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Attention Marketing Researchers: You Can Get Marketers to Eat Their Spinach

Marketers and marketing researchers are about as close to a consistently productive working relationship as Democrats and Republicans. As *Advertising Age* recently reported, "Just as marketers often don't understand research, the researchers often don't understand why they're doing it." Bob Barocci, CEO of the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF), explained, "There is a general belief [among researchers] that over 50% of the research done at companies is wasted. They're asked to do things that, even if the research project is perfect, won't be useful." Yet he admits researchers aren't helping their cause: "Often all we do is present numbers."

The current situation is not a recent phenomenon. Going back almost a half century ago, the pioneering consumer behaviorist Joseph Newman warned about the looming conflict between marketing managers and marketing researchers, attributing at least some of the tension to the anxiety managers feel that their experience and judgment will get short-shrift when research is available. Just about 15 years ago now, Professors Christine Moorman, Gerald Zaltman, and Rohit Deshpande pointed to "current low levels of trust exhibited by marketing managers toward their research colleagues." The combination of uncertainty and distrust didn't do much for fact-based marketing. As *BusinessWeek* reported at the time, the effects of it include, "minimizing the role of research in decision making."

No matter what industry you're in, it's a complex, complicated, ever-changing world out there—markets and media are fragmenting, paradigms are shifting, buyers have ever-changing needs, etc., etc. The situation screams for research, data, information, insights that can enable decision-makers—whatever their area of focus—to better respond, adapt, sell, and deliver their stuff. Yet like kids and spinach, marketers might know research is good for them, but it's not enough to get them to eat it. Indeed, just as they did fifteen years ago, "marketers generally distrust research and data," according to *Ad Age*. As a result, "market researchers are as unimportant as ever....Like moguls with trophy wives, marketers keep collecting them and keep ignoring them."

We've seen evidence that marketers agree research is good for decision-making in principle, but not in practice again and again:

- According to a 2006 Copernicus and Brandweek study, just 5% of senior marketers feel their organizations spend too much money on marketing research and analysis—in other words a whopping 95% think they are spending the right amount or not enough. Fifty-eight percent also said their organization needs to conduct more quantitative research studies that we do today. Yet Jack Honomichl, the preeminent source of information on the marketing research industry, reported that 2006 was a below average year for the marketing research industry, with eight of the Top 50 firms experiencing a decline in revenue from work in the U.S. or did not grow enough to cover the rate of inflation.
- The Copernicus/Brandweek study also found that while 67% of senior marketers agree that "although large scale quantitative studies take a lot of time and money, they really improve decision making," 66% also say they "feel very confident making marketing decisions based on my own sense of what our customers will respond to."



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- An IEG/Performance Research Sponsorship Decision-Makers Survey found "sponsor spending on research to determine the impact of partnerships lagged behind the lip service typically paid to wanting to measure ROI." In fact, only one-quarter of marketers spend more than one percent of their rights fees—what they pay to do the sponsorship in the first place—on research. A startling 81 percent did not have a dedicated budget for either evaluating opportunities or measuring results.
- The founder of a Boston nonprofit that provides emergency transportation came to us with a concept for a new service his organization planned to offer. He emphasized repeatedly throughout our meeting that he had a group of investors who wanted to ensure the concept would fly, that supporting marketing campaign was on target and impactful. He said he wanted research to guide the launch process, to improve the odds of success, and reassure his investors. We sent a proposal, had a few more conversations, then got the call that the firm had decided to go ahead. The founder felt strongly they had a good idea, a good plan, and felt comfortable enough launching commercials in three markets to see what happened. [As an aside, the commercials ran, few responded, the organization wasted time and money, and the idea died, not to be revived.]

Now marketers at this point are getting pretty set in their attitudes towards doing and using marketing research. "It's becoming harder and harder to get people's attention to do research," or so summed-up Tony Palmer, Kimberly-Clark's CMO. And unfortunately marketing researchers haven't exactly done a bang-up job of trying to move up the food chain. Ad Age reported one ploy some have used: "researchers have sought to fix that image by no longer calling research by its old, academic sounding name." The magazine notes a popular moniker today is consumer or buyer or brand "insights." "I can't stand the term 'market research,'" a director of consumer and market insights for Unilever told Ad Age. "I don't consider myself a market researcher at all. I really consider myself a marketer, which is why I like the [insights] title."

