



Beating the drum of international volunteering?

Exploring motivations to
volunteer amongst black and
asian communities

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Introduction

This paper presents a case history of research that VSO undertook with The Research Business International (TRBI), exploring motivations to volunteer amongst Britain's Black and Asian communities. VSO is an international development charity that recruits skilled volunteers from professional backgrounds to work abroad, usually for two years. Conducted over a 4-month period, the research provided valuable insights into the relevance and impact of cultural heritage in determining motivations to volunteer. These helped VSO shape their diversity agenda and develop strategies in the context of attracting volunteers from these communities.

The paper focuses on five main areas:

- Background and contextual factors to ethnicity and voluntary work
- Sampling and methodological issues raised by conducting ethnic research
- Key findings, especially contrasts between the different communities
- Strategies developed by VSO in response to the research
- Wider implications for market research

Background

The background to the case history follows two strands, which are explored in more detail below:

- 1 The increasing importance of the ethnic community in the UK
- 2 The origins of VSO's interest in ethnicity which preceded the TRBI research

The ethnic community is fast becoming a key part of British society. According to the 1997 Labour Force Survey, around 7% of the UK population is from an ethnic minority background. It is estimated to have a spending power of £13bn – a very large wallet indeed.¹ Their contribution to Britain's GDP is in the region of £40 billion. Whilst results from the 2001 Census will not be public for a while, one suspects that this level may have risen since 1997. Estimates indicate that the ethnic community is growing by 2-3% per annum whilst the White community remains virtually static.² On the one hand, this growth is driven by

higher fertility rates and immigration and, on the other hand, by religious and cultural practices. The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) hypothesizes that ethnic communities might make up as much as 10% of the UK population in the future. In some parts of the UK such as London, Leicester and Birmingham, they will become the majority.³

Figure 1 below shows that the Indian community is the largest followed by the Pakistani and Black communities. Combined Asians (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) make up 47.8% with all Blacks representing 33%.

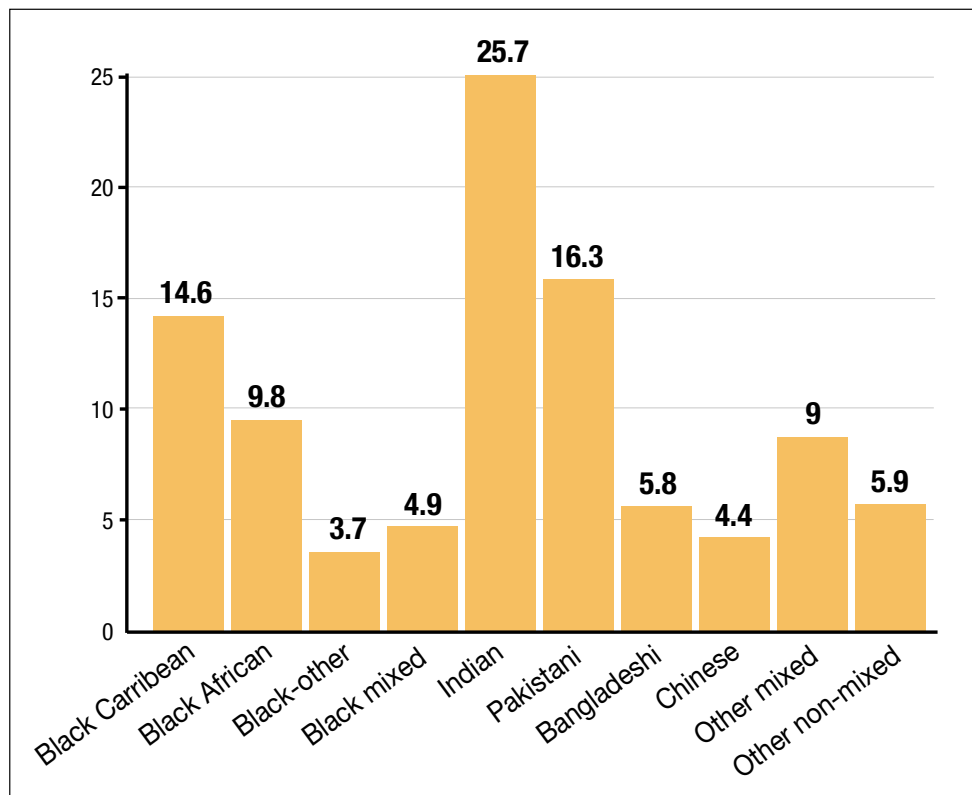


Figure 1: The Ethnic Composition of the UK

(Source: 1997 Labour Force Survey)

Aside from growing in size, there are also other reasons why the ethnic community cannot be ignored. Whilst in the past, ethnic groups were seen to be working in low paid and low status jobs, this trend has been supplemented by the rise of the Asian and Black middle classes. Some of them are swelling the ranks of the professions whilst others have set up their own businesses. CRE figures indicate that nearly 1 in 4 of Britain's doctors were born overseas.⁴ In Birmingham, there are over 5,000 Asian businesses and Interfocus research indicates that the rate of business start-ups within ethnic groups is higher than amongst their White counterparts.⁵

VSO also recognised that the growing ranks of professionals from ethnic backgrounds was too important a factor to overlook.

VSO's Interest in the Ethnic Community

VSO is an international development charity that works through volunteers. Founded in 1958, it has grown to become the largest independent volunteer-sending organisation in the world today. Over that period the composition and focus of VSO has changed. Initially most volunteers were young people and the focus of their placement was on practical help to individual communities, combined with their own personal development. However, by 2001, the average age of a VSO volunteer had risen to 35 and their professional skills and experience were being utilised to help fight poverty on a local, national and global stage. This evolution has been driven in large part by a change in the nature of demand. Communities and employers in Africa and Asia naturally request skills and technical abilities they cannot find locally. Accordingly, as the skill base within the workforce of developing countries has grown, VSO has increasingly recruited people with significant professional experience, combined with the personal qualities required to work effectively in a different culture and environment.

The organisation's traditional source of volunteers in the UK has been the White Anglo-Saxon community – a function both of VSO's cultural origins and the demography of Britain's professional classes. However, during the 1990s, two things changed:

- The emergence of a new generation of professional people from within the Black and Asian community provided a compelling business case for VSO to build relationships with ethnic minority communities. This would help recruit individuals from a burgeoning pool of professional people with the required skills
- Ethnic diversity has become a necessary characteristic, not only in terms of legal compliance but also political credibility, for public service organisations in the UK. As an organisation promoting international development, VSO needed to accurately reflect the breadth of cultures from which it wants to recruit its own staff and volunteers

In addition, striking anecdotal evidence indicated that, in some respects, Black and Asian volunteers could be more effective than their White counterparts. Because of their background, ethnic minority volunteers could bring insight and experience of living and working across different cultures, which is an intrinsic requirement of any VSO placement. Their ethnic identity would also challenge crude stereotypes about what kind of people become international volunteers and who has the power and expertise to promote development work. As a result ethnic minority volunteers could become influential role models within the organisations and communities they work for during their placement.

