
Viewpoint – The New Marketing Research Imperative: It's about Learning

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In 2003, the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) and ESOMAR helped drive a global Research Leaders Summit (RELEAS) initiative, where leaders of the research profession worked hard to redefine the vision and value strategy for market research.

Since last July 20, the ARF's Research Transformation Super-Council has been leading a team of the world's best known marketers to once again attempt to redefine the mission, vision, and scope of the research function.

In only five years, these two efforts resulted in remarkably different directions.

In 2003, the key words were:

- Accountability
- Relevant
- Differentiated
- Science
- Measurement
- Models
- Knowledge
- Calibrated
- Valid
- R4 (i.e., right information, right place, right time, right form).

In 2008/2009, distilled from a series of leadership meetings and industry forums in New York and San Francisco, the key words are almost completely different:

- Human
- Synthesis
- Science
- Sharing via social media
- Learning
- Listening
- Storytelling
- Categorization (i.e., how humans learn about new things)
- Risk taker
- Strategy (i.e., where to play, where to win).

In 2003, accountability was thought to be the differentiator; consultancy, leadership, and insights were listed as necessary but undifferentiated. The shift in research strategy in only five years is profound, from an emphasis on report-card accountability metrics to becoming a learning organization that puts the human at the center of marketing thinking.

A powerful framework for thinking about this shift comes from Kim Dedeker, Procter & Gamble Vice President of Global Consumer & Market Knowledge, who draws a bell curve depicting approximately 80 percent of research spending going against “testing and evaluation” (of concepts, products, commercials, marketing campaigns), with the remaining 20% split between the tails of creating “innovation” and “sense and respond.”

In 2003, we were focused on improved accuracy within the “testing and evaluation” center of the curve. Five years later, we are concentrating on how to rebalance the spending equation and create learning everywhere across the enterprise.

To be sure, there will always be plenty of testing and evaluation research, but accurate forecasts and accountability metrics no longer will be sufficient in a learning organization; research methods must be designed so that the enterprise learns from every test. For example, there is a reason *why* a new idea tested well or poorly that leads to important learning; if it does not, either the test was redundant (you learned that lesson already) or the research study was not designed effectively.

There are three primary reasons that the emphasis on learning is emerging now:

- New marketing questions: *The human is now in control* in an “always on” world of long tails of media and purchase choices, and where social media lead to information and opinions spreading like wildfire. Marketers now have a partner in managing their brand in a world where push marketing turns into pull in the blink of an eye, for example, where TV advertising leads to search as people often are media multitasking. In this world, marketing teams are seeking new ways of connecting their brands to people. These initiatives will require new mental models that will lead to new tools and metrics, but first we must relearn the consumer.
- Emerging mental models: Science has taught us that *humans are different than we thought*. Neuroscience, anthropology, and behavioral economics have painted a totally different picture of how people absorb messaging, retrieve memories, and make decisions from what was believed only 5–10 years ago.

We have learned that “think-feel” is one word, that people often use fast and frugal heuristics (rather than elaborate trade-offs of attributes) to make decisions, and that one of those heuristics is based on copying from others in your “tribe” (accelerated by social media that have connected people more than ever before). Those current research tools that only capture a piece of what matters based on this new learning must evolve.

- New data feeds: *Social media allow us to “listen” to naturally occurring conversations and behaviors... to hear the unexpected*. These insights come at us like a continuous river, changing the cadence of research. “Listening pipes,” as Pete Blackshaw, executive vice president of Nielsen Online Digital Strategic Services, calls them, go beyond “push surveys” to include social media conversation, search, digital analytics, customer interaction in the “brand backyard,” interactions at retail, and managed communities. At the ARF’s San Francisco conference on Research Transformation, Charlene Li, founder of the Altimeter Group, referred to the rise of “activist consumers.” She and Pete Blackshaw agree: these consumers *demand* to be heard.

So, if an enterprise wants to put humans at the center, it must become a learning organization that anticipates the human’s next move. And this is the research function’s big opportunity—its moment in time. Research is the best choice to be the Single Point of Contact (SPOC) for understanding and anticipating the human—bringing the consumer/customer/shopper, the complete human, to life in the boardroom to inspire marketing strategy and action.

Supporting this new positioning, research should consider a branding change as well: “Consumer and Market Learning” (CML) would be an appropriate name for a team that needs to become one part research, one part account planning, and three parts synthesis around an anticipatory view of how people will live their lives and what that means for the marketing organization it serves.

If you were to look at an organization from the outside, what would be the signs that it is committed to being a consumer and market learning organization?

- The research or insights group has the word “learning” somewhere in its title and mission and sits on the business leadership team to provide an anticipatory perspective on a business issue in the context of how people live their lives.
- The CML team hires (or outsources to acquire services of) anthropologists, behavioral economists, neuroscientists, and reporters.
- “Research presentations” look totally different. Emphasis is placed on synthesis from multiple sources as business issues are addressed with forward-looking insights presented in novel unforgettable ways using storytelling and scenario-planning tools.
- CML does not just test ideas, it creates them—and can point to certain innovations it helped create.
- Every research project that has an “action standard” also has a learning goal.
- The *activity* of accountability measurement becomes automated with CML focusing on the learning that comes from a stream of such data.
- Presentations to the investor community begin to feature the company’s unique commitment to learning about people and the winning strategies that such learning has uncovered.
- Continuous listening is used for continuous learning from a broad spectrum of data feeds of naturally occurring consumer conversations and behaviors. Learning briefs become as much a part of the corporate culture as test results.

- Learning comes from anywhere—social media, traditional surveys, internal employee forums, brand backyards.
- Someone needs to own the responsibility for advancing the enterprise's knowledge base about the human. Edgar H. Schein, professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, spoke about two necessary aspects for reducing "learning anxiety" in "Building the Learning Consortium" (1995). A team needs to represent a "parallel system" for learning. And this team needs to form a consortium with those in other organizations who have a similar mission. I suggest that the research function should own the responsibility for CML and that the ARF (through its research transformation initiative) provides that forum or consortium.

Research continuously has struggled with how to get a seat at the table. I am struck by the analogy to the *X-Men* movies. Every main character has a unique and repeatable superpower that is exactly the best one for a certain circumstance. Research used to think its superpower would be measurement. Now we realize that our *X-Men* superpower will be as SPOC for synthesized anticipatory learning that brings humans to life. This is worthy of X-Men status as CML's perspective will be critical to innovation and keeping brands relevant. Wouldn't you want Wolverine or Storm on *your* team?

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