Fifty Shades of Market Research

It’s hard to imagine what research brief would have initiated the licensing of Fifty Shades of Grey. Who could possibly have predicted its success especially considering how it came from nowhere and erupted onto the market? Marketers are comparing it with Harry Potter in terms of its success yet the Potter books were exquisitely written, completely unique and had child and adult appeal. Fifty Shades of Grey whilst having the novelty of the kinky sex is still basically a romantic novel with little to commend it in terms of the storyline or writing eloquence.

So why is this of interest to me, the author of *Learn Market Research in a Week* and *Secrets of Success in Brand Licensing*? Well, I spend my non-writing time advising clients to research everything, write detailed briefs, recruit the target market, segment their market and drive appropriate marketing messages to them using well-chosen media and channels. I research brand personality and define market segments, recommend marketing strategy and licensing opportunities. Now here comes this upstart brand Fifty Shades to run roughshod over this very sensible and dare I say it ‘grown up’ thinking!



Imagine we had run focus groups with women who read, what would we have had to ask them to elicit that this trilogy would be the success it is? Would we have presented the concept and if so how would we have described it? Would we have given them a sample to read? Would we have pre-placed the book? Even as a Market Researcher of twenty years’ experience I would struggle to have correctly predicted this one.

As a licensing professional what would I have researched in terms of product? Its adult market makes it already a licensing nightmare in a market where most licensed product is purchased by mums for children. Yet I understand the categories of lingerie and beauty have already been assigned rights and no doubt we’ll soon see a range of fun kinky sex toys aimed at the hen/stag/wedding market.

There will always be runaway successes that are never researched and perhaps never should be simply because of their nature (the risqué concept) their unknown heritage (unknown author) and timing (fortuitously in the middle of the wettest dullest weather imaginable when everyone was looking for some fun) but if you have a strong brand which could potentially be damaged by launching the wrong product you simply don’t have this luxury. For most of us, research is damage limitation in these scary financial times.

Judy Bartkowiak – Author of Teach Yourself ‘Learn Market Research in a Week’.