

Uncovering actionable insights amidst chronic information overload

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(also, why skilled researchers are more important now than ever before!)

Few could argue that 2016 was an *annus horribilis*. With a volatile political environment (both locally and globally) and widespread economic malaise, every sphere of business – and life - was somehow upended or disrupted. Several industries and professions, in particular, came under a glaring spotlight – with their very reason for being coming under scrutiny. Political scientists, pollsters, researchers, and any type of ‘expert’ were all forced to defend their science – and continue to defend it today!

As we are all now well aware, multiple quantitative polls failed to predict the victory of the Orange Menace, or the shock of Brexit. Naturally, once everyone had recovered as best they could, accusatory fingers were immediately pointed towards researchers, pollsters and number crunchers. Why had this supposed science failed so dramatically?

Admittedly, however, the research industry was under threat (and under severe scrutiny) even before the colossal failures of 2016.

A false sense of proximity...

With the advent of social media and analytics, many marketers feel that they now have “closer proximity” to their market because of ongoing social media interactions. Indeed, the element of voyeurism afforded to marketers through social media supposedly gives them sufficiently deep insights into their markets. As a result, some marketers posit that social media feedback obviates the need for formal research.

In addition to social media networks, the entrance of Big Data into the marketing mix means that brands are now flooded with all sorts of information. From internal sales data to search engine statistics, there is a plethora of information immediately at hand.

Information does not always equal insight

Despite the influx of new digital tools and unprecedented access to information, however, credible researchers still have a major role to play. Arguably, given the mammoth amounts of information now flooding every brand manager and marketer, the trained researcher’s unique ability to distill information into valuable and relevant insights has become more important than ever before.

If you don’t know which questions to ask, and which insights are required, no amount of information carries real brand value!

Here’s how you can better leverage the information at hand (and make the most of research expertise):

1) Use multiple sources of data and insight whenever possible

You shouldn’t base business decisions on one source only.

By all means, conduct a survey with closed-ended dropdowns - but then conduct some face-to-face, more probing, research too. Of course, do some trawling of the posts on your Facebook page, but do some real-world immersions and trade visits as well. Examine the customer behaviour analytics that come from your database, as well as the

broader, syndicated market data. (What I'm saying is that you can even count your Uber driver as a source, provided that he's not your only source!)

2) Remember that people are not rational

People do not make decisions solely with their rational brains. In fact, emotions are more important in decision-making than rationality. If we as marketers and researchers learned anything from the inaccuracies around polling for the US election, it is that the insight into what really motivates and moves people is all that really matters - not the definitive Yes/No type answers that rely on a rational brain.

Your task is to get to the deep truth about frustrations, unmet needs and life passions – as these truths yield actionable insights and identify key opportunities for your brand. This kind of insight comes from qualitative research, where one is able to probe, gauge reactions and get a handle on body language.

3) Spend time on getting your questions right

At best, poorly constructed surveys produce more questions than answers. At worst, they force people to lie, as they are not presented with an option that is relevant to them. Also, the badly constructed discussion guides used in qualitative research lead to a restrictive, rigid and narrow conversation - which prohibits real insight and innovation.

To take the polling results from the US election as an example, pollsters might have been focused on getting an answer about levels of trustworthiness of the candidates and likelihood to vote...as opposed to understanding the levels of deep discontent and the perceived need for real change.

The lesson here is to take the time to get the questionnaire, or guide, correct - and always link back to the overall objectives and what you need to learn. Get guidance from a research professional to ensure that what you are asking makes sense - and will answer the questions that you have about your business and brand.

4) Understand that perspective matters!

If you are too close to a brand or business, there is a strong chance that you are listening with a bias. Your bias can be "benign" in that you simply can't see why people don't get your brand messaging (or why they are so stupid as to not see a button on your website). Objective feedback, which is independently moderated, cuts through the emotions to the heart of the issues and opportunities.

The right perspective really matters in terms of the respondents participating as well - you need to be sure that the people participating in the research belong to the target audience you are aiming your product at - or else you will see your brand through the wrong perspective or lens.

In essence, research should be guided - if not conducted - by an objective professional to remove both the chance of bias and the 'old news phenomenon'. (People too close to a brand often dismiss something they have heard before as being "old news" - without probing into what is really meant).

5) Always tell a good story

Synthesising all of the different pieces of information and working out how they all fit together is arguably the most difficult part in the whole research process. There are often apparently contradictory or inexplicable results, and "interpreting" them is an important part of the analysis process.

The qualitative researcher is able to present the facts with insights that draw all of the various strands together, and tell a compelling story. This makes reports relatable and actionable. Rather than simply receiving the positive affirmation

from social media sites or PR campaigns, researchers will be able to provide insight into where consumers do and don't experience the brand vision.

Presenting the findings in a way that is insightful, visual and memorable makes the insights more likely to be remembered - and therefore actioned by the business or brand...

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