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# The Crucible — Getting Under the Self-Deceptions of Everyday Life

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The Crucible technique gives the client a first-hand look at the emotional underpinnings of consumers' motivations in using a particular product.

**A** crucible is a vessel used for melting materials at high temperatures. As a consequence of the high heat, the amalgam of materials forms something new. The new object, while made up of what was put into the crucible, comes out different, as if it had an identity distinct from its constituent elements.

In a similar vein, Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* in 1952. His underlying interest was more in the unstated effects of McCarthyism than in the Salem Witch Trials. He used the Salem Witch Trials as a metaphor for how perceptions get altered in human behavior into a distorted and often false perspective.

Projective techniques work in a similar manner. Knowing that human behavior and verbal reporting are fraught with self-deception and misrepresentation, projective techniques attempt to take those false or distorted perceptions that human beings claim for themselves and better understand how they got melted together.

“The Crucible” is an exercise describing a psychodrama technique reserved for (1) difficult-to-tease-out behavior or for (2) individuals who are still in the crucible of their lives, whose personal identities are still molten and/or forming. The crux of the technique is to establish sufficient cues of the person’s family to “recreate” living at home, where many of these behaviors began. Successfully done, a slight state of regression is created, one that can be pleasant or not, depending on the person’s home life. In this regressed state, the individual’s primary processes are less rigid and more prone to emerge in a less socially acceptable format.

In this heightened and open state, The Crucible can be used to act out dramas of sexuality, belonging and competence and how they are developed by one’s product choices. A young man does not get aroused seeing a can of Budweiser, but he has known before he was sexually aware of women that it was a badge of masculinity. Is alcohol a sexual/social lubricant, or does the drinker, either male or female, use the beer as an excuse to act sexually?

The use of the regressed state is particularly useful with adolescents. By definition, less-powerful people have more identity confusion than more-powerful people. A less-powerful individual’s sense of self is impinged upon more than that of a more-powerful person. And who has less power than a child? A dependent child growing up will look to others for approval and love and will imitate what he or she sees as a means of learning the ropes of life. The young child uses imitation to begin walking, talking and, eventually, thinking. The adolescent



tries on various roles like different styles of clothes to amplify and clarify his or her personal identity. Adolescence is a crucible in which elements meld together into a coherent whole, representing the best forces of that person's identity to help him or her navigate life.

Trying to understand the complex motivations of adolescents, which of their values are important today and which ones will still be around next week is, at best, a challenge for marketers. Learning what a teenager values and relies on – what elements were informative and influential to him in making a decision or taking a stance for or against something – is critical to that young person feeling understood and for you (the parent, the marketer, the authority figure) to be able to reach him.

### The Crucible Technique for Teenagers

This is where The Crucible technique comes in, taking the form of a human laboratory in the middle of a research question. In the following examples, The Crucible will be a family setting,

although it could take the form of a church group, a bar or a union meeting, depending on the problem being studied. The family metaphor is particularly useful in studying teenagers. Interviewing a teenager in the absence of the family perspective is like trying to reproduce an oil painting without a canvas.

Teenagers are vulnerable to family dynamics. In today's society, kids are particularly in need, although adolescents' sensitivity to parental influence has existed across generations. Family dynamics are just more fragmented today and, therefore, harder to read.

Ethics demand that researchers tell their participants they are being watched or recorded. Unfortunately, this often intensifies respondents' insecurities and increases their resistance to the process. I like to confront this immediately. A form of *interaction alienation*, shyness needs to be minimized. One way of confronting the observational mirror is to have the respondent get up, move toward the mirror and play "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all...?" Ask your respondent, "What do you see when you look at yourself? What do you really see?"

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## Interviewing a teenager in the absence of the family perspective is like trying to reproduce an oil painting without a canvas.

What do others (your girlfriend, boyfriend, family) see when they look at you?" Then, shift to the family-dynamics exercise.

