

Blind Vision (2004 remix).

Or why “research” is *still* important,
“insight” often an exaggeration,
and communication the key.

By Myles Runham (client) and
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Abstract:

Blancmange.... this pop band’s 1983 single inspired our title, highlighting that we believe research to be VERY important – especially in illuminating and aiding better decisions. Our 2004 version mixes together two potentially contrasting viewpoints (client and agency), examining the industry today - especially the way we operate, talk and ultimately how research is bought, sold and valued. The paper is discursive, experiential and maybe confrontational (especially regarding the term ‘*insight*’) - yet the two authors together conclude some important points on communication, relationships and how research can be ‘*maximised*’.

*Blind Visions, and no reasons, no reasons for actions*¹.



Fig 1: Blancmange, 80’s pop band
(not Myles and Darren!)

Why this paper? Why now?

Before we start to describe our opinions and beliefs, let us explain why we thought we would write this paper. We have been working together for over two years now as buyer and supplier (and neither of us are industry newbies either, having both worked in research for well over 10 years each).

Early on it was clear to us that our working relationship was different to others, as we quickly agreed on and signed long-term contracts or partnerships for the supply of research services. The buyer believed in forming partnerships rather than on/off relationships, and the supplier was keen to form a long-term association that would benefit both parties.

However, lately the buying point at the client firm has changed, and the relationship or partnership weakened due to new personnel and different perspectives or expectations; although we continued talking. This led to an analysis from both sides on the pro's and con's of our working relationship, highlighting some subtle yet important differences in our understanding of various terms, our expectations for research operations and deliverables and how we each value research. We thought that we would share all this with you.

As an aid to connection and engagement (at least for the authors!), as well as understanding, we use the lyrics from the Blancmange pop hit from 1983, *Blind Vision*. We will use these as stimulus for the title, and for our final conclusions. Full lyrics can be found in the appendices, for those interested (-:

So herein we compare, contrast and summarise our views on service levels, terminology/semantics, expectations and ways to maximise propensity for insight or action. To start, we compare how an agency might cost, and a buyer might value, any commissioned research.

ROI: Putting a value on research

Is the project value worth more than the sum of the invoices?

Let us begin this section by introducing a concept we will later return to; that **data and facts can be valuable, useful and indeed vital – *without* the need for added value or insight.** This fact can be best summarised in reverse (or as in fig 2), i.e. that ignorance is free but this lack of knowledge can seriously cost a business. In other words, not collecting data or doing research, or absorbing or digesting data/research, can lead to a worse position than if you do. Now this might seem obvious common sense, but this keeps evaluations of research in check and serves to set expectation levels (why seek insight, when information will do?). It also neatly summarises the lowest common denominator definition of value for both authors, and helps to support the title of this paper.

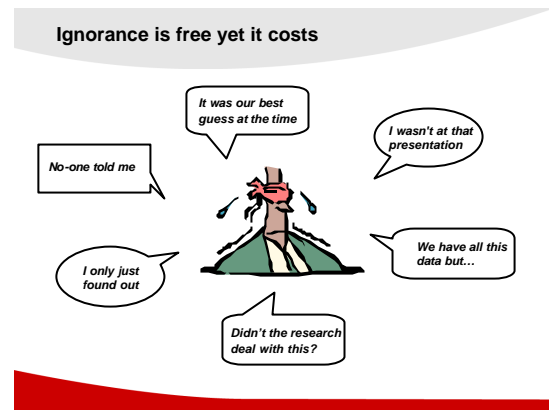


Fig 2: One way to 'value' research

But when we considered the value of a project, we naturally had some different viewpoints (as client and agency), although not perhaps as many as you might think. In terms of putting a price on any research, the *agency* can cost in three main ways:

- *direct costs plus margin/profit*
- *direct costs plus project hours plus margin/profit*
- *direct costs plus chargeable hours (for consultancy, etc.)*

The choice of method might depend on the consultancy emphasis, or traditions maintained within the business. A third way does exist, that is *value-based costing*. This is rare as it tries to guesstimate the commercial value of the information or advice to the client. In practice, only when a budget might perhaps be known to be large and a good relationship in place, negating competitive bidding, might such a costing be used (and whether this is right is open to interpretation or question).

On the other hand, a client has three perhaps over-lapping ways to *assess or evaluate* the value of any research:

- *the price paid*
- *the assessment and reactions of colleagues*
- *and the utility of the information or advice received.*

To this client author the measure of that utility, or the test of it, is the *action taken* as a result of receiving it. In other words, this could be *how effective and/or stimulating it is*.

