

2.0.0.1.1: Chapter One: Market Research Report

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2.0.1.1.0 Outline: Time-line one ...

2.0.1.1.1 Scope: Market research

2.0.1.1.2 Intended Audience: Anyone who cares

‘Do you have sixty seconds? I have a job for you.’ Oliver sighed, his concentration broken. He looked up despairingly from his computer. The spreadsheet that covered the screen concealed the game of Rebel Special Forces Unit Commander he was playing with HJ in Tokyo. ‘Yes?’ He smiled. He coughed to disguise the squelching sound that announced the unhappy end of his mission.



Gwen stared down at her assistant’s desk with a frown. There were two neat piles of paper, the taller held in place by an MP3 player. A shaft of sunlight from the large office window illuminated a shiny film of dust on the files in his ‘In Tray’.

‘You can’t still be dealing with those letters!’ She said, wearily. ‘You should have finished them hours ago!’

‘I worked through my lunch hour!’ He replied, hurt. ‘Some of them are over 10 pages long and just reading them takes ...’

‘I explicitly told you NOT to read them! I told you, all you need to do is to extract the name and address to put in the standard reply letter. What don’t you understand?’

He sat staring into space for two seconds contemplating his answer. It had felt gloriously rebellious when he first defied her orders but she hadn’t been standing in front of him then.

‘But how am I supposed to assess their suitability if I don’t read their applications thoroughly?’ He asked, innocently.

‘You aren’t supposed to assess them! If we need anyone new for the show we’ll go to an agency and hire someone who’s actually been on TV before. We haven’t time to read this guff from pathetic wannabee TV stars. They think just because they’ve spent a night in a haunted house, it makes them paranormal researchers! We didn’t ask them to write to us. They should be grateful we’re taking the trouble to reply! Just do what I asked you and stop wasting time!’

‘But what if one of them looked good? We could save all those agency fees and sign them for

peanuts. Most of them would do it for nothing, anyway. There was one bloke here who ...'
'Are you even listening?' she interrupted, breathing heavily. 'Just do what you're told!
Please!'

Oliver opened his mouth but closed it when she glared at him. Then his phone rang. Before he could grab it, Gwen reached over and picked it up. A feeling of dread paralysed him; what if it was HJ? He slumped back in his chair to await his fate.

'Hello,' she said, sweetly. 'Ascot Productions!'

She listened for a full minute, her expression darkening.

'Never mind all that,' she said, firmly. 'What company do you represent?'

After a pause she spoke again.

'Galveston and Richards? I will never have anything to do with that company ever again and I'd strongly advise you to do the same! I can't go into details, it's too painful. Goodbye.'

She slammed the phone down.

'Wow!' Oliver gasped. 'What did this Galveston and Richards do to you?'

'Nothing, I've never heard of them. It's just the quickest way to get rid of cold callers and I advise you to use it. Any special reason why you were late this morning?'

'Um, heavy traffic in New Cross,' he replied, taken aback by her switch of topic. He thought she hadn't noticed.

'Really! I thought cyclists just went on the pavement to get round traffic jams.'

'Only an irresponsible minority do that,' he replied, stung by this slur on the cycling fraternity.

'I was nearly run over by one of your minority going the wrong way down a one-way street, yesterday. Now, I'm going out to lunch! Please answer the phones!'

'Of course!'

As soon as she was out of sight, he pulled a face at her. He uncovered his game but HJ had gone. Oliver's defiant rebelliousness returned. He read the next letter in full. It gave him a warm glow, knowing that he didn't need to write such clearly desperate pitches. He felt like writing back to tell the applicant that life in TV wasn't as glamorous as all that. He felt like advising him to get a steady job in a bank instead. He didn't because he knew the writer would take no notice. Only years of rejection and humiliation could cure the writer's affliction. He remembered writing such letters himself.

The next letter was from a woman. Having extracted her name and address for the database, he was about to file the letter under R (for recycling bin) when a photo fell out of the envelope. As he stared at it, he felt the unaccustomed weight of an ethical dilemma cross his youthful mind! Finally, he wrote the woman's address, phone number and email address on the back of the photo and put it in his wallet. Feeling better, he ate a sandwich.

Bored with chewing, he fondly recalled the real reason he'd stopped in New Cross that morning. He been distracted by the sight, in a scrap yard, of old cars being ripped to pieces.

He could still hear the joyous scream of tearing metal and smashing glass! He was woken from his reverie by a call from a friend on his mobile.

