

The Roles and Goals of Marketing Research:
Where we are and where we need to be.

Rebuttal By Jonathan Weiner

I'm not a historian. I know little about the origin of market research, though I guess I know a little more now, but I do know that back in the late 90's Dick McCullough and I worked together at MACRO in a little office above a Baskin and Robbins. The company was strong analytically, strong in research fundamentals and true to Dick's vision of a small research consultancy having an impact at big companies like Apple, Levi's, and Pac Bell to name just a few.

What made us different? We were able to communicate with our clients. We were far and away better partners and consultants, purely because we knew how to talk to clients in a way that they understood, not only the research, but also what to do with it. And more importantly, how to help them communicate it to others in the organization.

It's funny because Dick talks a great deal about the good old days of market research, but I think sometimes he forgets what was important and what makes truly good research consultancies into truly great partners.

In my mind there are three fundamentals to a good partnership. First, there is technical/functional excellence – those pesky details he thinks we don't care about. Second, ability to listen, really listen, to client needs. And third, the ability to communicate in a way that is meaningful to the client. This last item is the focus of his point.

Back then, I was often disappointed when a great piece of work never got acted upon, sitting on some client's shelf gathering dust. I often voiced out loud, "if I had the chance, I could do better than that!"

Fast forward another decade and I found myself on the other side of the table. Doing great work from the inside wasn't so easy as I thought. It was hard to have an impact after all.

There were obstacles to success that were not apparent from the outside. Levels of expertise, need, ability to understand complex insights, and, yes unfortunately, political agendas. In fact, some of times over the next 15 years were more intense than the Roman senate itself.

Here is what I learned. Research is a vehicle to learning. It still remains the most important part of our job. If we can't be technically excellent, then it doesn't matter what we say. But if what we say is right, then it is the vehicle by which we educate and impact the business.

I can't tell you how many times I have heard the phrase "people learn through stories". Entire consultancies are built around the premise. What I learned is that in order to be successful, you have to prioritize your objectives, stay focused on the end goal and communicate the fact-based insights in a way an audience will understand.

It is meaningless presenting brilliant work from a discrete choice exercise or an ROI analysis to a "lay" marketing organization if they are not going to walk away with the key insights.

So the most impactful way is to start communicating a way by building a story line. Understanding what the objective is, how you want to get there and then start populating the story with the insights you need.

Dick asserts that we, on the client side, manage a process that we do not have time to understand or participate in. That is a falsehood. Often, a client will try and understand the work to make sure it addresses the most critical objective only for it to be obfuscated by a barrage of methodological black box jargon that serves only to divert the true objective of the client researcher – which is to learn.

Many vendors do not take the time to teach the client research managers. They only want them to believe that the problem can be solved in this way or that. I can't tell you, even with me, how many discussions it will take to peel the onion of a methodology just so that I can be satisfied with the technique. A vendor has to make sure that communication (remember that?) and bringing the client along is paramount to the success of any work.

The client researcher is not annoyed by pesky details or the importance of statistical significance. Those are critical -- It is really important that they are nailed down by both the client and the vendor -- but it is the responsibility of the vendor to make sure she educates the client on what is important. One of Dick's own laws of statistics is "don't confuse statistical significance with importance". It is critical for the vendor to filter through those pesky details so the client doesn't have to.

Dick portrays client research teams as entertaining an audience just to be invited to the dance next time around. His assertion that we are crafting a fantasy filling in gaps with our own imagination is farcical. In fact, it would be an egregious breach of responsibility to do so.

I do believe that research has evolved. We talk more about insights and what multiple data points lead us to believe about the true nature of markets and consumer behavior.

As I re-read some of his rant, I am more concerned about his perception of the client market researcher. A shallow, time starved, ego driven, marketer wanna-be who only wants to entertain his internal marketing partners to stay relevant.

About the only thing true about that is the time starved piece. What is more accurate is that we require research excellence and communication.

Now, he says that consultancies who are good story tellers get the big bucks, lots of engagements just because they can tell good stories. I probably can't deny that. But if they couldn't do the research, then it wouldn't matter what kind of stories they tell.

If you know Dick, then you know he can tell quite a good story. And if you don't believe that then re-read his article – I think you will be entertained. I hope the irony is not lost on the reader.

And we agree, that collaboration is critical, that the fundamentals are paramount but Dick has lost sight of the end goal. If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Well, if you can't get your client to listen to your research...

I assert that Market research continues to be not only useful, but critical. We are the marketing doctors of the organization. We can tell if we have an ankle sprain (requiring a change in tactics) or need major open heart surgery (requiring a change in strategy or positioning).

The only way we become irrelevant is if we don't make an effort to listen and communicate in a way that our partners will listen. Storytelling is not a short-cut. Its an integral part of the communication process.

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