This is basically subjective, and explains why it is so difficult to assess value on the client side. Difficult questions a client might ask himself in order to value any project might be:

- How much financial impact can be attributed to research when the value is in (subjective) “effectiveness”, or “stimulation”?
- How much cost can be shared amongst budget holders (a petty but important internal point!) hence increasing or decreasing the value?
- and over what period of time can these changes/activities be measured?

Hence, although it is accepted that data and information have value without insight (see fig 3), putting an exact monetary value on all of the information, advice and stimulus that research brings is in this client’s view impossible.

So then, back to where we began, perhaps a simpler or more pragmatic means to determining or observing *value* should instead be used? As we know, this client author is clear in his mind that *facts, data or information* that are useful or vital to business decisions and operations need not be insightful to be valuable [this client instead believes that insight should mostly be generated or derived internally – see later]. The pragmatic view is hence then that data has *intrinsic* commercial value. Facts or measurements from internal or external sources are then, at the very least, the hygiene factors providing the platform for decision-making. For this client (the online search engine, Ask Jeeves UK), such data might include user log files, sales data, as well as *commissioned information* from external sources - including advertising tracking and performance measures.

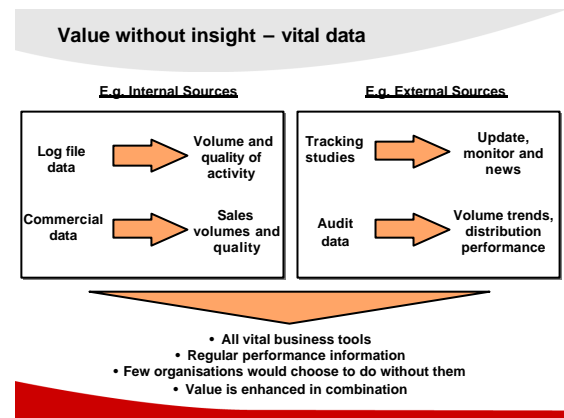


Fig 3: Vital data is naturally valuable

On the other hand, *the agency* will always seek to obtain a nother (simpler) measure of success (i.e. how the client valued the research) for any project through a post evaluation with/from the client (maybe a quick chat or a more formal customer satisfaction survey). This serves to both reassure the agency as well as give guidance for future improvements. The point being, if the client is happy (or at least indicates satisfaction) then the project/research might likely to be deemed successful. However, the matter should perhaps more pointedly be that *effectiveness* is the higher goal than client satisfaction. To this end, this client author always welcomes ongoing discussions that debate and openly evaluate any research, as he believes that it is through these debates that value may ultimately derived – i.e. through improved communication, information, decision-making and by definition more effective research. This should not be forgotten.

So then, although client and agency’s may value research somewhat differently, we do both agree on two things: clear effective communication through continual open debating, plus expectation-setting through clear briefing, specification and definitions. However, in examining such definitions might it just be that one client or researcher’s *effective information* is another’s *insight*...?

Terms of abuse, terms of endearment, or terms of reference?

In talking and analysing we realised that although we share a common basic understanding of the industry and its language, there are terms like *field&tab* and *insight* that highlight some subtle yet extremely important differences or misunderstandings – both in terms of meaning and perhaps more importantly in terms of expectations. Let's take a look at a few of these terms.

Full Service

Originating perhaps from Full Service Advertising agencies, from this client's perspective 'Full Service' is a misnomer for a research firm. The research agency might believe they can provide a full service and help the client in ANY way, but the client might just see this as a 'full research service' and not a full *business* service. The point being whatever the agency may know, they do not know as much about the business and its circumstances as the internal management team. And the agency should not pretend to!

On the other hand, the focus of the definition from the agency point of view might be based around research processes and steps - and the outcomes of those steps.

From this client's view these research outputs become inputs to the business processes and decisions that the research is commissioned to be applied to. From this perspective there is no such thing as a full service (i.e. to implementation) – even the management consultants can't quite get to it as the decision making can't be a part of a service offered – it has to be owned within the client business. There can be a full agency service, and this would be an engagement or project which calls on all of the expertise and resources that the agency can bring to bear (Full Service might indeed just mean Qual and Quant). But the ownership of the business decision will always be with the client.