Well, maybe it's true that at this point, "marketing researcher" has accumulated so much negative press as far the mainstream marketing profession is concerned, that a title change is indeed in order. But if it's just a different day with a different title, but no other radical shift in thinking about what added value research brings or, more importantly, how to deliver this added value so it's clear it's an actual VALUE, then it's not going to work. If you just move spinach from one side of the plate to the other, the kid still isn't going to eat it.

We very often work with the research folks—either directly or indirectly—at companies and have observed three more-than-skin-deep changes researchers have made in their mindset and approach to working with marketing that are working in bringing together principle and practice, and improving their status, credibility—not to mention job security—in the process:

1) More than just the facts, ma'm. "Currently, few technological reasons (and still fewer in the near future) prevent a company from obtaining timely, valid, and reliable information relevant to the most important problems," as Moorman et al. wrote 15 years ago. As the director of consumer and market insights for Unilever put it, the research industry is "this huge industry of billions of dollars that anyone basically can do." So take it as a given that anyone can be a bean counter—collect the data, do the analysis,



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present the facts—what's going to make the difference is going beyond just reporting the facts.

2) Actions speak louder. Listen to what marketers are saying: they aren't kvetching that they can't get the research; they're snarking about not getting research they can use. As futurist John Naisbitt might have said, marketers are more often than not, "drowning in information and starved for knowledge." Or as the senior director of consumer insights and intelligence for Motorola told Marketing News: "It's one thing to look at data and tell me that it's statistically valid, and it's another thing to also make sense." For it to make sense, marketing researchers have to translate data and insights for marketers into the language of marketing strategy or tactical programs.

3) Do your best Willy Loman. At this point in time, it's pretty safe to say that marketers are, at best, on the fence that what marketing researchers can offer is a route to better performing programs and, just as importantly, profitability. They need to be sold on the idea. We're hearing a growing number of researchers at organizations tell us that the biggest part of their job these days is "selling in" the information to "their clients," their colleagues in marketing. Making the business case—showing hard evidence of a market opportunity, profit potential of a particular segment, financial impact of a new profit concept—is a particularly compelling way we've seen to quickly win over marketers.

Remember the words of strategy guru Michael Porter and high-powered consultant Victor Millar who predicted, "sustainable competitive advantage will depend less on who has the information and increasingly on who is able to make the best use of the information." What seems to be missing in many organizations today is not data, information, and insights, but some important "how to's"—how to use it, how to apply it, how to interpret it, how to bring it to life, how to tell if it's any good (see Mzine Extra below for five ways marketers can tell if research is any good), etc. It takes an understanding of needs, wants, and motivations—along with some creativity—to get a kid to eat his or her least favorite vegetable. Marketing researchers would do well to take the same approach with their marketing colleagues.

Mzine Extra:

Five Ways Marketers Can Tell If Research Is Any Good

Just as senior managers need not be accountants to understand the principles and lessons of the profit-and-loss statement, balance sheet, and cash-flow budget, neither do they need to be statisticians to understand the principles and lessons of fact-based marketing research.

The principles for any valid, replicable, projectable research study are the same.

1. Survey a population that represents the total universe as defined by the company. Whether your market is women who might be interested in a new health club, food-store decision makers responsible for shopping carts, or homemakers who buy ground coffee, ensure that your sample represents the population. For example, an internet survey that is not weighted to control for bias is not representative of any population other than people willing to participate in internet surveys. It understates the proportion of the market who are not connected (i.e., minorities) and people who have neither the time nor the



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interest in cooperating with survey researchers (i.e., busy executives, hassled moms, professionals in general). In such cases, you must take care to recruit these under represented groups into the study and to weight different types of buyers into their correct proportions in the population.

2. Sample enough people within this universe so that their responses are reasonably stable. Interview 500, for example, and any percentage that you get is stable plus or minus about 5 percent. Interview only 50 people, and the wobble in your data increases to a point at which it is relatively unusable. This is particularly important when you are looking to break down your total sample into subgroups such as users versus nonusers, men versus women, high income versus low income, and the like.
3. Test the questionnaire to ensure that respondents understand what is being asked and are not being prompted to answer one way or another. This is called pretesting and is something that is becoming more and more rare in marketing research studies.
4. Conduct experiments within your survey wherever it makes sense. Expose half the sample to one new product concept, the other half to another. Show respondents three different price levels. Expose people to four different positionings.
5. Analyze the responses in a way that makes logical sense. Don't confuse correlation with causation; just because one thing is related to another does not mean that the first caused the second.