

A woman with long brown hair, wearing an orange sleeveless top and a brown watch, is sitting on a grey sofa and smiling while looking at a laptop. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a plant and a window.

Keeping ahead of the curve

Three things market research & insights professionals need to know to future-proof their careers.

An introduction

Since launching our podcast early this year, we've had the distinct pleasure of speaking with more than 30 insights professionals from all sectors of the insights industry. We've covered a wide range of topics in our interviews, from market research's role to making the world a better place to how to find career opportunities and balance, all the way to new methodologies, supply chain issues, and how to uncover the very best insights.

Eye opening and fascinating, talking to those who are on-the-ground in all types of roles has helped our listeners build an even greater understanding of the industry as it stands today. What we've noticed is that, no matter the area of expertise, our guests consistently touched a few key themes facing market researchers right now. The top three we cover in this paper include are summarized on the right.

If there's one thing that recent global disruptions have done, they have caused many to take a closer look at some of the challenges facing the insights industry, and how they must be addressed. We must understand and deal with these issues in order to stay relevant and competitive. I hope you'll read on as we share some of the things we've learned over the past 30+ years in the market research industry, and from speaking to your peers and colleagues on our Now That's Significant podcast.

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Fighting for data quality. We're only as good as the quality of the insights we deliver, yet there are a few odds stacked against the market research space. Some of these issues insights professionals have been battling for years, and some have been exacerbated by recent events. Understanding the intricacies of the issues affecting data quality, and how to combat them, can contribute significantly to success (or failure).

Integrating new methodologies. We have so much data at our fingertips these days that, if we can bring it all together, we can create holistic audience views that we only dreamed about just a few short years ago. New methodologies have opened up a whole world of insights, and integrating all these moving pieces together will be critical in staying competitive and a step ahead of your audience's needs.

Focusing on the human element. In a world filled with new technology around every corner, it is easy to be distracted by the next shiny thing. It's more important than ever to stay vigilant about valuing the human side of research - that means everything from allowing humans to do what they do best (like being empathetic and curious) to nurturing yourself and your team to find balance and reach full potential.





Data quality

Understanding the intricacies of data quality

Market research has one key job. And that's helping an organization to better understand the world it lives in by providing insights that inform business decisions and actions. Those insights must be reliable, accurate, complete and relevant, and they must be delivered in a timely manner. Yet, we continue to be plagued by data quality issues. Why?





The law of supply and demand

Sample companies are easy scapegoats and are often blamed for quality issues when projects are plagued with low participation rates, low quality responses or an inability to meet quotas, especially for niche audiences. However, things are not that simple. Many companies are seeing the squeeze that has ensued from the pandemic when it comes to sample recruitment. Karine Pepin, Vice President at 2CV, says that there is a “traffic jam” in the survey response collection process. The demand for surveys has increased while the willingness to take surveys has decreased.

Jeremy Antoniuk of Rep Data said that there are innovative, forward-thinking ways to find the respondents needed for specific studies, no matter how narrow. One way to get better results is to take an unbiased

approach, in which sample is drawn from multiple sources to provide more representative respondents and find those niche audiences. For suppliers, Jeremy says they must do things like: democratize sample aggregation knowledge and best practices; partner with researchers to combine best practices; combine their research expertise with practical research fieldwork best practices; improve sample quality through rigorous methodologies; and streamline the sample procurement and fulfillment process. This can start to move the needle on the supply shortage the whole industry is feeling right now.

On top of this overall shortage of respondents is the critical need for representativity, giving us a true mountain to climb. Sabrina Trinquetel of Measure

Protocol says that those who are conducting the research need to consist of a diverse group of people to gain multiple perspectives and ensure inclusivity, and the respondents we are collecting insights from need to be truly representative of the greater population. Traditional “nat. pop” or “gen pop” metrics of age, gender and region used to define a target audience need to become more expansive and include other metrics such as ethnicity, sexuality, and ability. This kind of approach will more fully represent the types of people that make up any particular audience - otherwise we are making decisions based on incomplete data. Many industry groups like the Market Research Society and Insights Association are spearheading initiatives to support movement in this direction.



A silhouette of a person stands in the foreground, looking towards a background filled with a dense, glowing grid of blue and white digital data, resembling a server room or a data center.

Fraud is ever-evolving

Even though fraud in the market research industry has grown and changed over time, its premise remains fundamentally the same: there will always be fraudsters looking to cash out on survey incentives. Lisa Wilding-Brown of InnovateMR says there is no way for any one company to completely solve this issue and eliminate fraud, but there are ways to be more proactive in catching these nefarious users. We need to stop telling ourselves that there is a magic fix or silver bullet when it comes to market research fraud, but we certainly do need to be diligent in fighting it.

