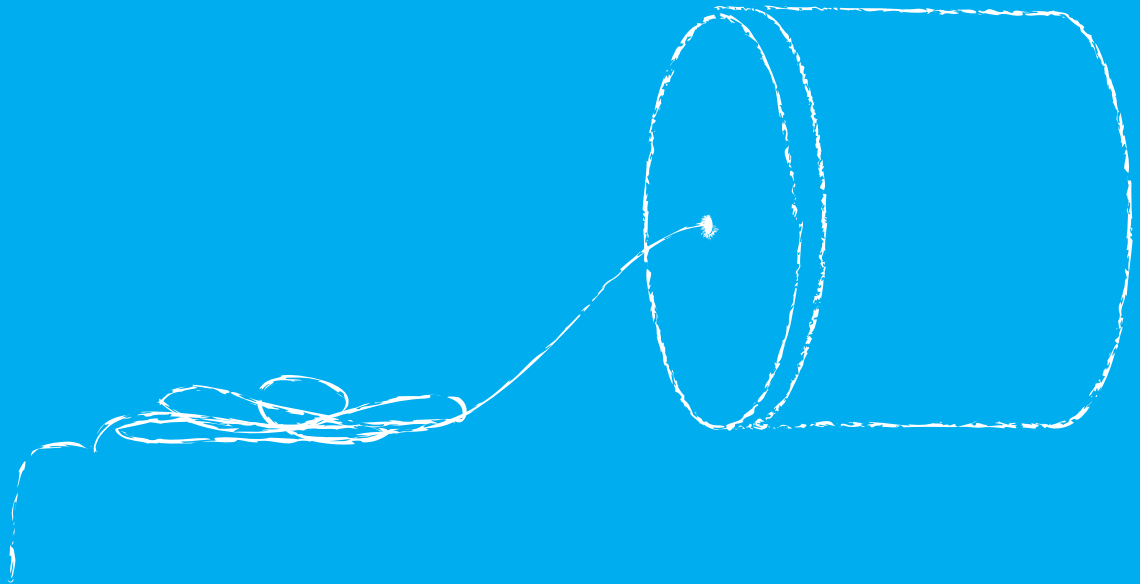# *Who are you talking to?*

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Ocean Observations

The mobile telecoms industry is about to take a firm grip on customer segmentation. Operators and handset manufacturers know that they need to target their services and products in order to win user loyalty. However, looking back at recent attempts to profile their offerings, it is not really obvious how they plan to achieve this and 'bring home the bacon' for their shareholders.

WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?
09 DECEMBER 2003 SOFIA SVANTESON,
OCEAN OBSERVATIONS

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THE HALF-NAKED WOMAN, [BIG SIGH]!

In the most fashionable department store in
Stockholm you will find *B-Tween*, a concept store
for mobile phones and fashion. The media buzz
around this store was huge when it was about
to open, and it made me very curious about this
new gig. One magazine stated that all the sales
staff were trained in mobile technology and
equipped with camera phones. Customers could
be photographed and the pictures would then be
displayed on in-store plasma-screens and, with
permission, published on a web-site. The camera
phones could also be used to get advice from
distant friends, with customers able to send MMS
messages from their dressing rooms.

The glossy pictures depicting a cool beating
vibe in the store were very seductive. Finding
myself hooked by this new concept, I went to the
store to check out the real thing. After a quick bike
ride I reached the store and unfortunately the end
of my fascination. Walking into the store I felt like a
paranoid *De Niro* in *Taxi Driver*: "You talking to me ?
You talking to me ? You talking to me ?!"

I am pretty sure that the store was supposed
to be talking to me: a woman in her early thirties,
an early adopter of mobile gadgets and a keen
observer of the fashion industry. But I fail to
see how showcasing the latest models from
SonyEricsson and *Xelibri* on top of a pair of sheer
pink string panties is supposed to interest me. I
find it lame and not very 'tomorrow'.

Don't get me wrong, I am not a prude, it's
just that I don't get the connection here. It is so
simple and so 'yesterday' to use the tired imagery
of scantily-clad women. We see it everyday,
everywhere. The advertising industry seems quite

unintelligent when they promote mobile phones
with imagery of half-dressed women partying or
businessmen in suits skating in Central Park. Our
intellect is being blunted here - as we approach
2004 we are beyond buying that concept. We can
see through it.

What makes me most concerned about
this situation is not that most mobile phone
advertisements suck. No, my worry is that the
industry has eventually realised that they need to
segment their customers - which is great - but if
they follow the pattern described above, then we
are going to see a bunch of targeted concepts for
phones and services that are more or less useless.

ATTITUDES AND VALUES AMONG INDUSTRY
EXECUTIVES.