To make the teenage tableau easier to read, The Crucible technique asks the moderator and, if possible, two other researchers to assume the roles of the interviewee's father, mother and brother/sister. To assist in that perception, the moderator asks the teenager what her mother, father and sibling are like and what the teenager likes/doesn't like about her family members and why. It is useful to ask about mannerisms and words/phrases that remind the teenager of her family members. Favorite family foods (and those she hates) bring to mind smells and satisfactions of the past. Songs or family sing-alongs are strong audio cues of the past (e.g., singing in the car during long road trips). The more the participant reveals, the more the three "characters" act like/take on the teenager's real family's identity.

Usually, this play-acting is enough to get the teenager engaged and involved. If the family dynamics are not forthcoming easily, instruct the teenager that re-creating the family dynamic is the goal of the interaction, to make it real so we can see what her life is really like and how "lipstick" (or shaving cream or whatever product category is being studied) fits into the teen's personal milieu. This helps to legitimize the interaction and gives the teenager permission to act out. This, in turn, helps the researcher determine which outcomes are unique to this teenager and in what ways the teenager is like everyone else in her mind.

There will be certain issues or questions that the research will want to answer, such as media listened to, resources relied upon, purchase dynamics controlled and/or not controlled by parents, etc. These topics can be woven early into the discussion as a way of revving up the personal involvement and perfecting the roles being played by the meta-family.

At some point, a personal drama should be experienced. It is OK to have a fight or an argument during the group. If you are playing the roles well, there should be emotion felt. The moderator needs to feel comfortable with expressing and accepting emotions, particularly negative emotions. If the emotional climate is not accepting, the teenager will take his or her

cues from you about what is expected/acceptable in this setting. The quality of the results will flow from the expectations established by the facilitators and the acceptance of what is expressed by the participants.

The moderator needs to get client agreement beforehand about what type of language is acceptable. Much teenage language is laced with swearing, and if you are inside their heads, it may be part of the conversation. Assuming swearing has been agreed to by the client, the moderator needs to demonstrate his or her expectations by swearing initially to show it is allowed and then following the teenager's lead.

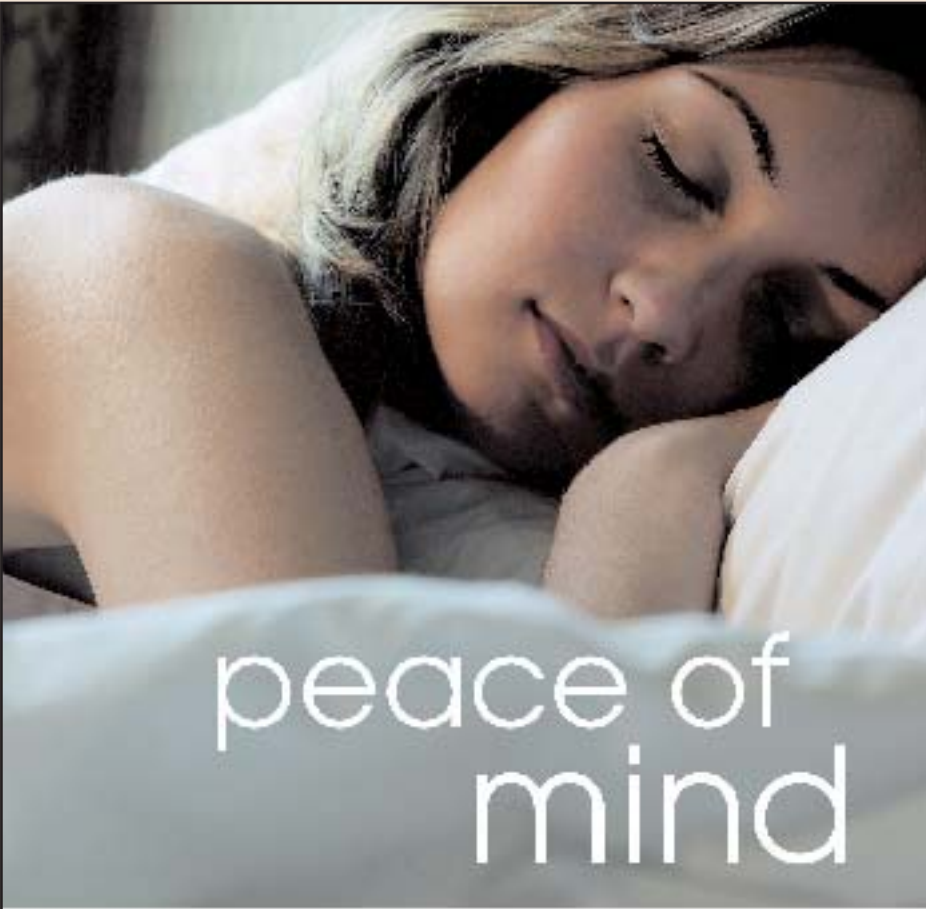
A full-flowing discussion can lead to areas of contraband information. The interviewee knows these people aren't his parents, but are just acting like parents. The teenager, therefore, can talk about things he wouldn't say in front of his parents with little fear of real punishment. It is a chance for respondents to work out some of their issues, so expect them to be shy at first. As the conversation continues, though, they will grow in strength and then offer material you wouldn't have expected about how they treat others, their sexuality, drug use, etc. These conversations need to be encouraged with non-judgmental acceptance.