Added incentive came from an initial piece of research intended for a media campaign. A survey commissioned by VSO to contrast perceptions of international volunteering among different ethnic groups suggested that propensity to volunteer was actually lowest among the White community, increased among the Asian community and was highest among Afro-Caribbeans – the exact opposite of the actual ethnic composition of current VSO volunteers. Three out of four respondents from minority ethnic communities felt a responsibility to help people in poorer countries – almost 30% higher than in the White sample. Of those who had heard of VSO, Blacks and Asians were almost twice as likely to consider volunteering overseas as their White counterparts. And 42% of people of African origin wanted to donate time to aid-related charities. A combination of organisational values, market analysis and practical observation therefore provided a strong incentive for VSO to explore how it might approach and involve Black and Asian volunteers. The seeds had been sown for further research.

Research Objectives

The major business objective underpinning the research was to:

- Enhance the take-up of VSO placements amongst the Black and Asian communities Specific information yields would help to:
- Explore reactions towards the idea of working or travelling abroad for lengthy periods of time
- Elicit reactions towards becoming a VSO volunteer and establish the characteristics of the typical Black and Asian who would apply to VSO
- Gauge awareness and knowledge of voluntary organisations and, in particular, VSO
- Identify media consumption habits with a view to developing ethnically sensitive media strategies

Selecting the Sample

The focus of the study was on male and female members of the Black and Asian communities drawn from a number of professions: medicine, IT/ internet professional, business advisor/ management, teaching, marketing/ PR/ communications/ fund raising, construction/ engineering, social work and nursing. These were the skill sets of particular interest to VSO and most in demand for overseas placements. That said, a number of other professions were also included for their potential value: accountant, lawyer, journalist, venture capitalist and strategy and resources personnel.

In a drive to approach a pre-warmed audience who were receptive to the idea of volunteering two further criteria were set. None of the respondents were to reject the idea of working or travelling abroad for lengthy periods of time and all of them were to be very/ quite likely to give time and/ or money to voluntary and charitable activities. The age range was limited to a younger audience (21-

35) as in-house VSO data and organisational experience showed this to be one of the key age groups that tend to be most receptive to the idea of becoming a VSO volunteer. Our results later supported this. Additionally, the ethnic audience itself has quite a young age profile: the median age of Whites in the UK is 37, that of Afro-Caribbeans 33, Indians 31 and Bangladeshis 18. All respondents had to be born in the UK or have been schooled here since the age of 10 to ensure that they were of 2nd /3rd generation extraction and were fluent in English (necessary for VSO placements, rather than for conducting research).

Beyond these generic criteria, a number of specific definers were used to place parameters around the ethnicity of respondents. Although the issues surrounding ethnicity will be discussed later, suffice it to say that the emphasis was on the larger sub-groups found amongst the Asian, African and Afro-Caribbean communities. The Asians were all from the Punjab or Gujarat regions of India and either Hindu or Sikh. The Africans were from a range of different African countries but had to include 2 Nigerians. Similarly, a range of Caribbean islands was represented amongst the Afro-Caribbean sample but 2 had to originate from Jamaica.

Research Methodology

A multi-faceted qualitative methodology was employed over a period of 4 months amongst both communities in order to achieve the research objectives:

- Phase 1 – one mini-group discussion lasting two hours with five respondents supplemented by three depths of one hour amongst a mix of male and female Punjabees and Gujaratees. Fieldwork was conducted by an Asian moderator during March and April 2001 in Birmingham and Feltham
- Phase 2 – one mini-group amongst Africans and one amongst Afro-Caribbeans, which were mixed in terms of gender. Four depth interviews and one paired depth (again one hour long) spread across the two Black communities completed the research programme. African and Asian moderators conducted the discussions during June 2001. Fieldwork took place in north London and Leeds

The scale of the research was relatively small for several reasons. First, both Phases were part of a larger study amongst a 'White' audience, which spanned 6 groups, 9 depths and 3 Converse interviews (telephone depths). Second, resources were limited. Thus the size of the ethnic samples had to be curtailed. There is a widespread belief that large samples are preferable in offering robustness and weight to recommendations. But small samples that have been judiciously composed can also be significant in informing strategy development. The findings from the VSO research were rich enough to support their proposed policy and marketing initiatives. Using Asian and African moderators had meant that their cultural expertise compensated for the scale of the study by enhancing the findings with cultural consultancy. This added greater insight

over and above the immediate research findings. There are, of course, pros and cons to such cultural consultancy but in this instance, it proved to be advantageous. In many ways, this is not totally dissimilar to other researchers using their in-depth marketing knowledge of specific sectors to add value. Subsequent dealings with ethnic organisations reinforced the findings.

Why Use Mini-groups and Depths?

Research programmes benefit greatly from a varied methodology as this exposes our listening to a range of 'respondent voices' expressed in different contexts. The mini-groups were designed to create a discursive environment in which to debate the key issues. But more importantly, they were also an ideal vehicle to replicate the communal and social aspects of becoming a volunteer. The close-knit nature of the Asian and Black communities meant that any decision to volunteer would not be an isolated one: it would involve others. Mini-groups were favoured over conventional groups to allow more airtime to these articulate professionals. It was also felt these would allow for a more focused and intimate discussion. Family groups were not considered as these would have resulted in a mix of generations and this could have inhibited the discussion.

The depths and paired depths served more than one purpose. They provided very useful insights into specific issues, for example, focusing on education and the teaching of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). Additionally, they allowed a more individual and personal view to be aired which at times complemented but at other times countered the reactions to VSO in the groups. In the absence of 'collective response and group frenzy' some of the reactions to materials shown were more muted in the depths and paired depths. This is discussed in more detail below.

Conceptualising Ethnicity

Britain is a diverse environment with many religions, races, ethnic groups, cultures and language speakers making up the ethnic community. To take the example of the Black community, there are attitudinal differences between those who originate from Africa and the Caribbean, those who come from different countries in Africa and different islands in the Caribbean, those who are Muslim and those who are Christian and depending on the part of Africa they come from they may speak different languages. We may ask for a group of respondents who are from Nigeria but this may yield a range of different religions and we need to be aware of this. Likewise, the term Asian can be broken down according to country of origin, region, religion, languages spoken and caste. The ethnic community is full of finer distinctions, which cut across each other to form complex identities. Thus it is misleading to assume that these communities are undifferentiated. Emery and Stubbington made a similar point in their fascinating study about communicating with the Asian population at the 1996 MRS Conference.⁶

The social anthropologist Baumann has conceptualised ethnicity as a relational term. Ethnic divisions are based on many other distinctions, which are mutually interdependent.⁷ Ethnic boundaries are defined relatively and situationally.⁸ Any one individual holds a multiplicity of identities (e.g., Muslim, Black, American, Nigerian origin, Yoruba speaking, tribal allegiance, etc.), and context plays a big part in which of these identities comes to the forefront and becomes the definitive category. (There are also, of course, other identities, e.g. home owner, professional accountant, parent, female/ male, voluntary worker, which also interplay. These prevent us from defining identity purely through ethnicity).