‘You think she looks sexy on TV?’ he laughed, incredulous. ‘She’s old enough to be your mother, you weirdo! Plus, she’s a terrible boss to work for, trust me!’

* * * * *

‘Do you have sixty seconds? I have a free sample for you to try.’

Gwen looked at the smartly dressed smiling woman with the clipboard and shoulder bag in annoyance. It was starting to rain, the street was crowded, she was late. She was about to wave the woman away when she saw the long queue stretching in front of the sandwich shop. It was rude to ignore a hard-working woman just trying to make a living.

‘Well, I ...’ Gwen muttered uncertainly.

‘It’s called Spicochoc!’ The woman announced proudly. ‘It’s a new mouth-wateringly spicy tangy, moist chocolate snack with a hint of the mysterious orient.’

‘Oh!’ Gwen said doubtfully, looking enviously at the sandwich shop. As the woman struggled to pull a sample bar from her bag, Gwen noticed a familiar face on the other side of the road. She raised her hand in recognition but put it down again quickly when she realised it wasn’t Oscar. She turned, red-faced, back to the clipboard woman who had finally freed the reluctant sample.

‘Here you are,’ clipboard woman said, handing Gwen a gaudily coloured wrapper inside which was a vividly coloured snack bar. She removed it gingerly and sniffed it. She felt a slight burning sensation in her throat. Oscar would have walked away, she thought.

She gingerly poked the snack into her mouth. The taste exploded. It was strongly spicy, yet salty, yet sickly sweet. She wanted to spit it out but clipboard woman was smiling sweetly at her. Instead, she swallowed a small piece quickly to avoid the taste. She had to turn away to hide her desperate efforts not to gag.

‘Exciting taste, isn’t it?’ Clipboard woman smiled enthusiastically. ‘It bursts on the tongue and leaves an amusing after-taste. Did you get the ginger, that’s the orient bit?’

‘Um ...’ Gwen replied, feeling hot and light-headed.

‘I’ve just got a few questions. No such thing as a free lunch, eh? I’d like to know, how much would you be prepared to pay for this exciting new snack? Would you pay over two pounds, over one pound or less than one pound?’

Gwen stared at her, bemused. She had a burning sensation in her mouth, a burgeoning headache and slight nausea.

‘Are those the only options?’ She mumbled.

Clipboard woman examined her form and frowned. Then she looked up and smiled brightly.

‘Yes!’

‘Less than a pound, then,’ Gwen said, feeling queasy. ‘A lot less!’
‘I can’t do a lot less but I’ll put you down for less! OK, just a few more questions about yourself. How many times a week do you go to clubs or discos? Is it more than twice a week, twice a week, once a week or less than once a week?’
‘What?’

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Twenty minutes later, as Gwen left the supermarket toilet, she glanced apprehensively up at the CCTV camera, hoping no one would connect her with the Spicochoc sample blocking one of the loos. At least she’d stopped feeling queasy. However, she still had a strong taste in her mouth, so she headed for the drinks display. Her favourite fruit drink, Fruitmaxi, was still missing, as it had been for three weeks. She sighed, wondering if it would ever reappear. She reluctantly picked up the own-brand version which was cheaper but blander and thinner. As she turned round, a trolley appeared, completely blocking her way. She glared at its owner, who was looking through the cheese display, oblivious to her. He picked up some Edam, turned round and stared at her apologetically. She looked directly into his eyes and felt time slow down.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ he said, rushing forward. ‘What must you think of me?’

He moved the trolley and then turned to look at her again, contrition in his eyes.

‘That’s OK,’ she said, mildly.

‘I hope you don’t think I’m being rude,’ he continued. ‘But aren’t you Gwen Ascot from the TV?’

‘No!’ She said, panicking. ‘I mean, yes!’

‘I’m terribly sorry, it’s very rude. I expect you get people walking up to you all the time and talking to you.’

‘No, not really. My show is on quite an obscure channel.’

‘I’ve watched every episode. I’m a huge fan of yours.’

She blushed. It had never occurred to her that she might have fans.

‘I can’t believe that,’ she said, modestly.

‘I am, it’s absolutely truly!’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the only piece of paper he had. It was his turn to blush. He couldn’t expect a TV star to autograph a list containing detergent, marmalade and milk.

‘Well, it was nice meeting you,’ she said. She tried to walk away but her legs wouldn’t move. ‘You must allow me to make up for trapping you in that dreadful, selfish way like that. I know this may sound terribly presumptuous, with you being a star, but would you allow me to buy you lunch?’