One way is to layer fraud mitigation techniques at multiple points in the project workflow. Vignesh Krishnan of Research Defender says that at the very least companies need to employ a consistent program that includes all the basics, such as digital fingerprinting, tracking blacklists and similar techniques, as well as more advanced practices. Making an investment in technology and human expertise to develop a comprehensive data quality program can help to manage fraud, even if there is no 100% solution. Collaborating along the whole market research chain to ensure compliance with privacy regulations and using the same messaging across the ecosystem, plus employing best practices for fighting ever-more-sophisticated fraudsters, can help.



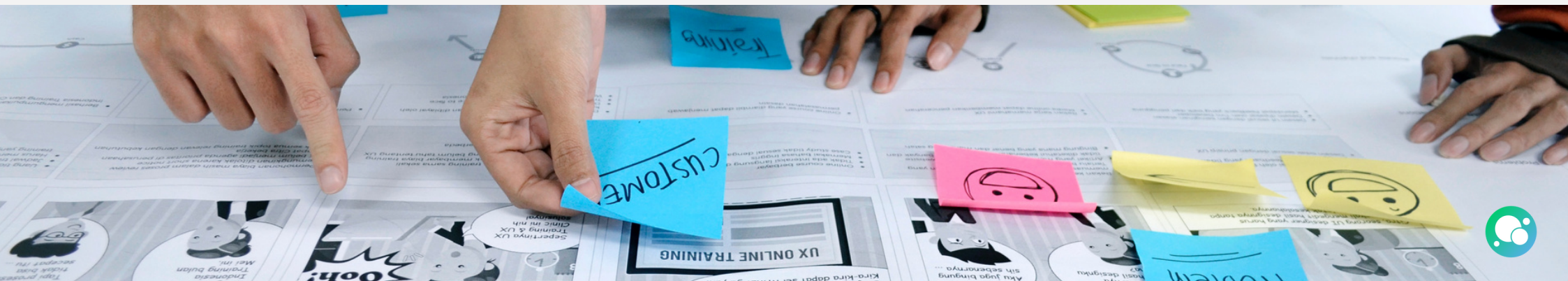
Boosting respondent experience from the ground-up

Designing surveys to engage and enhance the respondent experience is fundamental to data quality. There is no shortage of commentary out there about best practices when it comes to building better surveys and employing respondent satisfaction strategies. Creating user-friendly, device-agnostic designs, providing proper incentives and rewards for respondents, and setting expectations up-front for participants before they enter a survey are just a few of the things that are commonly cited.

Lynn Pellicano at Simon-Kucher & Partners says that shorter surveys are critical, and although we are heading in the right direction with length of interviews (down about five minutes on average over the past two years from 30 to 25 minutes), we have a long way to go. People are busier than ever before, and respecting their time while taking a survey is a big part of the data quality puzzle.

Creating surveys that work across devices, and making even complex questions accessible in a mobile environment, is also an important piece. She's a big proponent of proper screeners up-front that will keep respondents out of surveys for which they are not a good fit, saving them time and frustration, plus boosting data quality when the results come in because answers came from the right people in the first place.

In order to improve the market research ecosystem, those on both sides of the industry need to work together to solve challenges and ensure long-term success. Completely eliminating data quality problems may not be possible, but ignoring them will cause a snowball effect. Understanding quality drivers and getting ahead of challenges now is an investment in the future, and will increase the subsequent value you can achieve with every project.





Change for good

Gain holistic views with new methodologies and data integration

For years, market research has relied on a fundamental technique for understanding audiences: surveys. However, in today's data-rich environment, a single quantitative study is not enough to build true understanding. Audiences are more complicated than ever, which means brands need a more comprehensive view of exactly what their target customers are doing, feeling, and thinking. To help, insights professionals need to eliminate research silos and layer research strategies.





Advanced techniques hit the mainstream

One of the more interesting ways to cut through the clutter and find out how consumers are really feeling is through neuroscience, which can measure physiological cues that indicate a respondent's neurological response to content, experiences and products. Formerly only accessible in an expensive lab environment, with time-consuming processes, new technology has allowed greater application in the market research environment.

Laura Beavin-Yates of Immersion, a company that uses personal smart devices to capture real-time neuroscience

predictions, said that today agile neuroscience techniques are used for a wide range of consumer insights applications including in-home product testing, early stage concept testing (products, ads, brands), content testing, shop-alongs, shopper journey tracking, employee connection with programs at companies and more. Immersion measures people's overall emotional connection and attention with the content they're viewing or experience that they are having.