Sympathising with this view, the agency author might also add that the term is nowadays not especially stimulating or even meaningful. *Full service* does NOT guarantee any particular value to the client. To this end the word *consultancy* is much more in use than ever before, as with *added value* and *insight*, and these may for now be the best alternatives or supplements to our industry dictionary. We tackle the term *insight* shortly. For now let's compare full service with the other main research 'product', *field&tab*.

Field&tab

From the agency perspective, this would be understood as (or perhaps hoped to be) an execution-only service. A fieldwork, questionnaire and analysis specification would be provided and this project or service would be performed on behalf of the paying firm. This is important as it allows the fieldwork and data processing to be undertaken most efficiently with minimal management input, and hence lower project costs can be charged to the client. However, from experience the client might perceive (wish?) this term to indicate the deliverables only (i.e. the emphasis on the 'tab' or the data from the research) and almost treat this purchase as a commodity (rather than a service).

An example of where problems might arise with this (mis)understanding follow. One case is where a sample size, questionnaire length, and analysis spec are provided, but not the full questionnaire design. In talking with the client, it is clear they would require some (expert) help here. However, the agency can see that the questionnaire design will have a direct impact on the fieldwork and processing and so are hesitant to commit to a final 'field&tab' cost until the questionnaire is designed (although the client requests this). But the client

buyer is reluctant to pay an hourly rate for questionnaire design when quoted separately, given its perceived high cost (relative to the 'field&tab'). Catch 22.

Hence, we might argue that the term *field&tab* is not helping here but hindering understanding and communication between client and agency. There is no doubt a difference between agency-purchased field&tab and client-purchased field&tab. Sensible and experienced practitioners will be aware of this, and so differentiated offerings and even pricing can be used for the two. But the problems in communication and expectation again can only be overcome where there is a clear common understanding or detailed specification to the point of delivery, most often data, tables (or analysis?).

Analysis

This is indeed another term for definition. What is sometimes described as 'analysis' may actually just be the production of information from data, which can then be analysed. The data is the raw responses from the survey, the information is the tabulation of that data into a filtered and organised structure. The analysis is in fact the *interrogation and comparison and interrelationship of that information* – e.g. rates of penetration, segments, types etc. Viewed in this way, (good) analysis is the production of *research findings and advice* using the data gathered as evidence.

And so there is again room for confusion. Equally, we might point out that a research finding might not be insight (see later), it may just reiterate or confirm findings from other sources or projects – or indeed common sense. But maybe the common outcome of any research is information?

Information

A dictionary definition of *information* follows:

1. Knowledge derived from study, experience, or instruction.
2. Knowledge of specific events or situations that has been gathered or received by communication; intelligence or news.
3. A collection of facts or data: *statistical information*.
4. The act of informing or the condition of being informed; communication of knowledge: *Safety instructions are provided for the information of our passengers*.
5. Computer Science. Processed, stored, or transmitted data.
6. A numerical measure of the uncertainty of an experimental outcome.

It refers to both the derivation, deduction or creation of knowledge as well as a group of facts and even data. In other words, even this term has the capacity for ambiguity and misunderstanding when used in the research space. There are obvious levels for the term information, from the "understood and accepted" (e.g. from a presentation) to the "collected but not synthesised" (perhaps tabulations).

But what is it 'to be informed'? Is it to receive and understand information about a subject that you previously did not have? Or 'to be well informed'? Is this to have a grasp of all of the relevant information about an issue? Is that having *insight*, an understanding of the inner nature? We are in agreement that information builds towards knowledge, but is no guarantee of insight.

Insight

Now we are sure everyone is aware of the increasing use of this term, notwithstanding within the research environment. However, do you really know the true meaning of this term? And do you really believe it is something that research can deliver, every time? Let's see what the dictionary says about it..

A dictionary definition of insight:

- *“the power or act of seeing into a situation”*
- *“the act or result of apprehending the inner nature of things or of seeing intuitively”*
- *A grand theme of truth, knowledge, vision.*

So, with that in mind, how much research really delivers this magical or mystical insight? And how much should we expect it to? And do you need research to have insight?

What is Insight?

1. The capacity to discern the true nature of a situation; penetration.
2. The act or outcome of grasping the inward or hidden nature of things or of perceiving in an intuitive manner.

= ? (nearest a research agency can get?)

Knowledge/advice based on accurate evidence generated through relevant clever analysis of (new/all) data and applied in combination with existing knowledge of the product/market to the business needs/objectives

NB: insight does NOT need (new) data/information
But this is the basis of Market Research and differentiates us

Fig 4: What is Insight?