Research Issues

A number of points surface when conducting ethnic research and understanding these is an important stepping-stone to providing actionable findings. Many of these points were discussed at length by Philly Desai and Andrew Sills in their study for Newham Council presented at the 1996 MRS Conference.⁹ It is outside the scope of this paper to reiterate all of these and some are not relevant, for e.g., all the Asian respondents were fluent in English so language barriers were not an issue. However, some of the pertinent points for this study are:

- How to define the ethnic community
- Where to find the sample
- Which recruiters to use
- Who should moderate

These are not dissimilar to any other issues that may occur on a complex project but our awareness is heightened because we assume (rightly or wrongly) that ethnic research is very different from conventional and mainstream market research. Admittedly, there will be differences but there also similarities. Many researchers would be concerned when dealing with a target group that is not similar to them, for example, high net worth individuals.

Defining the Ethnic Community

When VSO approached TRBI to research the ethnic community, the research team's immediate response was to ask 'Which one?' Britain's diverse ethnic environment creates complexity that can make life very difficult for researchers when it comes to defining different communities – on what basis can they identify who to research? And which communities can be mixed in focus groups? Desai and Sills highlighted these precise points in their MRS Conference paper.¹⁰

It was decided that the focus should remain tight. Thus the Asian phase of the project concentrated only on Indians from Punjab (Hindus and Sikhs) and Gujarat (Hindus). These two sub-groups are relatively easy to mix in groups and have a degree of cultural affinity either based on shared religion or shared regional outlook. They are also two of the biggest Indian communities in the

UK. 52% of all British Asians speak Punjabee and 25% of them speak Gujaratee.¹¹ Whilst an important part of the UK community, a conscious decision was taken to exclude Muslims from the groups. Resources did not stretch far enough to have a separate group of Muslims and mixing them in the Hindu and Sikh groups might have compromised on group cohesion and dynamics. Additionally, VSO data showed fewer applications had been received from Muslims than from other ethnic groups.

The Black community was represented by those from Africa (Nigeria – quota, Malawi, Uganda and Ghana) and the Caribbean (Jamaica – quota, Barbados, Trinidad and Grenada and Dominica). Once more these quotas were to ensure that the larger sub-groups had a voice in the research. Whilst no quotas were placed on religious origin, this was recorded as matter of course.

Locating the Sample

Conventionally ethnic research can prove to be challenging for it is not immediately obvious where certain ethnic groups live. The location of different ethnic communities in the UK is a moot point for researchers, as looking for people where they do not exist can waste much time and money. Whilst an educated guess could direct researchers to major cities such as Birmingham, Manchester and Leicester, the precise location of particular ethnic groups within these cities is not so obvious.

According to the 1997 Labour Force Survey, around 97% of the ethnic population of the UK live in England. Nearly 75% of them live in Greater London (this accounts for approximately 50%), Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and the West Midlands.¹² Although the ethnic population is heavily urban and lives in cities, which cities they live in varies according to the group under scrutiny. Greater London houses over 80% of the total Black-African population and almost 60% of the Black-Caribbean population. The greatest concentration of Bangladeshis is also found in London, inner London to be precise. By contrast, Pakistanis are more concentrated outside the south east: nearly half of them live in Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and the West Midlands.¹³ Indians tend to veer toward the suburbs rather than the inner cities, west London suburbs being a particular favourite.

It was fortunate that we did not encounter any problems in locating our respondents. Thankfully, we did not find ourselves searching for Indians in inner cities or Africans in Surrey. Both the Asian and African researchers were very clear and specific about the research locations, which should be used and opted for West London and Birmingham to yield the Indian sample and North London and Leeds to yield Afro-Caribbeans and Africans respectively.

Recruitment Issues

Recruitment of ethnic samples is never a straightforward process, especially when they need to come from professional backgrounds. Fearing that this might be the case, more time was allowed for dealing with every eventuality. Rather than 1-2 weeks, 3 weeks were set aside to recruit and this paid off.

The first and most obvious issue was which recruiters to use. This study used both White and Black recruiters who were thoroughly briefed by the moderators. The main criterion for choice of recruiter was recruitment ability rather than ethnicity. All the recruiters had worked with QCS (TRBI's sister company) on a variety of projects and had a proven track record. Continual updates meant that problems were caught in time: errors such as out of quota respondents were avoided and high quality respondents maximized the value of the research. Thus, the recruitment process was largely straightforward and problem-free.

However, there were teething problems with signing up respondents. Busy and under-pressure in their jobs like most other AB samples, they too required convincing for participation. But this extended beyond just telling them that the research was valuable to actually making them au fait with the workings of research and its outcomes. Perhaps not as over-researched as White audiences, ethnic respondents may be more research naïve. This may not quite extend to suspicion but it certainly means more lucidity and clarity is necessary. A second issue hinged on the level of incentive that should be paid. Contrary to our initial beliefs, incentives for ethnic respondents were higher than those used for White Caucasian respondents. (The White respondents who had applied to VSO were not incentivised and only their travel expenses were paid). Relatively under-researched and unfamiliar with the market research world, some assumed that the incentive should be the equivalent of their hourly rate at work rather than a token of appreciation for their time. In one instance, an Asian respondent calculated that he earned £200 per hour and that £50 for a one hour interview was a bad deal – a rather telling point in the context of becoming a VSO volunteer. Although this issue also surfaces in some business-to-business research, it is compounded by the lack of familiarity with research of ethnic communities.

Moderator Matching

Often, clients seek out researchers who have experience of their market hoping that this can bring valuable insight to the findings. At the 2001 MRS Conference Sharma and Wilde argued a case for hermeneutics – a philosophical perspective arguing, in a nutshell, that our interpretation of research data is based on our previous experiences and knowledge base.¹⁴ This sentiment clearly has relevance in the context of ethnic research where the moderators' cultural capital is the essential background music for interpretation and analysis.

An Asian moderator was used for the Asian phase of the research: African and Asian (the same researcher) moderators were used for the African and Afro-Caribbean phase. One could argue that exact moderator matching is necessary – an Afro-Caribbean moderator for Afro-Caribbean respondents and a Gujaratee moderator for Gujaratee respondents. However, in reality this is impractical.

First, the incidence of ethnic researchers in the industry is relatively low and even if one could be found who matched exactly, cost and time implications may be prohibitive.