At the recent *World Handset Forum* in Barcelona
we learned that segmentation of the customer
base is high on the agenda for operators and
manufacturers. In the very same session we heard
people (read men) saying things like: "the symbol
of success is the latest model from Mercedes"
and "housewives are late adopters - the slow ones
who need a very simple user interface for their
mobile phones." We were also told that blondes
are airheads and consequently the only ones
who would buy such a phone such as the Xelibri
(Siemens' new fashion phone designs), since
they would never understand how to use a mobile
phone anyway. To those dumb blondes, a mobile
is just a way of showing off.

I realise that the last comment was not meant
seriously, but still, the very fact it was said out
in the open at a major industry event gives us a
glimpse of the prejudices which consciously and
unconsciously affect what we design and develop.
This scenario is exactly what I am afraid of: that
the narrow-minded attitudes and valuations of a
few people in leading positions will rule the vast
landscape of customer segments. Personally, I am
not interested in buying Mercedes. My father-in-
law drives a Mercedes and for my friends and I,
the Mercedes is a car for people of the forties. We
do not want to belong to that group. People are
different. To understand this would actually be a
real symbol of success for the telecom industry.
Neither can I buy the fact that a housewife

belongs to the group which needs the most simple user interface for digital devices. I am not sure if there is a difference between Swedish and Italian housewives, considering it was an Italian man who made the statement (and there we have another issue to consider: cultural differences). However, in Sweden where I am from, a housewife has to be pretty competent when it comes to electronic gadgets and machinery.

She is the only one at home during the day, and she needs to be able to take care of everything in the house, without having to call her husband continuously. She is quite used to figuring out how to use tricky machines and has a lot of practice in this field. I do agree that she is probably not an early adopter when it comes to mobile phones, but she is definitely one of the few who would handle a more complex interface. Hey, you don't have a weak head just because you chose to have a domestic career.

And then the dumb blondes... I guess that it is not worth commenting on!

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES NEED TO BE CONSIDERED.

I would also like to address the cultural differences issue in more detail. Last year (2002) *Samsung* released their *SGH-A400* in Europe. It had been a major success in South Korea and now it was the Europeans' turn to discover this commercial jewel. It was promoted as a woman's best friend, including 'practical' features such as BMI (body mass index), Biorythm and other applications that would make our lives a whole lot easier.

It did not take long until I received an email with the subject 'Death to the patronising phone' on one of the mailing lists I subscribe to, and this was in no way a list for radical feminists. The phone was considered a joke in Sweden. A stupid concept suggesting that women need a phone for tracking their periods and keeping their weight and - by implication - that these life aspects are the most important to females.

To tell the truth, women were pissed off and avoided the phone entirely. The weight subject is a sensitive one in western society. In Asia on the other hand, they may not have the ongoing 'skinny models' debate, and may not have had any idea

it could be considered a provocation to add an application such as BMI to the phone.

In the end, the SGH-A400 became a moderate success within the Swedish gay community, and I am pretty sure that Samsung didn´t have that particular group in mind when sending it off to Europe...

MONEY, MONEY

Needless to say, money is a driving force in the segmentation investment. If you can profile your products or services to support user needs, situations and behaviours in the very best way, you will sell more. The problems start when financial plans and user behaviours do not match.

Just because Vodafone places the camera functionality in the middle of their 3x3 Live! menu, doesn´t mean that people will take more pictures. Sure, they may take some by accident when entering the service, but if the pictures do not also turn out to be interesting by the same chance, they will certainly be deleted.

In general, people still use messaging functionality the most, and therefore should have the quickest access to this feature from the centre of the 3x3 menu. I guess Vodafone place the camera icon in the middle because they make more money on pictures than on a standard SMS. However, the truth is people get upset every time they have to take a detour to get to the messaging section, and that can affect the brand in a negative way. The most valuable investment of time and money will come from segmenting and understanding the real and existing needs of the customer base.

USER MODES, NOT PROFILES

Finally, I would like to question the user profile approach used for segmenting customers. Most people active in the research field would connect a user profile, or persona, with some demographics, some sociographics and some psychographics. Often a profile also has a name, a look and is based on some people the research team knows personally - all of a sudden we are close to developing an unnatural stereotype which does not really exist. We tend to end up with an

unreasonable freak, like the 7th Ripley-clone in *Alien 4*.

A stereotype is often a mixture of prejudices, beliefs and several existing people. But the real user is a mixture of modes, not a single profile. In a few hours we can go from being a business person (business mode), where the mobile phone´s calendar functionality is our lifeline, to an off-duty mom or dad (leisure mode), who's most valuable functionality might be to have their phone play a lullaby and show sweet pictures to entertain their children.

Should these modes be integrated in the same phone? Or should we have different phones for every different mode? And what are those modes? The companies which ask these questions, will get the results.