Well, from a research agency perspective, the question might become: what can we do to best guarantee insight is delivered, if at all? In reality this still as ever boils down to strict quality processes and good people – and maybe a bit of *“intelligent effort”* (the service industry equivalent of elbow grease). This agency author would like to say the closest he thinks an agency can come to insight, or another definition of insight, or perhaps more appropriately research output would (in length) be:

- *“Knowledge/advice based on accurate evidence generated through relevant clever analysis of (new/all) data and applied in combination with existing knowledge of the product/market to the business needs/objectives”.*

This is what is used as the definition of “research output” within SKOPOS UK, and how we aim to provide effective information for our clients.

In fact, to say an agency can guarantee insight is we would suggest a fallacy, or even an untruth, given the true definition of ‘insight’ as an understanding of the inner nature of things. Take the analogy of pure scientific research. Even then the guarantee of world-changing breakthroughs in understanding are never given, just hypotheses tested and theories developed. Occasionally a eureka moment occurs, but the only credible structure to

maximising the propensity for these to occur is rigour, standards, good practice and effort. The same should be true for market research.

Indeed we would argue that **the quest should be for Useful or Effective Information**, rather than Insight. Also we would put forward that Insight is an accumulation of knowledge and consistent application of information over a fair amount of time – rather than the generic result of one project.

To this end this client author concludes that insight should be held WITHIN a business, that it can be best generated and more importantly accumulated by internal client-based staff, but that agencies can be extremely useful in generating, stimulating or directing insight through the supply of good research, effective information and advice.

Finally, the agency author would add that agencies are there to provide stimulation or input for business decisions, and this might be through the supply of vital information, good advice, interactive sessions, or maybe sometimes even insight. Indeed, the term *Insight* is in fact commonly utilised by this agency author and his business for two main reasons. The first is that the emphasis in communications is on the value (or benefits) of the deliverables, rather than the process of research itself. Also the term Insight helps to ensure that researchers working on a project strive for an ultimate goal that is there to ensure effective information.

By aiming high the propensity for providing valuable effective information is increased.

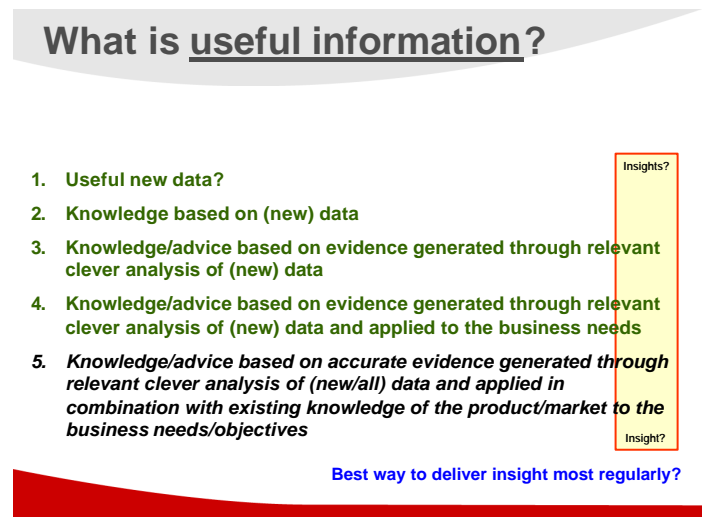


Fig 5: Useful Information and Insights v Insight

Insights v Insight

However, although perhaps a matter of semantics, we might offer that even though it is hard to guarantee Insight with any single project, it is possible for research to produce ‘*insights*’, as we believe a common understanding of the plural is a simpler ‘*facts*’. However, the emphasis in terms of value may have to be on *new* or *useful* insights, rather than just facts, more facts or more insights. In fig 5 we describe a spectrum of information, from facts and insights through to useful information – or the best guarantee of insight.

Again though, if we accept the plural but question the singular – does this not create the possibility for more confusion? Is the Customer Insights department the same as Customer Insight department? Certainly the latter has the capacity to be more valuable we believe as the emphasis is on the utilisation of information, rather than plain facts.

Summary

In discussing these terms and the industry, of most distinction was the mutual discovery that all these terms have ambiguity and can often be expressed on continuums or spectrums, rather than as distinct exclusive and commonly understood terms. This has clear ramifications for the briefing and selling of research. We might conclude that **explicit communication** will help, but this is actually quite difficult to achieve in practice – but a worthy process to try, by both sides, nonetheless. Ultimately, we are both in agreement that the true definition of insight is somewhat mystical and magical (when applied to research information) – and to guarantee its provision may be an overstatement. It might be equated to searching for the *holy grail* or *golden nuggets* of information with one attempt (and this agency author in fact can cite several occasions where such deliverables have actually been verbally briefed!). Hence, **reality and pragmatism** has to form one of the criteria for research specification and sales (true insight just isn't possible with a single project or on every occasion).