Second, an ethnically sensitive perspective is required in making sense of the research data. This may stem from being of an ethnic background but not necessarily mirroring respondents exactly. Thus using an Asian moderator for Afro-Caribbean and African respondents may be acceptable given their 'cultural otherness' relative to White moderators.

Third, the cultural sensitivity of the topic of research may also have an influence on who moderates the group. For example, research into the drinking habits of young Asian females and males might benefit from a White Caucasian moderator who is totally anonymous to them. (There is a fear amongst Asians that the moderator will know their relatives through community networks).

Fourth, best practice in research still needs to be observed. There may be instances where an ethnic moderator is not experienced in dealing with the subject area. In this instance a decision needs to be made: do we use him or her or do we use someone who has more experience of the area (but may not be ethnically suitable). One solution would be to opt for joint moderation. The key point is that each project has to be assessed on its own merits and suitable moderation provision made.

Key Findings

The case study produced many fascinating pointers, which were instrumental in shaping VSO's diversity agenda. The main emerging themes were:

- Blacks displayed a deeper engagement with voluntary work than other communities
- Whereas Asians found the idea of helping their own community embarrassing, Blacks were motivated by a sense of mission to help their own
- Family reactions were a key barrier to volunteering for Asians. However, negative perceptions of voluntary organisations and hard earned career success were more prohibitive for Blacks
- The image of volunteers was rather mixed across all communities
- There was some wariness of VSO and their marketing materials

However, prior to discussing the findings, the political and economic context surrounding migration into the UK needs to be explored. It is both interesting and relevant and helps us understand the underlying basis for responses towards volunteering and VSO.

The Ethnic Context Behind Volunteering

Migration has been an important part of British society and can be traced back beyond Anglo-Saxon times. The main influx of Blacks and Asians into the UK occurred in the 50s and 60s. This was encouraged by the government in an attempt to rebuild the country following the Second World War and to overcome labour shortages. Contrary to stereotypes, many migrants who had (and still do) entered the UK intended to work: they brought over skills and qualifications, set up businesses, worked in professions that would not be touched by the locals and created jobs for themselves and others. This desire to work also involved supporting families back home. A keen desire for success helped them achieve much:

“What is remarkable and often not understood is that the contributions immigrants and their immediate descendants have made, and continue to make, to Britain are out of all proportion to their numbers”¹⁵

But whilst Britain is relatively racially tolerant compared to other countries, ethnic communities have suffered in the UK, especially the Black community. To catalogue the extent of this suffering is outside the remit of this paper but suffice it to say that it has affected attitudes and behaviours. The legacies of colonialism, slavery and all their negative pre-cursors have left an indelible mark on the collective psyche of the Black community making them highly sensitive to White perceptions. Amongst both Asians and Blacks there is strong community network and desire to help one's own. Coupled with the desire to do well at school is the desire to fly high in careers. The research also confirmed our suspicion that Asians are very status conscious.

Involvement in Voluntary Work

As a precursor to any detailed understanding of the voluntary landscape, VSO needed to grasp current levels of engagement with this sector and if there were any particular slants towards certain groups or areas.

There were clear divergences in terms of the level of engagement with voluntary work amongst Blacks and Asians. As a way of spending time, Asians rarely mentioned voluntary work spontaneously. In busy professional lifestyles, it did not appear to be on the radar. However, most were involved in one way or another but this tended to be on a smaller, more individual scale. Donating money was an obvious way but this was riddled with misgivings. The fact that Indians donated more to specifically Indian appeals was a source of

embarrassment to some. Others raised concerns about the misuse of religious donations. This was a common 'myth' amongst Asians and virtually all could recount examples of such malpractices. For this reason, investment of time and effort was preferable, a key site for this being the local Hindu and Sikh temples. Driven by the desire to serve the public and obligations placed by the family, involvement in the temples could vary from twice weekly to six monthly. But most did acknowledge that they did not participate often enough. Other voluntary work included becoming a Samaritan, fund-raising, donating blood and hospital visits.

By contrast, the Black sample was much more aware of voluntary activities and more actively involved than the Asian and the White samples. Volunteering was something that they had witnessed from an early age. Spending up to 7 hours per week, not only did they act as volunteers, they also held prominent offices within the organisations (e.g. Chair, Treasurer and Director). Typical activities included those that were education based, medical (hospital radio, helping the disabled etc) and focus on the local community (youth work and the church). However, unlike the White and Asian communities, the Black focus was heavily geared towards helping their own community unashamedly. Whereas the Asians were embarrassed about the blatant prejudice of helping their own community more than others, for Blacks, this was a source of pride. It demonstrated what Blacks could achieve. However, it was also indicative of more deep-seated reservations about the White volunteering community, which will be explored later.

Motivations to Become a Volunteer

Understanding the motivators, which propelled people to become volunteers, was key for VSO. It meant that they could communicate messages appropriate to each community and increase the number of applicants to VSO. In the event, it transpired that there were some notable differences between Asians and Blacks. Whereas Blacks were entering into volunteering with a great degree of certainty and a sense of mission, the White sample was characterised by a sense of uncertainty and ennui. The Asians fell somewhere in between. In general, the White respondents' motivation for working abroad – the idea of immersion in a 'foreign' culture - lacked resonance with these communities.

Motivations for the Asian sample were linked to the desire to 'do good' and have a tangible impact. Skills transfer and self-development were also triggers but to a lesser degree and certainly not as pronounced as amongst the White sample. Sceptical and untrusting when it came to donating hard cash, some of their motivations tied into the need to give more than just money to important causes. Responding to emergencies was also evident and testified to their sensitivity to natural disasters (e.g. the Gujarat earthquake), wars and famines – a point, which was overlooked by the White respondents. Interestingly, and

unlike the other samples, Asians were keen to obtain public recognition for their endeavours. Originating from a highly status driven background, the social kudos accruing to them or to their families from voluntary work was too good to miss.

Blacks, by contrast, were less self-interested than both the White and Asian audiences. The major motivations to work abroad were to give to the Black community and to prove that Blacks can succeed (e.g. in running charities). The need to take social responsibility and positive action was strong. As a small band of professionals in the UK (smaller than in the White and Asian communities), Blacks felt a sense of obligation to share their skills, experience and knowledge with those less fortunate and those who could not afford their expertise.

"I think a bit of motivation would be if they are doing work in Africa or in the Caribbean where they are helping their own... as well as trying to educate people in Africa where they have got a big HIV problem... that would be something that would motivate them." (Afro-Caribbean, North London)

Additionally, they wished to understand the communities and provide help according to their needs. This differentiated them from White volunteers who were perceived by Blacks to impose their own values on local communities in an insensitive fashion. Personal challenge and self-development also played a part, tempered with passion and goal-achievement. At a lower level, career enhancement might have been a driver for a few but for most, working abroad for two years could have the opposite effect. It could undo all the hard work expended in rising up the career ladder.

