

Pressure to Act First, Think Later is Hurting Market Research

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In his book *The Invisible Computer*, Donald Norman discusses the cultural divide that separates the academic and corporate worlds. Having left the ivory tower (Norman was a distinguished professor of cognitive science at UC San Diego), he became an executive at HP, Apple, and went on to found the Nielsen Norman Group, a company specializing in user experience research. Like a modern-day Gulliver, Norman's new experiences were not without their surprises, one of the most profound being that professors have time to think, but little power to act, while their counterparts in business have little time to think, but have the power to act—and act quickly, they must!

I, too, have struggled to bridge these two worlds in the shift from academic (cultural anthropologist) to market researcher. Five years into my new career, I've come to understand how the “act first, think later” approach can be detrimental to market research. While speed is critical to competitive business ventures, its careless application impedes sound decision-making and actually ends up wasting time and money. There are many good products that have failed because they were launched without thoughtful marketing strategies based on deep consumer insight.

Market research providers are as much to blame for privileging speed above all else as the companies who buy their services. For the sake of time and getting a piece of the shrinking research pie, researchers are under pressure to abandon the fundamentals of good research: asking questions, developing hypotheses, and creating appropriate

research designs that will help companies take informed actions. When we cave into these pressures, we compromise our integrity and commitment to being an independent voice. Wall Street's ethical and legal crisis due to the investment banking scandal should be a lesson to us in the research industry. We need to evaluate our ethical commitments if we want to save our reputation and prove that our services are essential, not simply a formality, a luxury, or a rubber stamp.

Highlighted below are three challenges facing the market research industry that need to be addressed if we want to ensure the integrity and commitment to professional standards that our industry was built on.

1) Market research has been relegated to a legitimization function. Our role is too often like that of the electorate in totalitarian regimes where there is only one candidate on the ballot. In this charade our sole function is to say "yes" to our client throughout the research process. And timid market researchers frequently accept their role as well-paid rubber stamps. However profitable playing the "yes man" may be in the short term, in the long run it only reinforces the notion that market research is not a trustworthy independent voice. When we sign-on in this compromised capacity, we erode our chances of being taken seriously.

Over and over again, I've worked with Fortune 500 clients who insist on changing the line of questioning I take with consumers because they are not getting the answers they need to justify the business decisions they made before the research began. And, in the reporting stage, I've been asked to "make-up" the findings because "after all it's qualitative research." The scientific method has no role to play here. Rather, the rule of the day is keep changing the rules until one gets the answer one is looking for.

2) The boundary between market research and advertising, PR, and sales is blurring. Many product development teams don't realize that research needs to be independent of the sales function. Because companies are so focused on selling their products and services, they often use research among consumers as an opportunity to plug their product or service rather than to sit back and receive honest feedback from consumers. In addition, a number of advertising, PR, and communications firms claim to be doing research but lack any commitment to the basic premises of the discipline.

In my ethnography business, clients often want to be included in my onsite research because they wish to experience the powerful insights of first-hand observation. I encourage their participation, yet find that they often cannot resist crossing the line between research and cheerleading despite giving them detailed guidelines prior to their participation. They end up defending or explaining the products instead of listening to consumers' problems, confusions, or suggestions for improvement—the real reason for research. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article profiled a company that reports to do research but really is doing surreptitious PR. When asked why his research company never gave negative reviews of his clients' products, the CEO answered “that's not our business.” They don't understand or respect the ethics of research nor recognize the value of the critical voice of the consumer.

3) Gimmicks and gadgets are being substituted for sound research approaches. In the scramble to differentiate and keep current with the latest research trends, researchers are pushing gimmicks and shortcuts under the guise of “proprietary” techniques. This is especially true of hot or trendy areas of research such as Internet surveys and ethnography. There is nothing new about ethnography, (anthropologists

have been developing the techniques collectively known as “ethnography” for more than 100 years), nor are its techniques a secret. However, it does require years of training and experience to be skillful at ethnographic research. With ethnography, as with any research approach, look for experienced practitioners with a proven track record—not a company that is jumping on the bandwagon to cash in on the latest trend.

Market research is essential for companies as they seek to understand their customers and improve their offerings. Although today’s corporate climate favors quick delivery of research, it is also indicative of the fact that market research is often seen as an afterthought or a formality. We shouldn’t sell our industry short by succumbing to the pressures of mindless action, by giving up our independent voice, or by giving in to the temptation to substitute sound research for the latest gizmo.