

# Do Something New: Getting Respondents on Their Feet

Gary Hirsch and Robert Poynton explain how to use improvisational theater techniques to gather consumer insights in a fun way that engages both the brain and body.

BY GARY HIRSCH

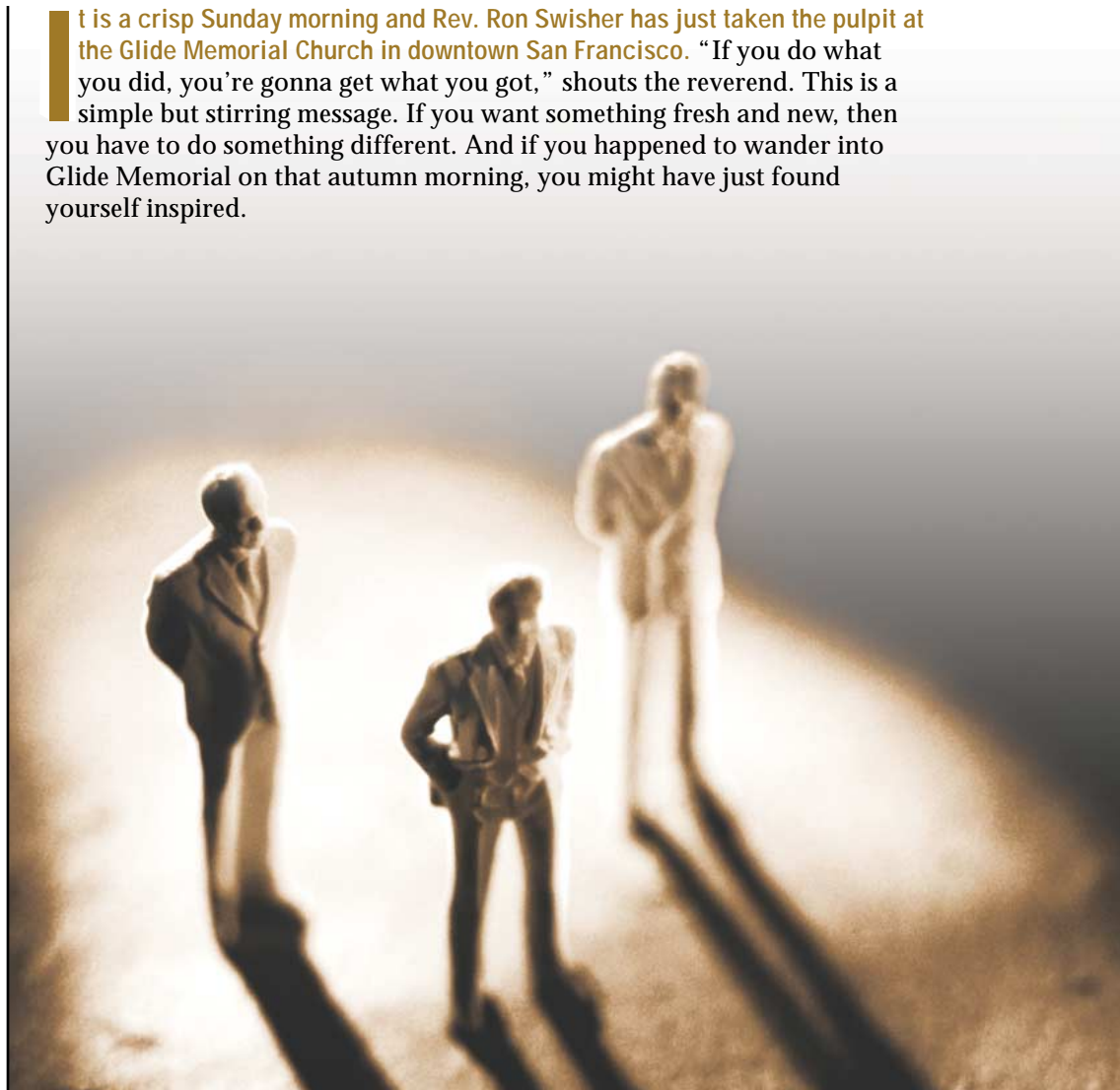
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It is a crisp Sunday morning and Rev. Ron Swisher has just taken the pulpit at the Glide Memorial Church in downtown San Francisco. “If you do what you did, you’re gonna get what you got,” shouts the reverend. This is a simple but stirring message. If you want something fresh and new, then you have to do something different. And if you happened to wander into Glide Memorial on that autumn morning, you might have just found yourself inspired.