Barriers to Volunteering

Despite the strong motivators, there were also powerful barriers faced by both communities focusing on financial commitments and impact on career:

- Financial – concerns over domestic financial commitments and remuneration when abroad were similar to those expressed by White potential volunteers. They stemmed from the low/ unpaid image of volunteers. Additionally, in an Asian culture driven by status, money and the desire to earn ever larger amounts, there was the specific issue of how to promote a seemingly low-paid career

"Volunteer it's almost a stigma isn't it? It means no money basically." (Asian, West London)

- Career – given the struggle of Black professionals to rise up the ladder, career issues (finding another job, fit with career path) took on heightened importance

"Most people who have a good job here might find it very difficult to give it up because we know when we come back, because of our race may be, we might find it more difficult to get another one." (Afro-Caribbean, North London)

Whilst Asians did not discuss their own struggles, they were sufficiently ambitious to realise that volunteering abroad for a period of time could jeopardise their careers. Additionally for Asians, there was the familial and social pressure of throwing away sacrifices made to train as a lawyer to become a TEFL teacher in Outer Mongolia!

"Talking to friends who are Asian, to tell you the truth, 70% of them are very money orientated.... because they have been taught by their parents...its been drilled into their heads that you work for money. The more money you have, the better things you have in life.... [Also] a lot them are ambitiousthat is one thing that Asians have in abundance." (Asian, Birmingham)

Other barriers varied in importance between the two communities:

- Perceptions of voluntary organisations – for Blacks, these were far from positive as they were seen as cliquey clubs dominated by Whites. Asians did not raise this as a major issue
- Culture – for Blacks, this was tempered with issues of racial insensitivity within the host community and their own inability to speak the local language. Driven by negative personal experiences abroad and in the UK, fear of being unable to integrate with the host community and with the voluntary organisation itself were strong
- Family – whilst there were worries about the effect of working abroad on children or elderly relatives, the lack of family domination and more Anglicised attitudes toward family life meant that this was not a very powerful barrier for Blacks. The family only appeared to perform a sanity check function for them. By contrast, for Asians, negative family reactions constituted an almost insurmountable barrier
- Giving up a privileged lifestyle (large house, fast car and successful career) ran counter to the Asian values of success and achievement which were inculcated by parents

"My mum would not comprehend it. You have a nice house and nice car ...Isn't there something you could be doing here?" (Asian, West London)

- The natural suspicion of Asian families and the local gossip network would be awakened in an attempt to find out what 'Mrs. Singh's
- daughter was 'really' doing'. Was she working in a school in Nigeria or had

she eloped with her English lover to Romford?

- Low awareness of the whole world of volunteering meant that fears of safety and welfare were magnified
- Of course, there would be the inevitable delay in match-making and (arranged) marriages

Language had an important bearing on how these negative family reactions to volunteering were expressed. On the surface, the objections to volunteering voiced by Asians might not have been so belligerent. After all, one could easily argue that a Black family or White middle class family could have similar reservations. However, what became evident was that this was not the case. Based on her own experience of the Asian community, the Asian moderator suspected that respondents were not being entirely truthful when responding to the idea of volunteering. When discussed in English, reactions were not half as negative as when discussed in Punjabee and Hindi. Asked to describe the likely responses from their family in Punjabee and Hindi when confronted with a proposition to go abroad as a volunteer, respondents articulated how they would be sworn at. Two words were used. The first, 'khutha', literally means dog, bad person and waster. Although not a pleasant form of address, it is used fairly typically as term of abuse and swear word. The second term, 'khanjaree', means whore and out of control. This word is not used very commonly and is considered to be a serious swear word.

The relevance of language for the Black sample was less clear-cut. This may have been due to the predominance of English in the sample. When asked to translate key reactions in native languages such as Yoruba (spoken in Nigeria), the strength of expression was largely similar to that given in English.

Perceptions of Volunteers and Development Workers

VSO has a dual identity: it is both an international development agency and a volunteer-sending organisation. Its purpose is to help tackle poverty by sending people abroad. In most ways this is a great benefit. It creates a point of difference and complements the programmes of other organisations working in the sector that send food and funding. However, this dual identity also creates some ambiguity. The volunteers themselves earn a local salary during their placement and effectively work for no financial gain, but they are also skilled and experienced people – in effect, development workers.

This dichotomy is not just a question of semantics. It also reflects a real ambiguity in how VSO is perceived by the wider public. Is volunteering really for professional people? Do they want good intentions or talent? Will it undermine a career or enhance it? Because of these uncertainties, many people are perceived to be reluctant to apply and it was therefore important for the research to explore reactions to the terms. Were people happy to become

'volunteers' or would a different positioning of VSO as working through development workers generate a better response?

Attitudes differed significantly between the groups. Whereas Asians were distant from the world of volunteering and formed their perceptions based on remoteness, Blacks had a more informed view based on experiences with volunteers. The picture painted by Blacks and Asians of volunteers, in theory, was not vastly dissimilar to that sketched by Whites. Volunteers were seen as altruistically inclined with passion, compassion and focus on people. They were giving of their time and skills in difficult conditions but received little or no pay for their work.

Whilst Asians concurred with the Black perception of volunteers being 'hippy-like', they did not see them as missionaries. Blacks did identify a missionary zeal with all the attendant image associations. To put it mildly, they reacted to this in a less than positive way. Volunteers were young, White males who were scruffy and unconcerned with their own appearance. Such volunteers combined patronising and almost colonial attitudes with a manner that was racially insensitive (possibly unknowingly). They were seen by some as party animals who were 'having a good time' in the host country. Amateurish, low paid and poorly trained, they did not create an impressive image. Despite this, reactions to their work were positive: the practical skill focus was appreciated. This image of the White volunteer also jarred with their own self-image as Black volunteers: professional, skilled individuals, time pressed, clean and image conscious, although still lacking in pay.

Awareness of development workers, both as a title and as a role, was severely lacking amongst Asian respondents – they were simply not aware of the different job descriptions in the overseas development arena. The White respondents had slightly more awareness but only marginally so. However, for Blacks, development workers had a more defined image. Regarded as creators and doers, they too were White and could be the same people as volunteers in terms of their physical characteristics. But they were differentiated by what they could offer. Older than volunteers, they were perceived to be paid, more skilled, project focused and building sustainable solutions. Their work made a mark on a long-term basis and they were respected.

It is self-evident that the term 'volunteer' did not chime with the Black community: Black voluntary workers were very different in personal profile, attitude and focus to White volunteers. And although the term 'development worker' also suggested a White man, the emphasis appeared to fall on their work rather than their social habits and attitudes. They had something to offer which the community could find useful rather than using the community as a means to further their own ends.