We also believe that there is a semantic difference between insights (facts) and insight (inner nature of a situation) and these need to be carefully considered when briefing, selling or managing research. The latter, we agree, is very hard to guarantee – although there are steps that can be and are taken to maximise the propensity for insight to be possible (or at the very least for valuable effective information to be provided).

However, ultimately the authors agree that if there is a connection, understanding and clear communication, whatever the terms used the results will be good.

Finally, to return to a point from earlier, it is the utility or the actions taken (or not taken) that ultimately determine the value of research so let's try to remember what action is (see fig 6). And then let's look at a pertinent case study involving the two authors.

What is Action?

1. The state or process of acting or doing: *The medical team went into action.*
2. Something done or accomplished; a deed. *vb to act*
3. Organized activity to accomplish an objective: *a problem requiring drastic action.*
4. The causation of change by the exertion of power or a natural process: *the action of waves on a beach; the action of a drug on blood pressure.*

The result of new and motivating data/information/advice/knowledge/insight

Fig 6: What is Action?

A Case in Point : Ask Jeeves Site Re-Design 2003

An Evaluation of success and value

The project:

Summer of 2003 – redesign of the Ask Jeeves results page

Objectives:

Improve user experience – satisfaction scores

Introduce new technologies/tools

'Rationalise' commercial product set & increase revenues

The internal project team – derived from nearly all Ask Jeeves business units

Product Development

Sales

Business development

Technology

Research

Marketing

Description

This particular project from last year 2003 (see fig 7) was crawling in research and information, from the project objectives through to the tracking of performance. Internal information sources described the problem and informed the objectives, honed with experience from U.S.-based sister sites and a close inspection of competitor offers.

The Solution Development Phase (II) required a close agency partnership (a user interface specialist). This agency was brought in from the setting of project objectives onwards and briefed on the business needs as well as the resources needed to turn around findings rapidly. A weekly schedule of prototype tests was agreed with informal 24 hour feedback to the project team followed by weekly findings reports. Favoured options were tested further amongst focus groups (with PC/web access).

The third phase – post launch – was more quantitative, relying on measuring effects and changes in user behaviour and perception. The SKOPOS online consumer panel (SKOPOS Euro-Panel™) was used heavily at this point to define, refine and apply satisfaction measures, rate site design impacts and benchmark against competitors.

Evaluation

At the time this process was thought to have worked well. Now, whilst this is still believed to be true, it is agreed that had SKOPOS been made more familiar with prior phases and existing findings (or insights?) as with the User Interface agency, there would have been even greater value delivered from a better brief and sharper communication of both needs and expectations. This is the responsibility of the client as a requisite step in stewarding insights, but SKOPOS also could have questioned the brief more and requested more of the existing information.

If these steps had been taken, the client and agency believe the insight would have been improved and maximised. Nonetheless, valuable information and effective research was provided and improvements made to subsequent research in order to continually increase the propensity for effective information or insight.

A case in point

The research:

Setting objectives	Developing the solutions	Monitoring the outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Site usage logs• Competitor intelligence• User feedback• US site inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prototype testing<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paper/conceptual• 'Live'• Focus groups• Modelling of effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Site usage logs• Site surveys• Panel surveys• User feedback• US site inputs

Part of the business to assess
progress



Fig 7: Ask Jeeves UK Case Study

Ways to maximise propensity for insight - or indeed action

So then. What have Ask Jeeves and SKOPOS learnt from our debates, discussions and from working together - that we can pass on ?

And knowing that insight or maybe action is the ultimate goal of any research project, be it explicit or implicit - how can any buyer and supplier go about ensuring or maximising the likelihood for this to be a result?

