

Don't explain the past, predict the future

The research industry needs to stop looking backwards and employ new technology to anticipate changing consumer behaviour

By Stan Sthanunathan, *Coca-Cola*

When a CEO wants to know how a product launch went awry, how purchase habits have changed or where the company is gaining ground, they ask research for answers. We have reams of them. But what if they ask a better question - one about what is going to happen? Then we might be stumped. Yet, if we want to increase the impact of market research, we need to focus far more on helping organisations predict, shape and capitalise on change than on carefully explaining their past.

The insights industry has long focused on carefully dissecting and explaining events that have already taken place. The theory is that, if we adequately understand how things unfolded before, we won't repeat the same mistakes. That thinking might explain why research professionals spend 80% of their time looking backward. Yet, 85% say they are dissatisfied with the impact they have in their organisations. Of course researchers are dissatisfied - we're charged with driving new initiatives forward but we're navigating by the rear-view mirror.

The approach worked in the past because the pace of change was slower. But today it's crippling and dangerous. By the time we've designed a six-month survey process and analysed the data for another three months, consumers have moved on to new patterns of behaviour and preference. Our industry doesn't need a little tweaking here and there to better serve our organisations; it needs to be transformed. Our role needs to shift from analysing the past to helping companies dream

about and create a more compelling and rewarding future, and driving the transformational change that will get them there.

We're fond in research of talking about insights; but I would leave insights out of a contemporary definition of market research because it's a passive concept. We need to be active participants in providing inspiration. Through inspiration you motivate people to take action and can provoke their desire to create something really new and different.

We must charge ourselves with helping our organisations to see themselves and their business opportunities in wholly new ways. This type of visionary thinking will also earn research professionals the much sought-after 'seat at the table' with senior decision-makers.

I propose that the critical roles of a contemporary market research professional are to inspire, provoke and transform. That's true for those functioning on the agency side as consultants, as well as for in-house experts. The most important role of the corporate-side market researcher is to meet the needs of consumers in the most sustainable and profitable way. The most important role of the research agency is to enable its clients to do exactly that.

Rather than getting bogged down in creating the next best research tool (that will quickly become irrelevant and outdated), both agency and client-side researchers must engage in a change of mindset that puts the ultimate needs of the business front and centre. A contemporary research approach should revolve around these key elements:

1 Anticipating new opportunities

If a researcher had gone to consumers in 1886 and asked them what they

would most like to drink, not one of them would have asked for something loaded with bubbles and a strange, sweet, syrupy taste. But then Dr Pemberton didn't ask what people wanted - he anticipated what they could want and carried a jug of his unique mixture down the street to Jacob's Pharmacy to be sold as Coca-Cola for five cents a glass.

Similarly, if you asked people in the late 1850s how they would like to get from one place to another, there would not have been a statistically significant response for developing the automobile because no one knew they wanted one yet.

The pace of change in our society today, and the diversity of its inhabitants, makes it ever more critical for market research professionals to act as anticipators and even agents of change. We need to get closer to clients and consumers to find out what is keeping people up at night and then tailor products and services to meet those needs.

The goal is to shape change, rather than follow it. We need to create the change people have not yet dreamed of.

2 Use innovative approaches
Getting ahead of societal change doesn't rely on the use of a crystal ball. It rests on finely honed powers of observing and listening to people, and then the ability to synthesise what we learn to draw logical deductions about the kinds of products and service-delivery methods that might better meet their needs.

We do this by tuning in to people with an open mind and waiting to see how they illuminate us. That's how we learn to know what we don't know. Once we get those flashes of inspiration, we will follow up on

them with tangible research practices, but we start the process, as the ARF's Joel Rubinson says, by "listening for the unexpected", rather than quantifying the expected.

There are many ways to 'listen in' to people's hearts, minds and lives today that never existed before, with techniques such as BlackBerry ethnographies and 'netnography'. We can develop ways to sweep the content of the web and conduct advanced forms of analysis on it to really learn what is keeping people awake at night. We'll obtain consumer insights that have never even crossed our minds.

If you focus on the well-accepted adage of leveraging what you already know, chances are everyone else in your industry already possesses that same knowledge and is acting on it. There's more power in figuring out how to know what we don't know.

3 Insights into action - now

Researchers, like most people, want results right here, right now. Today it's possible to make that happen with real-time feedback from consumers that drives immediate response in terms of tailored marketing messages and even product development.

Coke recently used social media to engage people in creating a new flavour of VitaminWater, right down to its packaging. A process that normally takes two years and millions of dollars of investment in formal market research and trials was turned on its head and conducted in three months for a few thousand dollars by harnessing the power of the crowd to co-create a new product.

Organisations are also now using responsive outdoor advertising with messages that change based on the time of day, and even more sophisticated versions that quickly scan passers-by for key demographic data, such as age and gender, and then display an advertising message targeted to that demographic. The same ad vehicle could then instantly transmit a coupon for the product to a mobile phone.

4 Focus on the business impact

As research professionals, we are appropriately concerned with the quality of our methodologies and reliability of the insights we gather. That vigilance is critical in terms of our own professional ethics and in the trust others will put into the new ideas we provoke. But we also need to understand that the 'back room' machinations of good



Demand for Coca-Cola didn't exist before Dr Pember first concocted his mixture in 1886

research are not what earns a seat at the decision-making table or the ability to influence corporate direction.

A pristine research project is meaningless unless it impacts business and drives value for customers. We must always draw a straight line between what we're doing and learning and how it will impact the growth and health of our business. We also need to be able to demonstrate that connection to senior leadership.

If we direct our focus on ROI and value creation, we'll be key players in helping the company figure out how to execute better in the marketplace and drive value in the business.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Of course, there is a requisite skill-set to conducting quality research, and there are new techniques to be learned almost daily. We also need to master new mind-sets. We have to be willing to experiment a little and get out of our comfort zones.

With just a little bit of an open mind, we can embrace new opportunities for learning what consumers are really about. They have ways of showing us what's important to them even when they can't completely articulate it yet themselves. And technology is making it possible for us to achieve the paradox of customising our messages and products on a massive scale.

I can't tell you exactly how to do it in your organisation, but I do know that at the heart of doing market research right in today's marketplace lies a willingness to stretch your neck out and try to figure out where change is going to show up next. It lies in listening to people's thoughts and desires to learn what really moves them. Armed with that inspiration, you may be able to predict what products and services will help them meet those overwhelming needs.