### Using Transitional Objects

While this article is primarily about technique, a brief departure about interpretation is in order here. Technique informs interpretation, and some forms of interpretation are more suited to this technique. The primary impact of this technique is to make the experience real, to shake the soil from the roots to show how the organism is living, to make the issues more pronounced and, therefore, more observable. However, the value of this technique is not just exposure. What the marketer needs to know is what to feed those roots, what combination of nutrients make the organism grow and which substances are noxious and to be avoided. This is done through the sensitive interpretation of what the moderator has observed.

For example, during this exercise, there may be transitional objects observed. D.W. Winnicott introduced the concept of a child using a transitional object in reference to a particular developmental sequence. A transitional object is when the young child begins to separate the "me" from the "not-me." In order to evolve from complete dependence to a stage of relative independence, the child uses transitional objects. An infant sees himself and the mother as a whole. In this phase, the mother "brings the world" to the infant without delay, giving him or her a "moment of illusion," a belief that his or her own wish created the object of his desire, which brought

How an underarm deodorant can suggest not only sexuality and social desirability but also the competence of the individual in a social world becomes the province of The Crucible experience.




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with it a sense of satisfaction. Teenagers are constantly regressing into their childhood experiences and denying their intra-psychic processes. It helps to view this teenage developmental process like a roller coaster. Enjoy the ride, with all its explosiveness, its daring and its repetitiveness. Don't get hung up on rationality or consistency.

Explore transitional objects carefully. How far the teenager is along the continuum of bringing the world to herself versus being independent determines how much she needs a parent or can be self-reliant. This has implications for whether to market to the parent or to the child and how "adult" to be in communication with the target audience.

If the item being marketed is a transitional object, like a lucky hat, a hockey stick or sneakers, the advertising approach could tap much deeper into the teenagers' psyche if the transitional aspects of the item are respected. Showing a mother or father recognizing the teenager's achievement and seeing her obvious sense of satisfaction recognizes the transitional aspect of the product rather than appealing more superficially to the teenager with a rational product-attribute approach.

### Parental Role-Playing

Another older reference that still has great applicability to family-centered communication generated by The Crucible is Eric Berne's *Games People Play*. Two very typical roles that teen respondents have participants play is either the nurturing or the critical parent. The teen is usually more in control of this portrayal than the parent. He generally has more at stake and more to gain. The weaker link or an immature response in the chain of interaction often causes the stronger person to adjust his or her approach, rather than the

other way around, thus evoking the critical or nurturing response.

The Crucible is a fabulous laboratory. The moderator should play a neutral character initially because you do not want to alter the emotional stream of communication. As the engagement increases, you will feel an emotional pull toward an empathetic or a critical response. Give your honest reaction to the respondent, but note its intensity and that it was “requested” by the respondent. These are cues of intentionality and are much more honest than what the person often says.

