

Making Sense

A sense-making framework to guide
market and social research

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Who wrote this paper?



This white paper has been written by the Sydney-based researcher Sue Bell who has devised a framework to guide the process of making-sense in social and market research.

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Chapters

Sense-making theory fills a gap	1
Why sense-making?	2
Some examples of sense-making.....	5
How to do sense-making research.....	6
Conclusion.....	10
Want to learn more?.....	10

Sense-making theory fills a gap

Susan Bell Research has developed a 'sense-making' framework for use in qualitative research. Its focus is on 'how people make sense of things' and brings additional insight into why people do what they do, why they experience services the way they do, and why they understand (or misunderstand) the communications they receive.

This 'sense-making' framework fills a gap in qualitative research. By changing the frame through which we approach our research - from the frame of 'consumer decision-making' to a frame of 'how people make things make sense' - we believe we will see more clearly how people use products and services. This in turn will bring new insight to the organisations that provide these products and services.

Sense-making is about how people get things done and move on to the next thing.

The use of a framework gives researchers and clients a shared understanding of how the research is to be conducted. The framework also allows for a broader suite of research tools than more narrowly-focussed theories such as decision-making.

The framework has wide application across consumer decision-making, organisational decision-making, customer experience and communications research.

Why sense-making?

How we experience doing something new

Imagine going to a new shopping centre for the first time, just to check the place out. It is one of the large multi-storey shopping centres common across Australia. Once you have parked your car and made your way into the centre, how will you work out where to go and what to do?

What many people will do is work it out while on the move, walking through the centre, scanning the environment for familiar signs and shops, making sense of what is there and where it is. You walk on, 'getting your bearings', making sense of it all.

At some point, you decide to pop into the Department Store Myer. Calling this a 'decision to go to Myer' is not quite right; you just noticed that you had arrived there, so thought you would go in. It wasn't an instant subconscious automatic decision to go to Myer. It also wasn't an effortful decision. The idea of popping into Myer just came to you.

What you were doing was processing the sensory stimuli all around you partly subconsciously and partly consciously, and then you noticed Myer because you knew Myer and have preconceived ideas about it. Wendy Gordon ¹ calls the low attention you give to your surroundings in cases like this the 'the influence of supraliminal stimuli' where supraliminal means 'above your threshold of awareness'. She equates it with the low attention processing theories of advertising described by Robert Heath.

At Susan Bell Research, we see this as 'sense-making.'² It's a process in which our brains synthesise incoming information and blend it with existing assumptions and beliefs. As you walked through the centre you were making sense of your environment in the context of what you needed to do at the shopping centre and what you knew and thought about the centre already. Sense-making is not a theory about decision-making. It is a theory – a framework really – about how people get things done and move on to the next thing.

The drive to make sense

People instinctively want things to make sense and this is the most important point about sense-making. This means that sense-making is an ongoing activity (unlike 'decisions' which occur now and again)

¹ 1. Gordon, W. Mindframes. Six enduring principles from 50 years of market research.

² Sense-making (or 'sensemaking') theory was developed independently by Karl Weick and Brenda Dervin, for example

We are sense-makers not ‘consumers’

Seeing people as sense-makers is a very different from seeing them as ‘consumers’. If ‘people are consumers’ who are they when they are not consuming anything? The idea seems absurd as if all a person is and does is what they consume. It is risky for researchers and marketers to categorise people in this two-dimensional way as ‘consumers’ because it ignores whole areas of life.

When we see people as sense-makers we see them as people who consume while they are getting on with doing what they want or need to do. From this perspective, people buy and use products and services to help them get on with life, or with their work.

Making sense is:

"a motivated, continuous effort to understand connections (which can be among people, places and events) in order to anticipate their trajectories and act effectively" ³

Why is this different from decision making?

There is considerable evidence to support the dual –processing theories of the mind such as Kahneman’s Thinking Fast and Slow. ⁴ We process some information automatically and act accordingly without necessarily knowing why; while at other times, we consciously make slower considered decisions.

However, when researchers have tried to operationalise how people make conscious decisions, they have assumed that they could ask people to stop whatever it is they were doing, and remove themselves from all forms of stimulus around them. The implicit assumption has been that the relevant decision factors come readily to each person’s mind, since decision-making research questions are usually about ‘given these factors, what will you do?’