She looked doubtfully at the in-store canteen. There was a strong smell of toast and beans wafting from it.

'I'm in a bit of a hurry and it's really quite unnecessary ...'

'I didn't mean here,' he interrupted, laughing. 'Perhaps I could ring you and we could arrange a slot in your busy schedule.'

'Um, it's really not necessary,' she protested, weakly.

'But I insist!'

She sighed in relief and smiled. She wasn't sure what she'd have done if he hadn't insisted.

2.0.1.1.10 Outline: Time-line two (6 months later) ...



'Do you have the figures?'

Oliver sighed. His spreadsheet hid a game of Rebel Special Forces Unit Commander Special Edition. He heard a sickening squelching sound as he looked up.

He didn't like the way his new boss talked to him. He'd expected a first class degree in media studies and nine months experience at a TV production company to command more respect. He'd had to go through a gruelling selection process for the job which now seemed out all proportion to the actual role. He was also still feeling

jittery from his cycle to work, having swerved violently to avoid a pedestrian in a one-way street.

'Yes, of course,' he smiled, humouring her. 'I emailed them to you about an hour ago.'

'Oh no, I don't have time to pick them up now,' Lorraine said, irritated. 'You'll have to print them off and bring them into the meeting with you.'

She swept off abruptly across the bright, dusty carpet of the open-plan office. In no time she was a speck on the horizon of identical desks, each with glowing computer screens attended by a human with a robotic stare. Oliver made a face after her. He glanced at the photograph of Hannah on his desk. He always did this when he needed to calm down. The thought of the times when they were together justified his choosing such a stressful job. It wasn't executives who suffered real stress, it was their assistants.

He stared along the row of identical desks with identical chairs and identical pot plants, all in perfect line. At least going to the meeting would get him away from his desk. He printed the document and walked slowly towards the meeting room, enjoying the freedom of the empty corridors.

He was annoyed, on arrival, to find he'd missed the coffee and biscuits. He looked coldly at Lorraine, who frowned back at him. He wondered if he hadn't been better off with Gwen. He looked around at the assembled bigwigs and wondered why they all had better jobs than him.

Some were hardly any older. None were better while many were much worse, but they were all luckier. Everyone tensed as the CEO swept into the room.

‘So, Lorraine,’ she barked. ‘I believe you are to present the results of the market research for Spicochoc. I trust it’s good news!’

‘Of course!’ Lorraine beamed as the first slide of her presentation lit up a wall with primary colours. Weary executives stared glumly at the picture, showing an enthusiastic employee sampling Spicochoc. They studied it intently, looking for a profound truth hidden in the simple image. Some made notes.

‘I think we can dispense with the pretty pictures,’ the CEO said, wearily. ‘We’re all adults here. Just give us the figures. What did consumers think of it?’

‘Um, I’m just coming to that,’ Lorraine mumbled, looking at her notes.

She flicked quickly through ten slides which showed more people sampling the snack. Finally, a graph appeared. Lorraine dropped her notes but carried on without them.

‘As you can see, a large majority of those questioned said they would pay less than one pound for the snack. This confirms my proposed market positioning of Spicochoc as an economy snack. Some 76% of people, when questioned said ...’

‘But the ingredients alone come to twenty-five pence,’ the CEO interrupted. ‘I thought we agreed last year that we were aiming for a snack for the premium market!’

She looked around the room but everyone was taking notes.

‘I’ve spoken to the food technologists,’ Lorraine said hoarsely, suddenly feeling hot. ‘They say they can swap some of the ingredients with cheaper alternatives to bring the production price down. And by using organic, fair trade alternatives instead we can easily produce a premium version, though with a different name, naturally. It would be marketed using more pastel shades and with pictures of exotic locations.’

‘I have to say,’ the CEO said, wearily. ‘I always thought the name was too down-market. As for the packaging, you can see it from the other side of the mall. I have nightmares of it blowing around High Streets giving us a bad name!’

Everyone stared at Lorraine.

‘The predicted profit margin is 10% higher than on Chococrisbar,’ she said, brightly.

Everyone looked at the CEO.

‘Very well. We’ll give it three months and then review it then. I need a report on the premium version on my desk by Tuesday. Next item. The rebranding of Fruitmaxi. It’s Lorraine again, I believe.’

Lorraine reached wearily for the computer remote control but the CEO’s hand stopped her.

‘I don’t think we need another presentation for the moment,’ she said. ‘If I watch any more today I think I’ll start seeing double. I’m sure it’s affecting my salsa.’

