

Samra2017: The reality of researchers being locked out of boardrooms

 By Leigh Andrews

18 May 2017

The research industry was 'the ma'n over the last 70 years. Now, it is lying on its death bed. Do you have the courage to resuscitate it? Bérengère Parouty and Heather Tluczek of Kantar TNS unpacked this topic in a research paper presentation at Samra 2017 on how market research agencies will remain relevant in the future: Through symbiosis, evolution or extinction.

Parouty and Tluczek's presentation was a powerful one filled with strong imagery and voice-overs alluding to the fact that we had fallen asleep at the wheel of marketing research and didn't notice the landscape had changed. The question now is how marketing research can best service the strategic decision-making processes of the C-suite, which seems to have bypassed us on the road.



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According to Parouty and Tluczek, researchers need to do more than just share thought leadership, as the process of reporting on global trends and experiences is now just as useful as local narratives. They suggest it may be an idea to place a researcher inside the company and to connect the dots between multiple data sources by fulfilling an external role while sitting inside the business.

They suggest a more strategic role for the researcher, dependent on the independent researcher's ability to perform in this way. They also caution against quick fixes as the major challenge is a **disconnect of researchers and major business challenges** as they're just not in touch with the C-suite. Other intrinsic industry challenges are those of positioning and relevance, and the issue is bigger than the sum of its parts.

Required: Change from within

Market researchers are increasingly looked at as “backward-looking number crunchers.” Parouty and Tluczek point out this is doubly disadvantaged, from both a business point of view and as it hints that we're missing the technical know-how; as a collective, we're falling short. Worse is that our foolhardy commitment has led to a skill-set shortage, particularly when it comes to fundamental business acumen. Isn't it strange that market researchers seek to solve business issues without speaking their language? Parouty and Tluczek says we need to nurture this lacking skill-set and also revise our job

descriptions but not get rid of current researcher traits. "Keep your curiosity and problem-solving nature but remember that change must happen from within to safeguard the industry for tomorrow."

Perhaps unfairly, market researchers are considered as sellers of insights to buyers of insights, even though most beneficial would be to streamline this process into a partnership and for the research process to be integrated into existing business processes. Parouty and Tluczek says the disconnect comes from our interpretation of the word 'partnership' because by our very nature, researchers are risk-averse. The associated discomfort with uncertainty impedes any risk-taking and so, they recommend a partnership model in the true sense of the word.

What's encouraging is that when talking to clients, Parouty and Tluczek find they do support level of change, but they warn that the situation is far more dire in SA than initially expected. Yes, there is still time, but we need to act now as fundamental change is necessary, in the form of symbiosis. Even innovation is too slow and minimalist for what Parouty and Tluczek have in mind, so we need a revolution in the form of sudden, radical change of paradigm.

This is certainly a brave topic to ponder as corporates are already building the capability internally, with the likes of AI, and investing in capabilities that will bring a holistic understanding of the consumer to their own business. This again speaks of the need for blended skills and cross-functional teams, especially as consulting companies are likely to become market research competitors in the near future. It is human insight that actually bring the consumer into the boardroom, so don't lose sight of that as the shape of data continues to evolve.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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