

# Close encounters reveal brand loyalties

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Knowledge is nothing without understanding and the key to understanding people is to spend time with them.

For Saatchi & Saatchi's worldwide director of strategic planning, Sandy Thompson, the way to develop successful strategies is to ignore computer screens and focus groups and spend time in the real world.

With that comes an understanding of what people want in their lives, which, in turn, helps create powerful consumer connections for business and brands.

Thompson was one of several executives visiting Auckland last week for a Saatchi & Saatchi Asia-Pacific meeting of chief executives from the region.

She pioneered a research methodology called "Xploring" which goes beyond focus groups and data, providing profound and accurate insights into people's desires and aspirations.

This understanding is critical to the development of brand loyalty.

"Say what people want to hear, not what you want to tell them. To create loyalty beyond reason, you have to fixate on what people care about."

Thompson developed Xploring when she moved from Saatchi & Saatchi Canada to China to take on the role of planning director of 17 major Asia markets.

"I literally got off the plane having moved my family from Canada to China and went straight into focus groups. It didn't seem to matter whether they were talking about cars or shampoo, everybody was saying exactly the same thing. I realised there had to be more than one way to approach the people of China."

Thompson convinced Saatchi & Saatchi it needed to find out the difference between "what they say versus what they do".

With two planners, Thompson drove around the country for three months delving into the real lives of the Chinese.

The results have had a big impact on the way Saatchi & Saatchi now researches markets.

"Some agencies still talk at consumers. We get involved with people," says Thompson. "Instead of going out and asking a question, instead of going out and trying to find

the answers to the things that we don't know, we literally go out and get involved in their lives.

"We try to find the truth about what is really important in their lives as opposed to asking the questions that relate back to our clients' brands."

**Xploring goes beyond focus groups and data, providing profound and accurate insights into people's desires and aspirations.**

Thompson says the connection is much stronger and real.

"When I take a strategy to the creatives and the clients, they say, 'Oh yeah, that makes so much sense'. But it's not something you would have got to if you asked for it."

Thompson says the traditional focus group is a little like going on a first date.

"The first meeting with a focus group is fairly shallow and you go away at the end of it thinking, 'I kind of like this person, I don't like that person', and you know something about them.

"On the second date you dig a little deeper. We try to get to what we call the third date really fast and the only way to do that is dive in and give of yourself. The second you do that, people come back to you quickly.

"It comes down to the truth. Why should we care about this water?" says Thompson, pointing to a bottled water product on the table in front of her. "There may be a thousand things the client wants to say about it, but my job is to figure out the truth about why people care about it."

Before her visit to New Zealand, Thompson spent two weeks in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Dubai, "digging into beauty under the veil of women in the Middle East".

Thompson says she was worried about how she would get past the veil and get people to open up.

"We got more stuff than I imagined we'd be able to get.

"When you do this kind of work where you are spending time with people in their lives instead of dragging them for fifty bucks into your



**Sandy Thompson:** Going beyond focus groups to find out what people want from suppliers.

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world, you get the truth really quickly.

"Instantly you understand how you can work with the Procter & Gamble of the world to bring connections with their brands to people they cannot normally get close to."

She cites work done recently with American retailer JCPenney, which had used the tag line "It's all inside", meaning you get could get everything in one store.

"People would go in, get what they needed, and get out," says Thompson. "There was no emotional attachment."

Research by Saatchi & Saatchi made it clear women in America "don't shop because they have to buy another pair of socks". Thompson says their research showed they shop because it's a "nice thing to do - it gives them inspiration".

JCPenney then adopted the tag line "Every day matters" for its brand position and re-established its relationship with customers.

The chain moved from a "we've got everything" attitude to a "how can we make every day matter to our customers".

The strategy has had a big impact on how JCPenney does business, from hiring staff to its online offerings, to the way it lays out its stores.

"It's dramatically changed the relationship people have with the store."

Thompson has studied cultural anthropology and advertising. "I use my cultural anthropology degree probably more than I use my advertising degree," she says.

"My job is about understanding people and understanding what matters most to them."

Not only has the global explosion of new digital media forced the advertising industry to constantly re-invent itself, clients are also having to re-invent products because of the speed of change.

The digital era has seen direct marketing grow dramatically, with the internet changing the way people consume messages. Today the emphasis is on "one-one-one" not "one-on-mass".

Thompson commutes to the Saatchi & Saatchi headquarters in New York, which is administered by Kiwi chief executive Kevin Roberts.