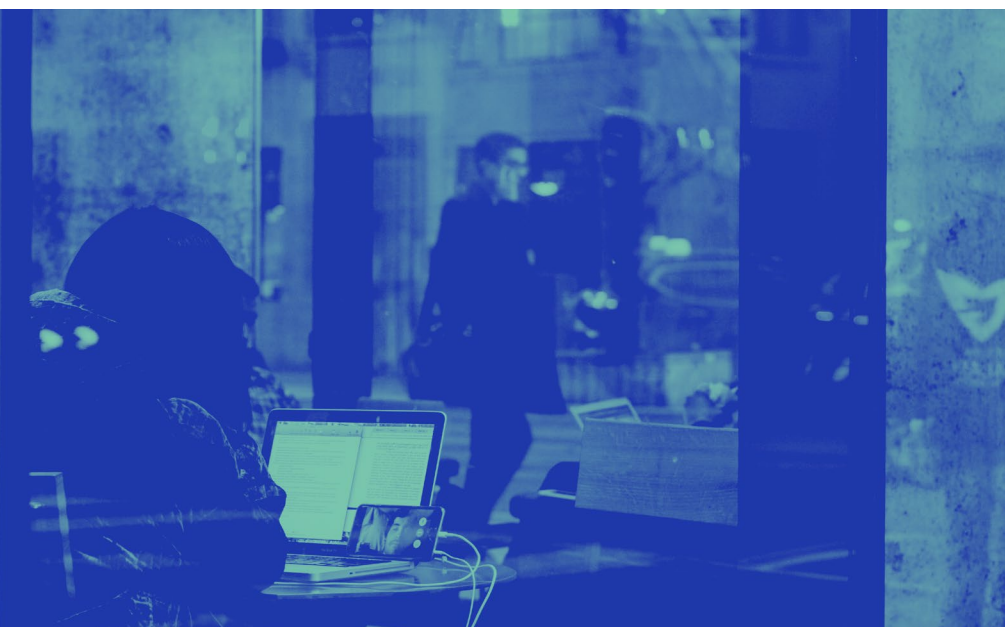
Modern life scatters digital breadcrumbs. It’s now easier than ever to understand people’s *lived worlds* and *relationships* end to end. Easier and more important to be data-centric planners. Using data we can understand on and offline behaviours, find the right people to speak to, what

they want from brands, and that relevant or meaningful space. Monzo users want a transparent package deal - we offer rewards in-app. Uber customers want quick, easy convenience - deliver in-cab sampling on busy days.

Embracing *lived worlds* creates more insightful, incisive strategy. But it doesn’t stop there. Clients are people too. Often, the only client contact before presenting work is the brief and perhaps a conference call.

A piece of paper or crackly PowWowNow line isn’t enough to understand where they’re coming from - and understanding where the client’s coming from drives a clarity of brief that translates into great work, and ultimately the do or die for your campaign.

What’s the client’s *lived truth* of the brand, product, campaign? Identifying crossover between client truths and consumer truths helps us be good planners. It helps us get to what we need to say, do and be to the people we want to speak to. For Netflix, it’s understanding whether, actually, their biggest competitor is sleep.⁵ For EasyJet last December, ‘sell more flights’ became ‘own those last few days of holiday allowance at the end of the year’. Getting buy-in from clients - showing an understanding of their needs - leads to better briefs and fewer disagreements down the line.



ILLUSTRATIONS

1. "The world of OCD", Anna Thairs
2. Groove Care Limited
3. Unsplash.com
4. Anna Thairs

¹ For more information, see dementiavillage.com

² Sharp. Byron. 'How Brands Grow' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

³ Riston, Mark. 'Ditching targeting for mass marketing is going back to the dark ages'. Marketing Week, April 2016 [<http://marketingweek.com/2016/04/12/mark-ritson-ditching-targeting-for-mass-marketing-is-going-back-to-the-dark-ages>]

⁴ Fournier, Susan. 'Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research'. (Journal of Consumer Research, 1998) [<http://bear.warrington.ufl.edu/weitz/mar7786/articles/fournier%20%281998%29.pdf>]

⁵ Hern, Alex 'Netflix's biggest competitor? Sleep.' The Guardian, April 2017 [<http://theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/18/netflix-competitor-sleep-uber-facebook>]

⁶ Ikea. 'Life At Home' [<http://lifeathome.ikea.com/home/>]

So, how can we be 'good planners' and behave, not just think, transformatively?

Don't have an 'agency model' - treat your process like iOS.

Always be iterating - reflecting, learning and adapting to develop planning processes with iterative flex. Transformation is a continual process. Developing a model to stick stubbornly to means staggering to a halt as soon as you've transformed. Short-termism in your outlook means longevity for transformative, exciting and incisive strategy.

Don't 'mass market' - ask questions about truths.

Ask questions flexible enough to grow and change with the process, audience and industry. *What is the lived world of your consumers?* Think holistically - past product or brand. Who are they? How do they behave across the whole customer journey? Look outside the marketing fraternity - as Ikea's 'Life at Home' research did⁶ - for deeper understanding. *What's the lived truth of your brand for them?* *What lived relationship do you have with them? Could it change?*

Don't be client-phobic - be as B2B as you are B2C.

What's your client's truth?

Ideas work best when you understand their context. Often we ignore what clients think of, and want from, campaigns - and ultimately what *they* think their brand is. Involving clients at the beginning of the process, rather than just presenting work at the end, fosters positive client-agency relationships. And means fewer hurdles later on!

"Be transformative." Easier said than done.

Remaining iterative, denouncing the objective is a big ask in a global arena suffering 'fake news' and international political instability. But transforming the way we look at people and how they live means better people-brand relationships, better work, and better human understanding.