### Common Themes Uncovered

During the course of a successful Crucible experience, several possible themes should come up. If they don't, then the experiment (the probes and the acting) probably needs some retooling.

First, teenagers' sexuality is being learned, defined and practiced on everything they do. There is a sexual component to all of their interactions, and so you should encourage expression of it and learn what it brings to their product experience. Teenagers' sexuality is very important to them, and they are learning how to be comfortable with it during this stage of life. A teenage boy, having little experience or confidence with his own potency, can transfer many sexual attributes to his choice of clothing or media habits safely and with less embarrassment than if he were dealing directly with his sexuality. This is how The Crucible projects a deeper process onto a safer product outlet.

Second, the need for inclusion is paramount. How acceptable the teenager is (how “in” or “out” he or she is perceived by others) is critical to his or her self-perceptions, which are being formed at this time of life. Products and media consumption reflect bits of themselves and, in ways, “become themselves” for short periods of time. A particular pair of shoes or a style of dress that is “very cool,” popular and (preferably) hard to obtain, reflects where that girl is on the social ladder more clearly than she feels in her heart.

Lastly, developing competence — whether in social skills, athletic prowess or academic abilities — is a third area of fundamental development in this stage of life. This area of discussion will come out in some manner in all Crucible exercises.

What is interesting is how all three themes fit together and influence the end product choice. How an underarm deodorant can suggest not only sexuality and social desirability but also the competence of the individual in a social world becomes the province of The Crucible experience.

Construct a plot in which the individual must



play three different scenarios, one being sexually attractive because of product use, one being part of the gang for using the same product and a third drama where the person seems socially competent (like preparing for a job interview) using that same product. In which of the three roles does the product seem most credible to the respondent? Which enactment seems to fulfill the wish of the respondent most completely? Being able to test which of the three variables is more important to the individual's sense of self is derived by how intensely the respondent plays each of the roles, how easy it is for him or her to assume that role, and how much he or she resists giving that role up when asked. It always helps to ask the respondent to play the role and then quickly play the opposite or a different role, just for contrast, during The Crucible exercise.

### A Few Practical Considerations

The Crucible approach can be done with more than one respondent at a time. The dynamics, however, get more confusing and are more demanding on the moderator(s), who should be prepared for conducting a symphony rather than a concerto. A mini-group is a better choice than a full group. Same-sex mini-groups also make sense with the 12- to 19-year age groups. The Crucible process depends on controlled regression occurring, and having the same sex in the group reflects the friendship patterns of childhood and is less likely to create barriers or embarrassment about opening up.


Likewise, the larger the group, the more narcissistic epicenters begin to develop within the group and interfere with a clearer interpretation of what is occurring. Younger children (under age 11, unless very mature) are better seen in individual interviews. Their psyches are

still too unformed to be optimal in this type of investigation. Too often, they try to please rather than to understand and express their own dynamic. Fully flowing hormones improve the accuracy of this approach.

The nature of this material can be explosive and emotional. The client must understand clearly the potential for tears and emotional upset. Likewise, the competent professional must be careful not to allow the client to exploit the interviewee in any way. At the end of the interview, respondents should come out of the experience feeling that they have learned something constructive about themselves and their behavior and that they have obtained insight commensurate with what they have given.

Given the emotional tenor of this approach, it works more easily with females. Males open up, but the process takes more time and the rewards are often less. Young males are less experienced and trusting about sharing emotional truths.

Another interview format that has been very successful with The Crucible technique is with an actual parent and child or two friends. This adds a level of reality and can be useful as part of a larger study where everyone is not related. Using some related pairs or friends along with the larger sample of individuals or mini-groups of strangers adds credibility to the emotional truths being drawn from the overall study.

In summary, The Crucible technique gives the client a first-hand look at the emotional underpinnings of consumers' motivations in using a particular product. It is an "up close and personal" involvement with the world of teenagers, beginning with their family development and how their sense of self grows and is intertwined with their product use. The Crucible is not for every client, nor should every moderator do it. However, for the right project, the right client and the right moderator, it can illuminate the human condition far beyond typical market research. 



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