

Viewpoint

We can do better

Professor Don E. Schultz,
Northwestern University

About a year ago, I stirred up what has proven to be a hornet's nest in the research community. First, I presented a paper, 'A roadmap for developing an integrated, audience-focused, market research-driven organisation' at the ESOMAR 2005 Annual Congress in Lisbon. There, I suggested too much market and marketing research was focused on inconsequential, tactical, short-term studies, used to confirm decisions managers had already made. My solution: leverage market research up to focus on financial business decisions. My argument was so powerful, the paper was simply ignored.

Since I thought the message relevant, I transported the essence of it across the Atlantic, summarising the argument in my column in the 15 February 2005 issue of *Marketing News*. The headline 'MR deserves blame for marketing's decline' received lots of attention. It brought the research community out in droves. More than 70 researchers, at various industry levels, responded by email. And they are still coming in as the Google audience starts to find the column.

I expected the emails to be scathing. They were not. At least 90% agreed with my views. Only a few wanted to string me up from the nearest lamp post. The overwhelming view seemed to be, 'We [the market research community] can do better. Why aren't we?'

Lisa Keefe, *Marketing News* editor, followed with a telephone roundtable, (reported in the 1 June 2005 issue). The title 'On common ground' seemed to reflect the consensus of the conversation between Nigel Hollis (Millward Brown), Ed Keller (NOP), Craig Collins (Union Pacific), Scott Bailey (Targetbase), Lisa and me. The general agreement was, 'We can do better. But, the problem is so big, it's going to take a long time to solve.'

In April, at the Advertising Research Foundation annual conference, I presented the same message in front of a panel of research experts including Robert Duboff, Fredrik Nauckhoff, Mogens Laursen and David Adelman. I expected substantial resistance, but, the response was the same, 'Yes, we can do better. But the problem is so big, it's going to take a long time.'

The pattern was beginning to form: agreement with the theme, but smothering the challenge with consensus.

Interviews with the trade newsletter *Research Business*, a long conversation with Professor Tom J. Brown, Oklahoma State University, who was revising the marketing research textbook he and Professor Gilbert Churchill have written, produced the same result. Agreement on the theme, 'market research can do better' but, the same response, 'the problem is just too big'.

The controversy continues. In the June 2005 issue of *Research World*, David Pring, IPSOS, a regular columnist for this ESOMAR-sponsored publication, took not only my views of MR but that of Malcolm Gladwell, of

Tipping Point and *Blink* fame, to task for our comments. He suggested that my view was simply indigestible, whatever that means.

The key point: everyone agrees, market and marketing research can do better. But, why don't we? Why don't we attack the problem with the idea of solving it, not just agreeing it exists. If we really have the skills we claim, why not put them to work? Set a research agenda. Identify the issues. Build a strong case for leveraging MR out of the tactical and into the strategic. Present it to management and deans and agencies and whoever else is required, and get something done. The new, fragmented, global, multi-faceted world of markets and marketing need us today. They will need us even more tomorrow.

We can do better. But not simply by agreeing there is a problem. We need a solution.

In pursuit of lost causes

Michael Brown, Technical Consultant to National Readership Surveys Ltd

Occasionally a breath of fresh air is admitted to our industry. If Ben Page ('Quality control' *IJMR*, 47, 4) has not thrown wide the casement, he has at least unlatched a window.

Let me first answer his final question: to commence a debate on '... a more detailed, rigorous and pan-national approach to guaranteeing data collection quality ...' would be to

waste our collective, industry breath. There are four main reasons.

First, we are no longer in the data business. We shed such trivia about the same time as we successfully escaped a cottage industry image and abandoned boring considerations of methodology. We then peddled information and moved on (as Mr Page correctly observes) to insight; no longer being a keen student of research marketing, I am not quite sure where the vocabulary stands now. But data quality is no longer an issue; if the buzz is right, the research is good.

Second, we are now a global service industry of no mean size, with a highly professional management. Such managers well know that the surest way of moving pounds or euros or dollars to the bottom line is by concentrating on or guaranteeing those product or service qualities considered fashionable by the consumer – in our case, the commissioner of research. (Have you noticed the insidious spread of 'Fair trade' labelling?) I hear of few contracts being awarded only after careful, comparative scrutiny of prospective suppliers' quality manuals.

Third, however, through no fault of their own, today's client is highly unlikely to be a professional researcher; he or she will just not command the vocabulary in which to phrase the questions that can test quality (if honestly answered!), whether we are speaking of sample representativeness, back checking, scale validity, inference testing or data ascription.

Fourth, we pay but lip service to ethics; if it were not so, we would be bound to give account of the limitations of what we can do (as well as of its very considerable potential and

achievements). And we would take it as our responsibility to ensure the lay client appreciated and understood the certainty with which we can draw the conclusions and recommendations we offer from the data we have collected.

Before the howls of protest burst my ear drums, let me assure the progenitors of MRQSA, its current managers, those who gained the accolade of BS status and those who now woo ISO that I question in no way either their good intentions or their hard work. But if you set gamekeepers to draft statutes, you must be sure that they do not

harbour too much sympathy for the poacher making a good living.

Michael Brown, now semi-retired, is Technical Consultant to National Readership Surveys Ltd. He previously served as Quality Director at Taylor Nelson Sofres.

If you feel strongly about the issues raised in this 'Viewpoint' and want to respond either through this column (no more than 600 words) or by submitting a formal paper, please email your contribution to ijmreditor@warc.com