‘But,’ Lorraine stammered panic-stricken. ‘It’s got all my figures in it!’

‘The only question I have is this,’ the CEO drawled. ‘How have sales increased since Fruitmaxi was remarketed as Fruitecho?’

Oliver pushed the papers he was holding into his boss's lap. She scanned them quickly for several seconds, vainly hoping they had changed since she'd last seen them. She felt sick.

‘As you are all aware,’ she said, finally. ‘Sales of Fruitmaxi did not reach the anticipated yield curve. Market research indicated that the packaging did not stand out sufficiently from our competitors on the shelf. We therefore redesigned the packaging with a distinctive new opal colour scheme using pictures of real fruit, instead of cartoons, to appeal more closely to our target group. We also took the opportunity to change the name to something more easily memorable.’

‘Yes, we know all this,’ the CEO said, irritably. ‘All I want to know is, what are the sales like since the relaunch?’

‘Well, the bad news is that sales have slumped by 62%. However, the good news is that sales are rising faster than at this stage after the original launch. This is all completely normal for a rebranding exercise. As it is effectively a totally new brand, it takes time to establish consumer recognition. Another big plus is that our market survey shows that the new name and packaging are recognised more strongly by target group. Our poster campaign has been launched successfully and is achieving widespread visibility throughout London and the Home Counties while ...’

‘Yes, I think we know everything we need to,’ the CEO interrupted. ‘Next item. Ah yes, the launch of Spongotok! Please tell me some good news, somebody!’

Lorraine stood up.

* * * * *

Oliver followed the CEO hesitantly back to her spacious office on the top floor. He looked sheepishly at the CEO's assistant whose glare brought him to a halt.

‘It's alright, John,’ the CEO said, looking back from her office. ‘OK Oliver, I've five minutes before my conference call. Come in and tell me what's on your mind!’

Oliver had been expecting to make an appointment and return with his presentation on his laptop later. He walked into the giant office unprepared. The CEO quickly closed the door behind him. He longed to be at his own quiet desk. The CEO sat down, leant back and smiled reassuringly at him. He was not reassured.

‘I've got an idea for marketing Spongotok,’ he said, sweating in spite of the air conditioning. ‘You should go to your boss, she's marketing,’ the CEO replied curtly. ‘I don't appreciate people trying to short circuit the system!’

‘Yes, of course, I'm sorry,’ he mumbled, while turning to leave and wishing he was in Ecuador.

‘What's the idea?’

He turned back to stare at her, barely able to stand. She looked surprisingly cheerful.

‘Well,’ he mumbled. ‘It's a ...’

‘Do speak up!’

‘Yes! It’s based entirely on the internet. We’ve never tried it before but I’ve done a study on the idea and I think it’s low risk, with low startup costs and low overheads.’

‘That sounds admirable, so why aren’t you telling your boss?’

He considered telling the truth for a second before speaking.

‘I did but she rejected the idea without discussing it. I think she may be far down the line with the existing plans.’

‘You don’t think she’s very adaptable, is that it?’

‘No, not at all. She’s great, I’m just not sure she’s proactive enough when it comes to considering alternatives. I think she’s so overworked, she just doesn’t have the time.’

The CEO suppressed a smile.

‘And you think your alternative will work, is that it?’

‘Yes, absolutely!’

The CEO smiled. Oliver felt faint. It was so hot!

‘So tell me your idea.’

* * * * *

Gwen pursed her lips in frustration. The negotiations were not going well. She looked around her small office at the filing cabinets, white board and Swiss Cheese plant for inspiration.

‘The thing is, Gwen,’ the smiling man in a grey suit said. ‘The channel is looking for something new. There is a feeling that the format needs refreshing.’

‘Really!’ Gwen asked sharply. ‘How new?’

‘The feeling is that nothing ever actually happens on camera. What would really get the ratings up would be if we could actually get, say, a real ghost on camera.’

‘We’d all like to film of a ghost,’ she laughed. ‘If only!’

‘OK, you’re the expert. But there is also a feeling that your presentation style is a little one-sided. We’d like to see a bit more balance.’

‘Balance? I don’t understand. I have a researcher working full time on my script for every show and I check all the facts personally.’

‘No doubt but many of our viewers would be interested to hear an alternative viewpoint occasionally. Maybe something that wasn’t so relentlessly, well, negative.’

Grey suit man smiled reassuringly. He leaned back in his seat. Gwen wondered if it was the seat that once collapsed when Oliver leant back on it.