Well we would conclude:

- *It is very difficult if at all possible to commission true market or consumer insight, as research may be just one part of the information mix – or insight may need time to accumulate*
- *It is dangerous for an agency to promise true insight as part of a project delivery*
- *Evaluation of research and insight/s will be easier to assess after the event and once applied to the business problem*

But we both agree that agencies can guide insight and provide effective stimulating information and advice. They do this by:

- *Narrowing the options*
- *Concentrating the client on the steps ‘beyond information’ and after the analysis*
- *Guarantee client confidence in the information and insights that are being used*

Agencies can also save the client on internal costs in terms of:

- *Rigour, method, quality processes and personnel*
- *Information production*
- *Reporting*
- *Accuracy and timeliness*
- *Knowledge of other projects*

But to ensure that the propensity for insight is maximised, clients need to be clear about what they are buying:

- *Be explicit about what already known*
- *Share other information already held (both internal and from external sources)*
- *Describe the problem being faced – not just what you think the research need is*
- *Tell the agency what success might look like – or maybe what failure smells like as a minimum*
- *Encourage the agency to question the brief, and examine existing information in combination with new facts and insights*

And the agency may maximise the propensity for effective and information and insight to be produced by (instead) seeking to provide:

- *“Knowledge/advice based on accurate evidence generated through relevant clever analysis of (new/all) data and applied in combination with existing knowledge of the product/market to the business needs/objectives”.*

Overall, there is clearly a shared responsibility.

Hey DJ, where's the remix?

Conclusions and closing comments

Overall, Ask Jeeves and SKOPOS are open about the successes and weaknesses of their relationship, partnership and research. Some key themes from our own partnership evaluation can be summarised as follows:

- *Research is valued in different ways by agency and client*
 - *Explicit communication in general and of success factors will help*
- *Certain research terms are not clear and can cause confusion when used*
 - *Might a central dictionary be useful?*
- *Indeed, terms can be expressed on continuums or spectrums, rather than as distinct exclusive and commonly understood terms*
- *True Insight cannot be guaranteed from any research project, and should not be specified by clients as a deliverable*
- *Delivery of Useful or Effective Information (or Vital Data) should be guaranteed however (and if this ultimately results in Insight, great)*
- *Propensity for Effective Research (or Insight?) to be delivered can be maximised by:*
 - *Aiming high, maybe for Insight but at least for highly Useful or Effective Information*
 - *Quality, rigour and effort within agencies*
 - *Partnerships with agencies rather than projects*
 - *Internal client-based research champions and knowledge-holders*
 - *Internal analysis and sessions within client integrating research information*

So, to end on a high note, in final conclusion the authors propose a remix of the lyrics to the original Blancmange pop hit. We strongly believe that **good research certainly illuminates business decisions and visions by default, without needing or resulting in true insight** - and that the **value in research comes in effecting and stimulating actions** (rather than necessarily seeing the mystical inner nature of things). Hence from the same song sheet we sing...***Informed Visions and much reason, much reason for actions***. The remix is recorded.



Fig 8: The 2004 remix

APPENDICES

Footnotes

1/. Blind Vision: Full lyrics

Refrain 1:

*Blind hope, blind visions
Blind centre, one centre
Blind living and seeing
Blind hell, blind hell
Blind visions and no reasons
For action blind words*

*Blind visions and no reasons
No reasons for actions
In a dream when I'm reading pages full of words
The harder you look
It's getting hard, it's getting hard, it's not
A dream's a dream
In a dream when I'm reading pages
Pages full of words
It's, it's getting hard, it's not
It's not, it, it
It's getting hard
It's getting harder
It's getting hard*

*Hold me closer now, hold me closer
That's blind vision, blind vision
Push me harder now, harder push me harder
It's blind hell, blind hell
Keep me spinning round and round
Blind centre, blind centre
Now I'm turning miles above the ground
That's blind hell, blind hell, blind hell*

(repeat refrain 1)

Blind Vision, © Blancmange 1983

References

Research

Callingham, Martin (2004), Market Intelligence: How and Why Organisations Use Market Research (published by Kogan Page)

Music & General

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/1/2/features/wallpaper/eighties6.shtml>(Blancmange images)

<http://www.autobahn.com.br/Blancmange/lyrics.html>(Blind Vision lyrics)

The Authors

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Myles Runham is the Director of Strategy for Ask Jeeves UK and is responsible for the development and implementation of strategic planning for the business including the operational planning process. In addition, Myles delivers competitive intelligence on marketing trends and competitor activity. Myles joined Ask Jeeves in 2001 as Head of Research within the Marketing team, overseeing the expansion of the team as the business grew. The research team covers the delivery of continuous information to all areas of the business. Prior to Ask Jeeves, Myles worked at BBC Online as Research Manager and spent time working in Corporate Strategy (focusing on new media) and at BBC Worldwide. He has also spent time working at Andersen Consulting as part of the Strategic Services division.

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