The term volunteer also only resonated to a limited degree with Asian respondents but for different reasons. The negative connotations of volunteer sat uncomfortably against the cultural backdrop of Asian culture. However, there was an indigenous Hindi term that was used which had more positive connotations. Anchored more firmly in the Asian community, 'seva' meant 'to serve' in a religious sense and in a religious setting. Its associations were more positive: traditional, refined, 'cleaner' and selfless. Using this term rather than volunteer, could allow VSO to target this group more effectively. This does, however, raise the issue of relevance to other communities.

Perceptions of Voluntary Organisations and VSO

There were clear discrepancies in awareness and perceptions of voluntary organisations and VSO amongst Asian and Black respondents. Few steps had been taken by the former to investigate voluntary organisations, hence their awareness of VSO was almost non-existent and their knowledge of VSO's work even lower still. This could, of course, work in VSO's favour, as a tabula rasa is a useful starting point. The White audience were much more familiar with VSO having heard of them through friends and relatives, at university or at careers fairs.

Awareness of voluntary organisations (including VSO) was considerably higher amongst Blacks, which was to be expected given the greater sensitivity to voluntary work and its impact in the developing world. Their recall was dominated by the large international aid agencies, charities and voluntary organisations (possibly a consequence of discussions focussing on going abroad). However, perceptions of voluntary organisations were not positive. Through a combination of hearsay and first hand experience, voluntary organisations were seen as large, heavily funded organisations likely to waste money and time.

This negative perception transferred over to their feelings towards VSO. As an organisation VSO was seen to be a 'White club' that existed on the periphery of the host community. The image of VSO volunteers converged neatly with, indeed had been informed by, their feelings towards volunteers in general. There was an incorrect belief that VSO's recruitment policy was restricted to UK passport holders, and so was seen to be inherently biased. Yet, despite this negative reaction, VSO's project work was met with appreciation.

A more informed view of VSO based on real knowledge and understanding of their work and its impact could and had shifted perceptions away from the generic voluntary organisation stereotypes for a few. The net effect of this view was that some Blacks who were interested in becoming volunteers might have chosen VSO. But others were prepared to adopt solo routes where they used community knowledge to go abroad alone and engage in voluntary work. The

challenge for VSO would be to position themselves as the voluntary organisation of preferred choice rather than be selected by default. Greater input from Black and Asian returned volunteers as well as a more targeted publicity drive could also be required to redress the balance.

Reactions to VSO Marketing Materials

VSO marketing literature was not shown to the White and Asian respondents because, at the time, the research was more geared towards the motivations to becoming a volunteer rather than testing communications. The decision to show VSO literature to Blacks yielded more fascinating insights into the workings of this community.

For Black respondents, reactions to VSO marketing materials were mixed. On the one hand, they perceived traditional colonial imagery of Whites helping needy, unskilled Blacks. Many of their negative associations with volunteers, voluntary organisations and VSO were reinforced and translated into powerful emotions. These responses stemmed mainly from the group discussions where feelings escalated.

"It galls me because it seems like it's only White people who are bringing life and happiness into the lives of those poor Black people who know no better." (Afro-Caribbean, North London)

On the other hand, there was also a more accepting, rational sentiment, which focused on the 'technical' content. This view recognised that the literature did convey the range of professions needed and work carried out as well as a mix of ethnic images and different roles, although this was less prominent. These considered responses stemmed from the paired/ depth interviews.

From VSO's point of view, it is worth noting that these materials were never produced for a specifically Black audience. Also one suspects that the Black community (much more so than the Asian) is very sensitive to advertising imagery, which could be vaguely interpreted as colonial and racially insensitive. Although there was actually a mix of ethnic backgrounds in the images, e.g. Chinese people helping Blacks and Indians being helped by White people, some of the Black respondents did not 'see' these. A classic case of theory laden observation, they focused on the images, which their eyes had been accustomed to see.



Figure 2: Images 'Seen' In the Marketing Materials



Figure 3: Images 'Not Seen' In the Marketing Materials

Third, there was the cumulative effect of showing several posters and an array of leaflets. In real life, respondents would never be exposed to such a quantity of literature. The overall consequence of this mixed reaction was that those who were unsure of VSO and did not step beyond the image would be less amenable to considering VSO.

Guidance on Media Strategy

Any media strategy undertaken by VSO needed to take account of the unique cultural heritage of each of the communities.

For Asians, this meant communicating reassuring messages, which appealed to older Asians (i.e. family) and the younger ones who were likely to volunteer. Such messages would have to straddle the older and the younger generations. Asian language media would cater for the former and help establish credibility. English language media would cater for the younger audience and reflect their own media consumption of radio, TV, the Internet, posters, newspapers and magazines. The music and fashion interest of young Asians also pointed towards VSO input into prestigious Asian award ceremonies. The impact of the temple in the local community suggested that this would be an ideal way of targeting both generations of the Asian community – talks and easy access to the Asian grape vine might generate a reasonable response. Additionally, there was spontaneous interest in using endorsements: Asian celebrities could raise awareness and even sustain it providing their motivations and identification with the communities in the developing world was credible.

For the Black community, the media emphasis was different. Language and generational factors were not really an issue. Both Black and mainstream media could be used – this reflects their own media consumption and also meant there was more chance to target those who did not use specific channels.

One point of communications convergence between the two communities could have been through using Black and Asian returned volunteers to discuss their experiences. As returned volunteers had completed a VSO placement, this would have provided the opportunity to air concerns about the work, the role of the volunteer, integration and discrimination issues. When asked about the impact of these meetings, many Blacks claimed they would phone Black or Asian returned volunteers to obtain further information – something they would not do as a result of seeing a poster or leaflet. This insight proved to be invaluable in formulating VSO's marketing campaign and highlighted the need for a more personal approach.

VSO had considered ways to maximise on time and resources by organising functions for both communities jointly. The reality was that this would probably not impress Asian elders. One suspects, racist as it may seem, the thought of sending their offspring away with an organisation that is trying to appeal to a Black audience or that has a Black volunteer base would frighten them – an issue that is not easy to circumvent.

Summary of Key Findings

The key messages from the research for VSO were the different approaches needed to tackle the various communities. These meant not only hooking into their motivations and but also overcoming the barriers to volunteering.