At its essence, improv is about creating active stories. Stories can tell you far more about your brand identity than mission statements or brand values.



There are times when the study you are working on demands that you go beyond simply identifying if something is right or wrong. There are projects where the client is looking for really fresh insights and perceptions. At these times, let the words of Rev. Swisher ring loud in your ears. Do something different!

Try this simple exercise: Cross your arms. Now cross them the other way, folding your arms in reverse. Was that effortless and easy? Check to make sure you actually folded them the other way. Did you hesitate and make a conscious effort to check that your arms were folded differently the second time? Did the second folding feel strange and unnatural?

Routines and habits such as having a preferred way to fold your arms can be a good thing. They provide short cuts and predictability. They can also, however, leave you thinking, “We have been here before.”

In your work you may find that the same solutions, ideas, and questions keep emerging. If you fall back on habit and routine, there is a good chance your competitors probably do, too. So if nothing else, finding new ways of working can be a competitive advantage.

What can moderators do to do something different in groups? For starters, you might want to try getting people out of their chairs.

### The Way We Think

We think with our entire bodies. There is burgeoning scientific research to back this up. Read *Molecules of Emotion* by Candace Pert, about the importance of the body in thought and feeling by the woman who discovered endorphins.

We have all made decisions that were rooted somewhere other than just our minds, for example, the gut. When Fred Smith, the founder of FedEx, was in college he wrote an economics paper that detailed the workings of a radical idea, an overnight delivery service. He received a C on that paper, but ignored the low grade and carried on because his gut told him otherwise.

Getting respondents on their feet creates an opportunity for the thinking to emerge from elsewhere. It is worth trying, especially if you are looking for unfiltered ideas and perceptions.

### Serious Fun

It can be extremely fun to be around people who are up and moving, physically responding to ideas and scenarios that encourage them to think on their feet and respond in the moment.

Your efforts, and those of your clients and respondents, should feel like time well spent. Time is going to pass regardless—having fun can help. In addition, studies show that when we are having fun we produce different



neuro-chemicals in our brains that help stimulate new connections. When we are relaxed and playing we have a variety of different ideas.

### Improvisation As a Method

Recently a large UK retailer wanted to understand how their brand values could inform store design. For example, the retailer valued being helpful. How could they express this through the layout and design of their retail space? They wanted to communicate these values through action.

Improvisation proved to be a great method for exploring this question. Improv, as a theatrical art, is incredibly challenging because the performers have no rehearsal time, no budget, and no plan. They have to create on-the-spot stories for an expectant audience. To thrive under these conditions, improvisers must draw on all of their resources—mind and body.

At its essence, improv is about creating active stories. Stories can tell you far more about your brand identity than mission statements or brand values. Words such as honesty, service, and integrity are commonplace in today's corporate environment. These words have become placeholders for a vast array of behaviors and meanings.

By encouraging your study participants to interpret these words into actions you and your client will make many new discoveries. For instance, you might discover that these words mean different things to different people. Some consumers may appreciate being asked, "Can I help you?" while others may find it intrusive. You can discover new actions to reinforce the values (e.g., displaying a site map on the floor of every aisle in the store). You can also discover existing actions that directly contradict the values (e.g., it is not helpful to display all of the heavy items at the back of the store because customers have to drag them to the check-out counter).

### Away We Go

We recruited groups of 10 consumers by asking one simple question: "Do you like to play charades?" Our goal was to find people who were happy to be up, moving, and

perhaps even acting a little ridiculous in front of each other. We decided on a non-traditional venue, making the sessions three hours long, configuring the room as a large open space, and personally greeting folks as they came in to build a quick relationship with everyone in the room—including the client who participated actively in the sessions.

If you had peeked into the session about an hour into the process you would have seen people up and moving around, creating action lists, and playing out scenarios. They weren't concerned with creating theater or being clever, witty, or even funny. They were exploring values such as honesty, helpfulness, and integrity with both brain and body in a safe space that was more about discovery and less about judgment.

### The Risk of Play

To warm up, we needed an activity that was fast, physical, and fun. We chose Enemy Defender, a high-energy game in which each participant secretly nominates an enemy and a defender. Participants are instructed to move so that the defender is between them and their enemy at all times. There is no time to evaluate or decide, players just commit and watch what happens.