When we look at this from a sense-making perspective, we see that the surrounding stimuli - what Wendy Gordon calls ‘supraliminal stimuli.’ ⁵ often help people make decisions during the ongoing sense-making process. In fact rather than ‘make decisions’ in sense-making we would say ‘to get on with doing what they want to do.’

Talking helps us make sense

In the behavioural economics decision-making tradition, researchers have generally dismissed what people say about their decisions as unreliable, saying that people do not recognise the cognitive biases that shaped their decision.

³ Making Sense of Sensemaking 2:A Macrocognitive Model Gary Klein, Brian Moon, and Robert R. Hoffman IEEE Intelligent Systems Vol. 21, No. 5 September/October 2006

⁴ Kahneman, D. Thinking Fast and Slow. Allen Lane

⁵ ibid

In sense-making we take a different approach, arguing that talking about what we just did is how we make sense out of it. This works because sense-making research covers more than cognitive biases. We are interested in what people say to convince themselves in some instances.

Sense-making is emotional

Sense-making is emotional because making sense feels good. Turning that around, 'how we feel' tells us whether something makes sense or not. In that way emotions are not separate from information; they are information.

"Sense-making is about the enlargement of small cues. It is a search for contexts within which small details fit together and make sense. It is people interacting to flesh out hunches. It is a continuous alternation between particulars and explanations with each cycle giving added form and substance to the other." (Weick, 1995, p. 133)

Sense-making is a good thing

Sense-making helps people act efficiently. People make evaluations and decisions "on the fly" based on what makes sense to them at the time from their frame of past experiences, sense of self and the cues in the immediate environment. They don't have to stop in order to think.

On the other hand, sense-making allows people to stop thinking. Once someone feels they have enough information on how to insure their house, for example, they will stop searching even if this is not the optimal decision for them. They stop because their need to make sense of the options has been fulfilled.

But sense-making can lead to inefficiency, flawed decisions and misunderstandings.

As stated above, people seem to have an innate drive to make things make sense. Sometimes though, that means that things go wrong. We find patterns where no patterns exist; we draw conclusions on scant evidence, or start out with the wrong assumptions.

Some examples of sense-making

Scenario 1: When a couple start to think about retirement

The prospect of retirement gradually dawns on many people. Over time, they become exposed to a mish-mash of ideas, points of view and sources of information. They feel uncertain about what to do because everything is new and nothing is certain – how long they will live, how much money they will need... To come to grips with it all, a couple at this stage of life will talk with each other, with other people and with advisers. Their focus will mainly be on the present: ‘what should we do now?’ not the unknowable future. Ultimately, the couple start to see an emerging pattern in the information and ‘make a decision’. The process that these pre-retirees go through to get to their final decision is sense-making, regardless of the decision made.

Scenario 2: Sense-making in an organisation

Organisational life is full of moments of ambiguity and uncertainty and the notion of sense-making can add significant insight to how the organisation defines the situation. In this scenario, a company has been called to account by the industry regulator for a long-held practice. For the regulator, the situation is clear cut because the practice has been banned. Company executives on the other hand believed that what they were doing was commercially sound and fair - they had done this many times in the past with no apparent problem. It was also important to them to ‘stand up’ to the regulator to assert their own identity as a successful industry player. The company executives made sense of this situation by conceptualising the regulator as inexperienced “in the real world”. Once they defined the situation this way, it became impossible for them to submit willingly to the regulator’s demand, so penalties had to be applied. The company executives had made sense of the problem in a way that became a barrier to them doing anything about it.

How to do sense-making research

A sense-making framework for research

Susan Bell Research has developed a sense-making framework to guide our market and social research. The components of the framework can be seen in the diagram below.



Key concepts within this framework are:

- People come to experiences with a pre-existing frame of reference. Their minds are not a blank slate. People use this frame to guide what they perceive, think and do. They also continue to modify this frame throughout their experience. Cultural values form part of this frame. For example, fairness is one of Australia's key cultural values. When Australians encounter unfamiliar or complex situations, they often ask themselves 'is this fair'?
- We don't make sense of things alone. We watch what others do or talk to them about what they are doing. Talking helps us review and evaluate.
- Making sense feels good. When we are in unfamiliar or confusing situations we feel bad. This keeps the sense-making drive going.
- We are surrounded by sensory stimuli all the time but our brains cannot process all the stimuli accurately. So we notice some cues and not others, and amplify those that seem most relevant based on our frame of reference.
- Among these cues we see patterns or connections automatically even when there is insufficient evidence to do so.

