

Five Minutes with Chris Loxley at Unilever R&D: Social science still has to compete and prove itself

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Part of PPG's Impact of Social Sciences project focuses on how academic research in the social sciences influences decision-makers in business, government and civil society. **Rebecca Mann** talked to **Dr Chris Loxley**, a social scientist at Unilever, about how research can promote innovation in the private sector.



How does a social scientist end up at Unilever?

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Unilever was really pushing the recruitment of social science graduates into Research and Development. In 2000, I joined a department called Consumer Science, which had about 35 people, a good number with social science PhDs – sociology, like me, or social psychology, anthropology – and the rest from cognitive psychology or the hard sciences. We were all people with similar interests and backgrounds using techniques from the social sciences and applying them in commercial research or using medical techniques such as MRI scanning.

We were working in a whole variety of areas: business development, innovation, consumer understanding and background market research. Rather than collecting social scientists together in one place, you spread them across the business because of what they bring, namely the ability to interrogate consumer data and insight. It would be right to say that the experiment has been successful: the value of bringing people social science skills has been proven and now it's routine to employ social science PhDs and to find social scientists across Unilever, doing very different jobs.

What kind of engagement do industrial researchers have with social science academics?

We now have social scientists working across the business. But Unilever doesn't have a monopoly on clever people, technically or otherwise. There's a lot of talent out there, and we do much more market research in an open innovation way – working with market research agencies, working academics. Unilever defined a particular style of working with academia, funding CASE studentships at British universities and elsewhere in the world and funding academics as consultants. I think is probably the way we will work increasingly, in the future.

In one case, we read a book by an academic on how you can kind of reinvent the meaning of a particular category and how brands have gone about reinventing themselves. We thought it was interesting and contacted him. We didn't have a particular project in mind, but he and his team came and spoke to us, and a big piece of work developed from there. It's often in that way that the relationships develop – we read interesting research and reach out to academics. We have worked with people at Durham and Lancaster Universities, as well as researchers from overseas.

Many people in R&D and in Unilever have been through postgrad training so we still keep in touch with the intellectual academic debates, we still try and maintain links with either former classmates or with particular academics. We are on a few mailing lists and that keeps us reasonably up to date. If we have a need or issue, we can circulate it around our network to see if anyone can help us with that issue. That's how we do open innovation technically as well. We have a scouting program, where scouts identify academics that do interesting work in bioengineering or chemistry. We don't have the same scouts on the social science side, it's done more informally, but we still have a group of people to find out who is doing interesting work in say, climate change in social science. We think we can find relatively quickly and easily the right kind of academic to put a request to. I don't think we don't have a problem in finding the right people.

How has social science research methods had impact at Unilever?

Previously, Unilever and other big companies were using tired and tested research methods, such as questionnaires, self-reports and focus groups. When you think about our subject matter – soaps, shampoo, mayonnaise, with which people may be less engaged – you need other analyses where you don't want to rely on asking people what they think. Many techniques, such as ethnography and participant observation were largely brought in by academics. We spent a lot of time building such methods, working with anthropologists, really taking tried and tested anthropological practices and bringing them into commercial research.

I think there are several areas where social science has led to a real product innovation. The whole area of using feedback and diagnostic techniques has developed within the business and has followed through into actual product launches and communications. Now, I think a lot of these techniques are more or less standard. Market research consultancies have become skilled in the techniques of social science: ethnography, projected techniques from psychology.

It's difficult to value the contributions of social science at Unilever. Industrial research is still dominated by the natural sciences, with PhDs in chemistry, biochemistry and biology. The assumption is that the natural sciences work in a particular way and that innovation in science and tech works in the same way. Despite what I've said, social sciences still has to compete and prove itself against that model. But we could look at particular projects and see that many leaders of successful projects were non-technical people, social scientists. That's a measure of the ability of the social scientists to work with a team, often technical people, to see the bigger picture in terms of consumer need and how to work with the marketing community who are social scientist graduates.

I think social science has in a sense changed how Unilever sees its relationship with the consumer. It's not just the fact that we sell people products. You have to think about the domestic setting in which they live. It's kind of obvious, but it's not something that was routinely part of how Unilever innovates. I think it's probably more to do with changing the innovation process than being able to point to specific products. For example I would point to the Unilever sustainable living plan. That's really quite an interesting attempt to articulate a very different discourse about the role of a business, decoupling growth and a company's carbon footprint and thinking about the consumer in a more holistic way. Social science within Unilever has been responsible for setting the scene for that kind of policy to develop within the company.

Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the interviewee:

Chris Loxley works with the New Business Unit at Unilever R&D.

About the interviewer:

Rebecca Mann is a researcher with the LSE Public Policy Group. She holds a Master of Public Administration from the LSE and degrees in Law and Economics from the University of Sydney.

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