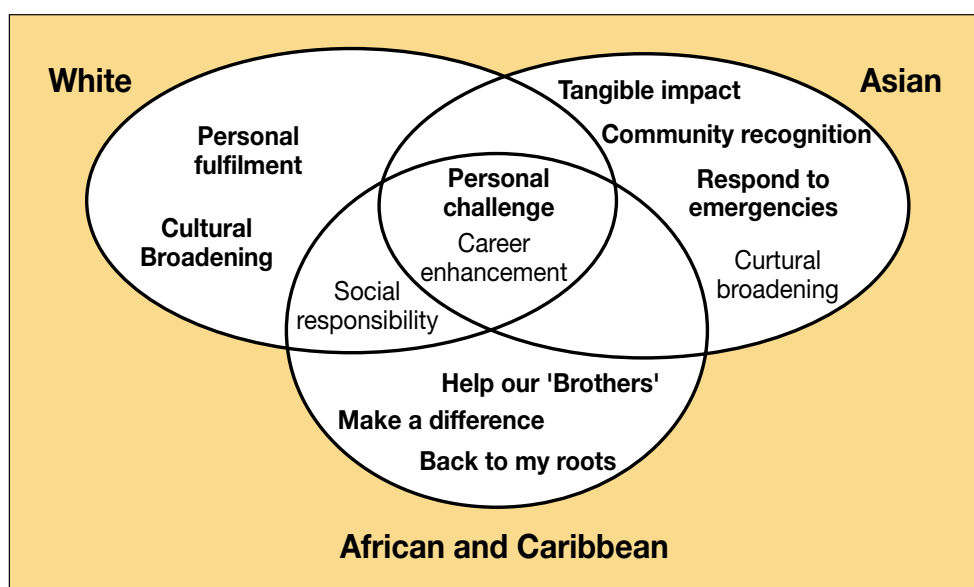


Figure 2: Major Differences in Motivations to Volunteer (NB: Bold indicates key factors.)

White:	Asian:	African/Afro-caribbean:
Barriers can be surmounted	Significant obstacles	Concerted effort needed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family ties • Career • Financial • Qualifications • VSO • Timing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family reactions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - overwhelming • Financial • Career • Personal • Perceptions of volunteer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VSO perceived as 'white' • Financial • Career • Family

Figure 3: Key Barriers to Overcome

Faced with such results, what impact did they have on VSO? What actions were taken?

Actions Developed From The Research

The research gave VSO a sense of realism about the task they faced to attract an ethnically diverse group of volunteers from the UK. It is no simple task to recruit 700 professional people each year to work for two years for no financial gain at the grassroots level in developing countries. The research made it patently clear that ensuring the ethnicity of these individuals accurately reflects the communities from which they are drawn will be a real challenge. This is due not only to the specific aspirations and culture of different Black and Asian groups but also because of the identity and product that VSO currently offers. The highly urban nature of the ethnic population (especially, in London) also meant that VSO could be geographically more specific in their marketing activity.

- Who to focus on – the research findings helped to clarify the target audience for future marketing and communications. Actual and perceived barriers to volunteering were clearly much higher among the Asian sample, compared to the Black audience. The latter related strongly to the concept, even though they evidenced similar concerns about its impact on their career and were unconvinced of VSO's current credibility within the community. As a result, VSO has now chosen to focus its initial strategy on recruitment of African and Afro-Caribbean professionals
- Setting targets for recruitment – VSO decided to set an initial target of 7% of its volunteers drawn from ethnic minorities, which reflects the national average. Within the organisation, this was seen as the minimum acceptable to achieve any credibility in the eyes of both staff (some of whom had questioned the seriousness with which the agenda was being tackled) and external audiences. There remains an argument that since a majority of

volunteers are in fact recruited from London and the south-east of England the percentage target should be closer to 25%, which might more accurately reflect those regional demographics. However, it might equally be argued that the proportion should reflect the percentage of working age adults in minority ethnic communities (i.e. those who could feasibly volunteer). In the end, VSO has chosen to set a target of 7% that they believe is both achievable and sufficiently ambitious to evidence their commitment to diversity

- Building partnerships – given the issue of credibility in the community, VSO communications needed to address not only immediate, direct response marketing but also longer-term brand awareness and partnership building. As in so many fields, there is a real premium placed on long-term commitment among minority communities and their own professional networks. The scepticism that occasionally surfaced in the research is reflected in their close inspection of marketing campaigns to gauge whether they seem like evidence of opportunism and fashion, or a genuine desire to work together. Accordingly, VSO has invested the time of senior staff in establishing a dialogue with targeted networks of Black professionals. There is a partnership emerging with a national network of Black civil servants, which should deliver a secondment scheme in 2002. This clearly responds to VSO's agenda but it also works around the concerns and builds on the ambitions identified in the research: VSO secondments, for example, allow Black staff to prove their ability, enhance their skills, fulfil their personal ambition and do so without risking their hard-won professional status. Similar energy is being devoted to a partnership with a broad-based network of Afro-Caribbean professionals in the financial sector
- Sensitising marketing materials – a range of immediate practical actions have been prompted by feedback from the discussion groups. All VSO publications are now diversity-proofed by a cross-divisional team that meets every quarter to review how they present the organisation. Very quickly, VSO marketing materials have been able to reflect a wider social and ethnic spectrum of volunteers
- Press activity – in public and media relations, VSO has developed a dual strategy, targeting the Black ethnic press in order to build awareness of the brand, while using national media for direct response work. Rather than use concentrated bursts of activity for the ethnic press, VSO's strategy seeks to use it a little and often so as to build long-term organisational credibility. VSO has also sought to introduce a greater number of Black volunteer case studies within features sold into national papers, although it has been sobering to have one seemingly strong case study rejected by a national mid-market newspaper for being somehow 'inappropriate'. In addition, all relevant press materials are now sent consistently to key ethnic media outlets as a means to

generate print and broadcast coverage and build empathy among particularly the Black communities in Greater London

- Events – events and exhibitions have become a key feature of VSO's recruitment strategy, reflecting the importance of face-to-face communication. Every Black careers fair in the UK is now attended: one-off events are organised to present VSO to individual networks and all of these are fronted by Black staff or returned volunteers. This is not only because like any returned volunteer they are the most effective advocates for VSO, but also because they can address why they did it from their own personal experience, what it was like and how it has subsequently enhanced their life and career

It was interesting to observe in the research process how some respondents' opinion shifted through the discussion as they debated the idea of VSO. Many respondents requested VSO information packs at the end of the discussions. International volunteering is not an obvious choice to some people, partly resulting from a lack of knowledge about the work involved, the support offered and the type of people involved. Very often, the more these gaps in knowledge are explored and filled, the greater the interest among enquirers.

The impact of this activity over the last year is beginning to emerge. Existing information management systems have had to be improved to ensure accurate capture of data on ethnic origin. Allowing for this discrepancy, VSO received approximately 243 applications from ethnic minority volunteers during the financial year 2000/01. Already in the first six months of 2001/02, there were 159 applications. While these figures obviously do not yet amount to a long-term trend, they offer an encouraging indication of enhanced performance.

Lessons for Market Research

Actionable findings were an integral part of the VSO research programme. However, from a methodological point of view, there were also areas, which can shed light on mainstream market research.