- Self-identity drives what we do next. Sense-making is all about ‘what should I do next?’ It is not an objective evaluation of the facts. Fundamentally it is about ‘me’ and as such is often emotional.

Conducting research from a sense-making perspective

The characteristics of sense-making research are:

- It is qualitative
- It uses the ‘think aloud’ protocol
- It is contextual.

Sense-making allows people to stop thinking.

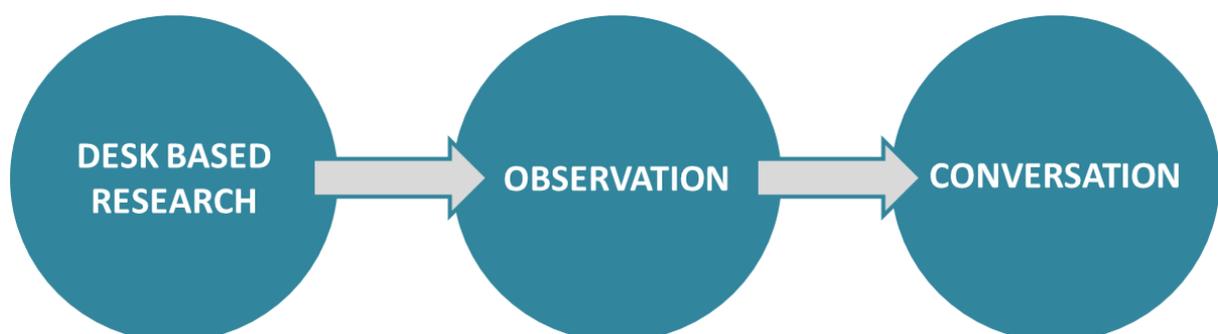
From a market / social research perspective, sense-making is useful for clients and researchers who are interested in how people make sense of:

- Communications
- Concepts
- Products
- Service experiences
- Stakeholder relationships
- Ethical dilemmas
- And more

It seems particularly useful for research about people facing complex or unfamiliar situations, whether those people are ‘consumers’ or employees.

The sense-making research process

While individual projects will differ, the broad process is usually:



Cultural norms and assumptions influence everyone’s behaviour, so first of all we conduct relevant desk-based research.

We follow this with observation and then have a conversation with our research participants about their past, their sense of self, and how they made sense of their experiences.

The Sense Making Process

Organisational life is full of moments of ambiguity and uncertainty.

This conversation may be in the form of an individual interview, paired interview or group discussion, as relevant for the project objectives. Susan Bell Research recognises that interview-or group-based qualitative research has been subject to criticism in recent years. In our view this criticism is well-founded when researchers tried to ask people about things they could not possibly know, for example 'how many times have you seen this commercial?', or 'how important was this factor in your decision?' However, in our sense-making conversations we ask people about things that only they can know what is going on in their conscious minds and what that means for their sense of self. We expect them to be making sense of it as they talk.

Some people succeed at tasks that others fail at because they made sense of the situation in a particular way. Part of our analysis therefore is to identify the skills of successful sense-makers so these can be taught or demonstrated to people whose instinct is to use a less successful strategy. We use discourse analysis and narrative analysis as our analysis tools.

Conclusion

Sense-making research starts with the premise that people use products and services to help them get on with their lives. In taking this wider view, sense-making research gives a more complete picture of how people buy and use products and services than other forms of research. Changing the frame from 'consumer decision-making' to a frame of 'how people make things make sense' - helps us see more clearly how people use products and services. Indeed, it explicitly seeks to explore areas of life that many researchers deliberately ignore.

Talking is how we make sense out of things.

The use of a framework gives researchers and clients a shared understanding of how the research is to be conducted. The framework also allows for a broader suite of research tools than more narrowly-focussed theories such as decision-making.

The framework has wide application across consumer decision-making, organisational decision-making, customer experience and communications research.

Sense-making research is qualitative in nature, and combines desk-based research, observation and conversation. The results can be quantified.

Want to learn more?

If you would like us to help you use sense-making for greater insight contact Sue Bell on:

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