Enabling groups to play requires sensitivity. As adults we are usually skeptical and nervous about anything unknown and unusual. As we have all experienced, it is not easy for grownups to play. We want to know the reason for this ridiculous expenditure of energy. We wonder, "What is the value proposition?" To transition participants from this mindset to an environment of play, it is helpful to make the anxiety in the room visible: "Since you know that this session involves improvisation, you are probably filled with one of two emotions: fear or dread." Simply making these feelings explicit helps your audience feel recognized and looked after, and they will be less apt to object for the sake of being seen.

### Trawling the Idea Lake

Early on in our work, we discovered that when people are walking and talking it often short circuits the filters that they instinctively employ to come up with the "right" answer. This is best illustrated by Idea Lake, an

exercise that quickly makes visible the experiences and perceptions that exist in the room around a certain topic. In Idea Lake participants meander about the space responding out loud, all at the same time, to questions posed by the facilitators. For example, for the value of “helpfulness” we may ask a series of questions that include:

- Describe someone you know who is helpful.
- What do you like/dislike about helpfulness?
- If there were a super hero called Helpful Girl, what would her super powers be?
- If you decorated your living room in the theme of “helpful” what would it look like?

Participants respond to each question in unison. It is chaotic, loud, and seemingly pointless since the room is full of voices and no one can hear anyone else. This exercise is not pointless, however, because by moving

around and talking to the ether, participants have filled the room up with ideas, and even more importantly everyone has something to say about every question. The issue now is that we need to tease out the individual ideas from the lake to make sense of the group download. We do this in the second part of the game, again using mind and body. The group stands in a semi-circle and the participants speak one at a time. Someone steps forward and speaks out loud about the subject in question, drawing from the answers they have just given. Participants are encouraged to interrupt and cut each other off when they want to say something.

Clayton: “Helpful Girl would be able to read your mind and help without asking. She...”

(Someone else steps forward.)

Helga: “Crayola crayons are helpful because they give you lots of color choices at your fingertips...”



This is not a conversation. These are fragments of ideas about the topic, the actual answers to the questions posed in the first part of the game. This entire section is recorded on the greatest invention of the last century, the giant, Post-It™ flip chart. The end result is walls filled with new and different ideas, perceptions, and juxtapositions—all generated in about 15 minutes.

### Other Improv Games Involving Mind and Body

**Fast Food Stanislavski:** An exercise used to translate language such as brand values (e.g., integrity) into new and concrete actions for the client to explore. Participants create action lists about the value of interest as applied to a random occupation. In particular they are asked “How would you know [the value in question] if you saw it?” For example, how would you know if a bus driver valued integrity? They then list all of the actions they might observe. These actions are then translated to the area of interest.

**What Comes Next:** This technique utilizes the group as a director and allows them to give detailed input to every aspect of a scenario by asking the question “What Comes Next?” at each key beat of the story.

**The Airline Game:** An exercise that makes visible differences in meaning by playing out a common story structure for a brand (e.g., “Intel Airlines”) or a brand value (e.g., “Refreshing Airlines”).

### What Do You Get?

So, three hours of improv-based exercises have passed and folks are a little sweaty and out of breath. The room is plastered with ideas and

there is still residual laughter filtering through the space. But what do you get? Well, in this case, the client discovered that helpfulness and honesty are values that need time and repetition to be credible in the mind of the consumer. Changing the space and layout too frequently played against this. In other instances we have seen clients discover that the values of innovation and reliability can be at odds with each other when expressed through action. Or that a brand value like “tantalizing” can be expressed through the action of package design.

But that’s not all. Employing both brain and body, while not always easy and perhaps not for everyone or every situation, is hugely rewarding. Not only does it generate new ideas, it builds relationships. Through this process we discovered that it is possible for two different species of human beings (consumers and clients) to co-habit the same space on an equal footing and participate equally.

### Adventure and Safety

Keith Johnstone, one of the seminal figures of improvisation theory, explains, “There are those who prefer to say ‘yes,’ and those who prefer to say ‘no.’ Those that say ‘yes’ are rewarded by the adventures they have. Those that say ‘no’ are rewarded by the safety they attain. There are far more no-sayers than yes-sayers.”

If you and your client are interested in the adventure, if you want your research to be more fun for you and your participants, if you are looking to tap more than just the filtered thoughts generated from the brain, then using methods that incorporate both brain and body is a good place to start. 