‘Relentlessly negative? It’s not my fault if all the cases we investigate have a perfectly natural explanation. What do you want me to do - lie? Do you want me to say it’s a spirit when it’s clearly just creaky floor boards?’

‘No, of course not. We wouldn’t dream of questioning your integrity. You must report things as you see them. We’d just like to bring in someone else, in addition, to give a wider

perspective.'

'Wider? What do you mean wider?'

The pen she was holding snapped. She dropped the pieces onto the floor.

'Well, a lot of our viewers actually believe in ghosts and we feel we should acknowledge their point of view.'

'Really! So if a lot of your viewers thought the Earth was flat, would you accommodate that point of view too?'

'I think you're being a bit hysterical, Gwen. We just think that with a few adjustments the show would appeal to a wider audience. And we all want that, don't we?'

'What adjustments?'

'Well, maybe someone else presenting it, for instance. Maybe someone without any particular viewpoint, someone more neutral. It would take the load off you.'

'No particular viewpoint!' Gwen said, barely controlling her anger. 'Everyone's got a viewpoint on ghosts, except some celebrity bimbo! No, wait ...'

'Well, yes, we were thinking of a celebrity, just to bring in the audience, you understand. You'd still be central to the show, obviously. You'd be part of a panel of experts representing various different viewpoints.'

'So you're taking my show away from me, is that it? I'm to be nothing more than a bit player. Why not just call it Celebrity Ghost Hunt and have done with it?'

The suit man smiled broadly and wrote something on his notepad.

2.0.1.1.21 Time-line three (6 more months later) ...

Oliver sat down at his new desk for the first time. His seat felt much more comfortable than the standard issue model! His desk was bigger, wood instead of metal with carved legs. He was unconcerned that the seat was still warm, Lorraine having departed minutes before. She had made some bad decisions and had paid for them. That was business - it was nothing to get emotional about. He leaned back and swivelled, something unheard of in the open plan office.



'Comfortable Oliver?' The CEO's boomed from the office doorway behind him. Oliver span round, nearly falling out of his chair.

'Yes!' He mumbled.

'Here are your first tasks,' the CEO growled, dropping three heavy files onto the polished hand-finished surface of the immaculate desk. 'I want you to clear up the mess left by Lorraine. I want Spicochoc and Fruitmaxi cancelled before we lose any more money.'

'Do you mean Fruitecho?' Oliver asked, timorously.

'I don't give a stuff what it's called! It's losing us money hand over fist and I want all remaining stocks removed from our warehouse. Give them away if you have to, just get rid of them. Actually, not Spicochoc, you'd better dump that. We don't want to antagonise our customers any more than we have already. Disgusting stuff! Oh, by the way, good work with

Spongotok. I see the figures are up again this week!’
‘Thanks.’

The CEO marched away so heavily, the floorboards shuddered. Once she was out of sight, Oliver smiled broadly. At last he had respect!

He looked into the box containing his hastily gathered possessions from his old desk. At the bottom he was surprised to find the old dusty photo of Hannah. He looked at for a few seconds, sighed, and threw it in the bin.

He started up his computer to read his emails. He shuddered as he noticed the one he’d been dreading for months. It was from Oscar. So, finally, the game was about to begin!

* * * * *

Gwen leant back, allowing herself to feel tired and hungry for the first time in two days. She felt satisfaction; the presentation was complete. She stood up, stretched and looked out of the window to see her small neglected garden in the shadow of nearby flats. It was a view that had become far too familiar in recent months.

It had been a struggle to convert her spare bedroom to an office. Files and DVDs were piled up on the floor while old broken bits of computer equipment lined the walls. She couldn’t have friends staying over any more as she wouldn’t want the to stay in such a room. Not that she wanted any visitors anyway. They didn’t need to witness her temporary fall from the big time. Once she’d got a new show and a proper office, she’d throw a huge party.

She ran through her presentation again. She knew it would succeed. She understood the way media folk worked. It would appeal to their vanity.

She checked her email but there was nothing from any of her business contacts. The only emails were a couple of spams and one from Oscar. She hadn’t seen him in over a year though he occasionally emailed. She opened his email in keen anticipation.

It read: ‘I hope you’re having a better time than me. When I think of how things were when we were together I really wonder how it ever got this bad. Any chance of meeting up, I need your help with a weird problem?’

She smiled. She quickly replied, agreeing to meet. It would be nice to meet someone in a worse state than her.

2.0.1.1.30 End - stop reading here

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