The Importance of Language

It has long been known that respondents should be encouraged to phrase reactions in their own way, using their own words. The ethnic example described above has simply thrown this into sharper focus. The objections to volunteering demonstrate how language is a crucial tool in communicating thoughts and emotions. Had the research team relied on feedback in English, VSO would have received a different emphasis in the findings and they would not have understood the extent of the family barriers amongst Asians. The philosopher Grondin makes this point aptly when he points out how language is our vehicle to create an image of something.¹⁶ The application of linguistic sensitivity is, of course, much broader. International research is a case in point

where native language speakers are deliberately used to understand the nuances of language and culture. But even when respondents and researchers speak the same language, differences still occur. Picture a middle class researcher exploring non-take up of unemployment benefit amongst White Anglo-Saxons on a council estate in Newcastle. They will need to be aware of linguistic subtleties. When asked to discuss such issues as if conversing with friends, the respondent's local terminology and slang maybe more enlightening than sanitised interviewer speak. Likewise, talking to ABC1 consumers about purchasing ISAs could also benefit from such linguistic sensitivity.

The Use of Ethnically Different Moderators

The debates around moderator's ethnicity are complex and protracted with no clear answer. Issues of matching and its impact on findings have been discussed earlier but reactions to VSO materials beg closer examination. It could be argued that the muted response to VSO marketing materials in the depths was due to the ethnicity of the moderators: the depths were conducted by an Asian moderator and the groups by an African one. However, this could be a tenuous argument. First the Asian moderator sat in the Afro-Caribbean mini-group discussion and probed responses where necessary. Second, the moderator's ethnicity would have taken on a more prominent role if she had been White. We would then have expected more muted reactions.

Furthermore, when asked how they would have felt about images of non-white volunteers (e.g. a Sikh man with a turban or a Chinese man) helping Black people, these were deemed unproblematic. Their chief reason for this was that these non-white volunteers had not been their colonial masters in the past. Evidently, the legacy of political domination and a troubled racial history through colonialism is difficult to erase. Hence use of an Asian moderator probably did not curtail the strength of feeling in the interviews. Viewed in a broader context, the more profound issue at work here revolves around researcher's 'otherness'. How similar or different should researchers be to their respondents? This is also a well-worn debate where the received wisdom argues for some familiarity but not to the degree that researchers 'go native' and overlook incisive questioning and penetrative analysis.

The Arguments for Using Mixed Methodologies

The strong reaction to VSO marketing materials points to a deeper exploration of the value of mixed methodologies. The powerful tide of group energy generated after seeing the VSO leaflets and posters was not caused by any one particular person. It was a collective, conscience provoking response where even the quieter respondents may have felt obliged to climb to the moral high ground and invoke condescension. Indeed, it would have been a very strong character that would have defied the group response. The paired/ depths interviews demonstrated that in an individual, one-to-one environment, in the

absence of group frenzy, responses can be more considered. They can be more receptive to the entire message rather than be overwhelmed by one particular aspect.

As market researchers our main task is to deliver actionable findings to clients and methodological rigour is our mainstay to do this. But, at an everyday level, we are not always sensitised to the impact of methodology on findings. It is well known that groups are not always the best vehicle to test finished marketing literature but the decision to test them was taken at the eleventh hour when the groups had been recruited. The VSO research reiterated the reason for this wisdom. It illustrated how erroneous feedback would have been received had we just tested the marketing materials in group discussions. It also showed how last minute changes have to be handled very carefully and in light of the overall research aims.

Key Learnings

Some of the key learnings from the VSO study can be applied to other research. Many of these are powerful checkpoints en route to transforming insights to action.

Research

- 1 .Adopting a mixed methodology can prevent erroneous feedback generated through reliance on one method of data collection
- 2 .Recognising that language mediates thought and emotion is an important step in true understanding of responses. Expressing response in their own language at critical points in the discussion can reveal powerful insights into the depth of feeling towards a concept or product
- 3 Matching of moderator's ethnicity (or other characteristics) needs to be handled on a case-by-case basis. Although exact matching may not be feasible, 'otherness' and an ethnically sensitive stance are a definite advantage

Ethnic Communities

- 1 .The ethnic community is full of finer distinctions carved along the lines of continent, country/ island of origin, region, religion and language. These distinctions mean it would be unwise to treat them as a homogenous group
- 2 . Political, social and historical legacies from the past can affect reactions and responses to marketing materials and 'the product offering' in research today
3. Those responding to a diversity agenda need to understand how the range of ethnic audiences perceive and respond to their identity and 'product offering'
4. The ability to compare and contrast motivations and response across all ethnic communities not only provides an insight into minority audiences but can also clarify perceptions and relationships with a mainstream White market

- 5 Appealing to a diverse ethnic community can present challenges when it comes to developing a consistent and cohesive marcoms strategy
- 6 A dual time span needs to be considered. In the short-run, direct response activity can be a useful tool for profile enhancement but nurturing long-term partnerships is key in overcoming hesitancy or lack of credibility within the target group

The Way Forward

The VSO case history has amply demonstrated how powerful insights into the target audience can yield sensitive marketing programmes. This is especially pertinent in the case of ethnic audiences where knowledge of the community is sketchy amongst the mainstream marketing and market research community. Combined with the fear of being branded politically incorrect, this has meant that marketing to ethnic communities has been handled with extreme care and kid gloves. Perhaps this isn't such a bad thing, especially if it involves taking a closer look at how to market to White Anglo Saxon audiences too.

The VSO research also indicates that we need to pay more attention to the bigger picture. Traditionally, added value is seen to stem from milking the findings for recommendations. What is not always evident is how much knowledge of the market has been included in the interpretive process - sometimes this isn't very much. It is precisely this broader knowledge that can deliver powerful insights to action. The worth of the VSO study came not only from the empirical findings generated by the research but also from the cultural consultancy of the Asian and African researchers who conducted the research. Their awareness of the wider socio-historical context (for e.g. colonial and migration issues) facilitated deeper understanding of the results and their implications. This 'big picture' is key not only for ethnic research but also for mainstream research be it within fmcg markets or business-to-business research. Greater focus on this kind of extended consciousness of the market can illuminate our use of research. We are then better placed to inform the marketing agenda with a clearer steer on recommendations and actions.

Notes

- 1 Leach, 2001, pg. 42
- 2 Curtis, 2001
- 3 ibid
- 4 Roots of the Future, The Commission for Racial Equality, www.cre.gov.uk/ethdiv/ed-roots.html
- 5 quoted in Singh, 2001, pg. 34
- 6 Emery and Stubbington, 1996, pg. 356
- 7 Baumann, 1996, pg.18
- 8 Van den Berghe, 1975, pg. 73
- 9 Desai and Sills, 1996

10 *ibid*, pg. 82

11 CRE Fact Sheet, Ethnic Minorities in Britain, 1999, pg.1

12 www.statistics.gov.uk/themes/population/articles/ethnic.asp

13 www.statistics.gov.uk/themes/population/articles/ethnic.asp

14 Sharma and Wilde, 2001

15 <http://www.cre.gov.uk.ethdiv/ed-roots.html>, pg. 2

16 Grondin, 1991, pg. 42

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