

Get Marketers to Eat Their Spinach and Love It, Too

Five Ideas for Marketing Researchers

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, and insights that can enable decision-makers—whatever their area of focus—to better respond, adapt, sell, and deliver their stuff. Yet, “it's becoming harder and harder to get people's attention to do research,” as Tony Palmer, Kimberly-Clark's CMO, explained. Like kids and spinach, marketers might know research is good for them, but it's not enough to get them to eat it.

And marketers do know it's good for them. According to a recent Copernicus and *Brandweek* study:

- **81%** said they approach decision making deliberately, examining the available data before making any big decision.
- **67%** of senior marketers agree that “although large-scale quantitative studies take a lot of time and money, they really **improve** decision making.”
- **58%** of senior marketers in the study said their organization needs to conduct **more** quantitative research studies than they do today.
- **57%** complained that making major marketing decisions based only on a few focus groups tends to lead to very poor decision-making.

So why won't they eat it? In the same study, we heard the same grievances we've all encountered before:

- **53%** concurred with Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Blink*, “that marketers should rely more on intuition and judgment in making major decisions and avoid becoming mired in data.”
- **34%** agreed “research people are often interested in research for its own sake—they're like frustrated Ph.D.'s.”
- **34%** also said “much of the research done in our organization becomes a paperweight—it just sits on a shelf—and has little impact on our business.”

Now one legitimate conclusion to draw from this kind of feedback is that marketing research has a big, hairy image problem. And an image problem requires—what else?—a marketing response.

Marketing Around the Problem

Joel Rubinson, the chief research officer at the ARF suggested, “The only thing uncool about research may be the word associated with it. So maybe we need to find a new terminology.” Sure enough, *Ad Age* also reported on the name change: “Researchers have sought to fix that image by no longer calling research by its old, academic sounding name.” There are also concerted efforts to “humanize” results with stories, faces, and pictures—in other words, bring the research to life for senior managers.



Neither of these are bad ideas. It could very well be 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, in fact, in order. Delivery of information in a form that's interesting, impactful, and understandable certainly goes a long way to improving communication as well. We wonder though, if these moves to fix marketing research's image might not be putting the cart before the horse, if maybe we might be marketing around the problem. After all, if it's just a different day with a different title and a fancier multi-media presentation, but no actions addressing the root cause of complaints then it's not going to move us very far up the food chain.

If you just move spinach from one side of the plate to the other, a kid still isn't going to eat it.

Five Ideas

Researchers are referred to as “frustrated Ph.D.s,” studies become door stops, and marketers prefer to rely on intuition and judgment because the data we provide all too often is of questionable quality—it's loosely related to the decision at hand; it's vague in how it impacts performance; and it's unclear how people across the marketing organization and beyond can use it.

What can researchers do to fix the problem? **We have five tips:**

Anyone can be a bean-counter. The going perception of the research industry is “this huge industry of billions of dollars that anyone basically can do,” to quote the director of consumer and market insights for Unilever. True, anyone can be a bean-counter—getting the numbers together, reporting the straight-forward facts to marketers. Researchers need to get out of this rut. While it's nice to know yes, advertising increased sales or, as is more often the case, it didn't, the bigger question on the minds of marketers these days is why? Why is/isn't a program working? How can I generate/avoid this kind of performance again? Where was the breakdown in the chain of communications, from awareness to behavior? Was it the medium, the message, the budget, or something else? Descriptive data may get us in the door with marketers, but it's the diagnostic and prescriptive information that will keep us at the table.

Remember, the senior management marketers report into want answers, not just numbers, so we need to make it our business to dig deeper to get the information marketers need to do (maybe even keep) their jobs.

Beware of significance. It's in our blood to look for statistically significant relationships. If we're trying to explain why something is (or isn't) happening, we want to identify the relationships that 9 times out of 10 will answer the question. That's a good thing and you don't want to ignore what the statistics tell you certainly. But at the same time, we don't want to overplay it either. Just because it's *statistically* significant, doesn't mean it's significant to the business or relevant to a particular marketing decision. Compounding the problem, we focus on the differences between groups of people, different products in the same category, etc., and lose sight of what the actual numbers are telling us. For example, while it sounds incredibly important that men are four times as likely as women to buy a new product, if 4 out of 1000 men are buying versus 1 out of 1000 women, the difference between the groups isn't the story. It's that neither one of them bought the product in the first place. Getting lost in statistical significance just invites "frustrated Ph.D." comments and, even worse, breeds marketers' distrust in the data. Our job is to continuously filter what the statistics tell us through managerial and other business-related criteria so the end information product we deliver resonates with marketers.

Be careful with cool. Corporate America is really no different from high school—no one wants to be at the bottom of the social ladder. We all want to be cool. These days, there are a plethora of research tools to parade around to marketers that would seem to help dial up the cool quotient of marketing research. Ethnography is hot. New research technique "cool hunting" is by definition cool. Any method that isn't quantitative or data and statistic-heavy seems instantly appealing to many marketers and, in turn, makes us more appealing to work with. We need to be careful with cool though. If we want marketers to trust us, our recommendations, and the results of our work, we need to be upfront and honest about the advantages (e.g., fast) and disadvantages (e.g., not projectable) of different research tools. We should suggest a particular technique because it makes sense for the organization, the situation, and the decision at hand, not just as a way to "fit in."

Show me the money. At this point in time, it's pretty safe to say that marketers are, at best, on the fence that marketing researchers offer 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. Providing hard evidence of a market opportunity, profit potential of a particular segment, financial impact of a new product concept—a.k.a., making the business case—makes marketers feel more confident in using the research as a guide. Show marketers the money and they will show us researchers the love.

Up with People. Hey, we're all impressed by a really rigorous, highly technical modeling discussion. But let's face it, marketers generally aren't. We're just not going to wow a marketer with the sophistication of our models—we should just accept this and move on. The contribution of any research technique, whatever it is—to a felicitous research outcome is pretty modest to begin with anyway. How well a research effort helps marketers make different marketing, operational, and business decisions depends on how well researchers understand who in the company plans to use the results and how they plan (or hope) to use them. If we approach the majority of our work as part of a process rather than another one-off project, take the time to do some research on the research to talk to the folks who will use it, we can better offer research solutions that address the needs of marketers and translate data into the language of the marketing strategy or tactical decision at hand.

Serve Up the Spinach

As Peter Krieg from Copernicus has put it, "intuition and creativity need to be carefully balanced with sophisticated analyses of unimpeachable marketing research data. That's how great brands and companies have been built and business legends made." Yet in the Copernicus and *Brandweek* study, only about a third of marketers (27%) currently share this view. 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. Researchers would do well to take the same approach with their marketing colleagues.

What seems to be missing in many organizations today is quality data—information and insights that are relevant, profit/performance-focused, and actionable. If researchers take steps to improve the quality of the information we deliver, we'll have marketers asking for second and third helpings of what so many of them turn up their noses at now.

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