



The Importance of Media Research

An Interview with Phil Cooke

What do you as a producer find yourself wanting / needing to know that research can provide?

Everything! That may sound a little crazy, but the fact is, television is driven by the size of it's audience. You can make a living publishing books to a small readership, or having a niche magazine, or having a small theater, but television is so terribly expensive, it needs to reach the widest possible audience. Therefore, I want to know anything I can that will keep that audience watching.

And it goes beyond the traditional male/female and age demographic breakdown. I'd like to know if my audience is blue-collar or professional, educated or uneducated, religious or non-religious, etc... All these factors can help us focus a program that will be more effective and compelling to that audience.

How can a creative Person/Producer use research information?

I use that information from the very beginning of a project. For instance, at the start, it helps us decide which project to do. Are patriotic themes "hot" right now? Are religious themes in demand? Do people want episodic dramas with continuing characters they can follow from week to week? Is the audience interested in music or drama or real-life documentaries?

So it starts with research.

Next, we use that information to design our approach and write the script. It doesn't matter if it's a preaching program, a music program, or a dramatic program. Accurate audience information can be used to help shape and structure a program that they would be interested in.

The fact is, I wish pastors, evangelists, and Bible teachers would use this information more. That doesn't mean they "pander" and preach a watered down message that people are looking for – it means they really understand the struggles and frustrations, the hopes and dreams the audience has, and they can design a more effective message based on that knowledge.

I'm always amazed at how well Jesus knew His audience. The Bible says His words had "authority".

Doesn't research limit a producer's creativity – the old struggle between the creative types and the number crunchers?

That depends to a great extent on the creativity and self-confidence of the producer. Yes, there are instances where the research results are either fuzzy or indicate an approach that clashes artistically with the director or producer's vision. But in those cases, you can rely on the experience and track record of the producer, and go with his or her vision.

In my own case, I think people hire me as much for my track-record as anything else. After 20 years I've seen about everything in Christian television, and if we don't have accurate information about a particular situation, I've usually encountered it before, and know how to deal with it.

On the other hand, research is actually quite freeing. To know what the audience's likes and dislikes are gives us an immediate jump on the project. And it gets us past that period of wondering which way to go, or how to approach the subject. But I have to admit – it sometimes takes a seasoned producer to not be intimidated by the data and to use it most effectively.

The best place to see research working side by side with directors and producers is in commercials. Typically, the commercials you see on television today are supported by a mountain of research – but the spots are still often highly creative and entertaining.

Why doesn't Christian broadcasting do more research?

Two reasons – finances and inexperience. First of all, most television stations and ministries have a very tight budget, and therefore research is often the first thing that gets tossed out the window. It's sad really, because research is often the key to discovering what their mistakes are, and what the television program actually should be doing. In other words, the very thing that could save you is what's being discarded.

But that's because of number two – inexperience. Once again, many ministries and television stations are also very short sighted. Historically, they want an answer NOW – they can't wait on data to be tabulated, and they aren't interested in what will work 5-10 years from now. But that attitude results in always being behind. How often have you heard jokes about Christian television being about 10 years behind secular television in style, look, and professionalism? That's the reason.

Once of my strongest desires right now is to create a funding organization who's purpose will be to discover what we should be producing 5-20 years from now. I would like to find the finances to bring in talented researchers, writers, producers, directors, and other

creative people to explore the future of media, and how we can continue to make an impact.

Until we begin doing that, we'll always be behind the curve.

But if Christian broadcasters are prayerfully following God's will, why should they need research?

I'm really tired of this one....so let's finally put it to rest. If this principle were true, we wouldn't need to have police to protect us... alarms to wake us up... doctors to fix us when we're sick... and we certainly wouldn't need to raise money for Christian television – God would take care of all of it.

But the fact is, we live in a horribly broken and fallen world. Occasionally, God intervenes in our affairs and performs wonderful miracles – but because He is sovereign, we don't always know when or where He will act. Therefore, we need to use the brains, insight, and knowledge He's given us to fulfill our mission on the earth.

Essentially, what we're doing is evangelism – finding the most effective way to preach the gospel message to as many people as possible. If understanding how they think, react, and respond increases my chances of getting through to them, then I'm going to take advantage of it. To not do that, is to turn our backs on marvelous information and tools God has given us.

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