



BY PIET LEVY//STAFF WRITER

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MINUTES WITH...

BRAD BARASH, VICE PRESIDENT OF DECISION INSIGHT INC.

MARKETERS ACROSS THE country are bracing for a tough year—but not Brad Barash.

The vice president of Kansas City, Mo.-based Decision Insight Inc., a market research firm, expects steady business in 2009 thanks to growing interest in virtual shopping as a research device. Since 2000, Decision Insight has specialized in online re-creations of stores for market research purposes, yielding results that reflect how shoppers behave in a real store.

Barash presented Decision Insight's work on virtual package design with Kellogg's at the **American Marketing Association's** Marketing Research Conference last September. In 2006, the company's work with Frito-Lay was honored with the AMA EXPLOR award for virtual ethnography research. Although Decision Insight's research processes are on the cutting edge, Barash says innovation isn't the be-all and end-all when it comes to attracting clients. He recently spoke with *Marketing News* about his predictions for 2009 and offered tips for how marketers can make the most out of working in a down economy.

Q: Given this year's economy, what do you think is important to do from a market research standpoint?

A: There are going to be cutbacks in marketing research, and not just marketing research, but all disciplines. So I think it really boils down to spending the money more wisely and basically just

investing more wisely. From a marketing research standpoint, I think a lot of what that means is getting [in] earlier on the development cycle by using research to understand strategies before there's been a big investment ... so you are only investing in the strategies that are more likely to succeed. We focus on using virtual environments as a research platform. That really has benefited us because we do catch things earlier in the research cycle. We can do it before a major investment has been made.

Q: Since there's trepidation among marketers and the business world given the financial situation, how does Decision Insight plan to maintain its appeal?

A: In our world here, even though companies are cutting back, we're actually seeing growth. No. 1, people are realizing virtual shopping isn't just this cool technology, it's actually this viable research platform. Now that we have that validation, there's credibility. And then because of the economy and this idea of people trying to test ideas earlier in the development cycle, they can test them in this virtual world without having to go through the expense of testing them in real life.

Q: You said there might be smaller budgets for market research, so what do you think would be the best way to make sure money is being spent more wisely and investments are being made in a wiser fashion?

A: I don't think its going to work for everybody, but you have to have approaches that ... really get to making sure that the investment that the client is making is going to pay off. If a company is going to invest in these shopper marketing strategies, it really needs to understand [what is] beyond the appeal of the strategy. How does it impact the bottom line? With budgets getting cut, there's more focus than ever on ROI for the research budget. So you have to demonstrate that the research you provide really can impact sales.

Q: How do you go about trying to convince businesses that the work you do is very important? What would you recommend that other market researchers do to try to make themselves as appealing as possible to other businesses?

A: One of the things a brand has to do is demonstrate not only what's going to happen in terms of sales for their own brand but how it impacts their customers or the retailers. It's more important now [than] ever to demonstrate to customers and retailers how different strategies that they're trying to sell in can benefit the retailer as well as themselves. So if I'm going to recommend a new product assortment in my category as a brand, I have to be able to demonstrate a win-win for the brand and for Wal-Mart, or the grocery store or whatever channel I'm in. And what we've seen is that retailers are now coming to expect that

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from their vendors, their suppliers, the manufacturers. They're looking for the manufacturers to come to them with solutions that benefit not only themselves but benefit the retailer as well.

Q: Do you think innovation is necessary for marketing researchers to try and stay at the top of the class, given the economic situation?

A: I think innovation is important for sure, but it really has to be the research that drives the innovation. We were a research company that discovered a virtual shopping platform was a great approach rather than: 'Hey, this is a cool technology. What can we do with it?'

Q: What about approaches for presenting research to make it as appealing as possible? Any advice on making presentations sizzle?

A: I don't know if it's sizzle so much. We try very hard to avoid doing what I call a data dump or just regurgitation of data. We work very hard to tell a story with the data. As you can imagine, with a virtual shopping study we have tremendous, tremendous amounts of data, and rather than just dumping that data into a bunch of charts, we try to boil it down to what the two or three key takeaways are from the study. We call it 'the elevator speech,' like a lot of people do. If you're in the elevator with the CEO and he asks you what happened with the study, you need to be able to boil it down into 30 seconds of, 'Here's what happened.' The last thing you want to do is spout off a bunch of statistics.

Q: What do you think 2009 will be like for marketing research overall?

A: I do think, given the economic situation, that it would be hard to predict [business is] not going to be down, just from a volume standpoint. But I do think more and more companies are embracing newer technology and more online [research] techniques, so I think that side of the business will continue to grow. And I also think anything that supports shopper insights will continue to grow because that's where the trend is. Ultimately, I think there will be more of a balance between brand building and selling. Right now, I think the pendulum is swinging more towards the selling and the shopper insights, and somewhere away from brand-building. But, ultimately, I do think it will come somewhere back in the middle where the two are really tied together. **m**

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