Rebecca Brooks of Alter Agents has used this technology coupled with other research methodologies, both qualitative

and quantitative, to provide more robust insights to clients in all categories. She says it helps to provide a granular understanding of how engaged their audiences are, both in their attention and their emotions. For example, her firm used neuroscience as part of a social media study to help identify the emotional impact of viewing video on mobile platforms, and also for a video game study to gauge advertising engagement among players and viewers.



Qualitative text data becomes more accessible

Another vast data resource that has traditionally been difficult to tap into is unstructured text data. In the past, text data sources like open-ended survey question responses had to be combed through and manually coded for insights. With demands for speed at an all-time high, across all industries, this is simply too slow. Alyona Medelyan from Thematic says that these manual approaches also allow people to bring their own bias into the equation when coding responses and, overall, can cause downstream issues. In order to take full advantage of text data, Alyona recommends implementing AI, machine learning, and natural language processing (NLP) algorithms to help us make sense of it to its fullest potential. Thematic uses these techniques to analyze reviews, chat, surveys and more with no manual coding, and extract themes and sentiments from collected text.

Ben Hookway of Relative Insight says one of the most valuable ways to use text data is comparative analysis. Rather than analyzing all data that is common between two people groups (generally 90-95%), Relative Insight scrupulously digs into all that is different between the two groups (normally 5-10%).

When the company's platform was being used in law enforcement, before its technology evolved into a commercial setting as an SaaS platform, this approach enabled one law enforcement department to spot bad actors who were posing as teenage girls to entrap children. By using AI-powered NLP with advanced comparative.



linguistics, this approach can help drive enhanced contextual understandings of target audiences, competitors and trends - all from any source of text data. And often, this data is already owned and available for analysis, which means any insights gained are going to be a value-add.

When businesses find a way to truly utilize text data and turn it into hard facts, plus make connections with other data sources like sales or survey data, they can start to access true audience understanding.



Data integration does not have to be a pain

So, you have all this data coming in from all directions - including new research techniques and methodologies. How do you bring it together? In a recent GRIT report from industry think tank Greenbook, “synthesizing data from multiple sources” was consistently on the list of critical priorities. We need all the data, from all the sources, together in one place in a manner that makes sense, so we aren’t operating in silos.

We have an increasing number of technology-based tools at our disposal that do everything from recruiting survey

participants through social media ads, all the way to custom, interactive data visualization dashboards. Data integration is no different. At this stage, traditional workflows can include broken, manual processes and time-consuming “workarounds” to bring data together in some kind of usable format. For those companies that rely on primary consumer research data, such as that garnered from surveys, to help them understand their audiences, typical business intelligence tools won’t usually fit the bill. While some may opt for using existing BI tools because of such potential integration pains (plus IT’s

insistence on status quo), survey data actually requires specialized tools that generalist data analysis platforms do not have, such as weighting and multi-level response analysis.

Solutions are needed that integrate and harmonize multiple disparate data sources, including complex market research data, to give a total cross data-source view, which is always greater than the sum of the individual parts. The right technology can bring all the data pieces together, so they can work together to provide knowledge, information and insights.





Stay in touch

Don't forget about the “human” element of market research

Technology is critical to doing our jobs as insights professionals, helping us meet today's demands for speed, data integration, accuracy and much more. In fact, there's no way we can do our jobs without it. However, the human element of our industry is what truly sets us apart. Over the years, we've rarely met a researcher who isn't driven by curiosity, passionate about what “nugget” they can uncover from the data, and how they can make a difference. It is those strictly human skills that we can't forget about as we ride into the future on a sea of technology choices.



Finding techquilibrium



This has been a favorite subject of ours: how to find that deft balance between the two seemingly opposite forces of technology and humans. It's something we like to call "techquilibrium", a term coined by Gartner, which is defined as the right mix of traditional

and digital capabilities and assets. This "balance point", with the right mix of capabilities and assets, can be found by using technology to amplify and enhance human strengths within market research.

Simon Chadwick, who wears many hats in the market research world, cautions the industry to be acutely aware of technology's possible shortcomings. Our current environment, which is pressuring insights teams for more data with fewer resources, has led to the use of more self-serve platforms, and insourcing in the hopes to free up time and money. These approaches can certainly end up in costly frustration. He says the key to using technology today is intelligent partnering - seeking out partners with the right solution to provide real advantages. Someone has probably already developed the exact solution you need, and done it well. Finding the right partner, with the right level of support, can put you a big step ahead.

As market researchers we are naturally curious about the human experience, and Priscilla McKinney of Little Bird Marketing says we also need to remember that we are bringing our own humanity into our careers. We need to use that fact to our advantage and be aware of how it is coloring our work as a whole. She cautions that we can't be led by the tool, or the methodology, and we still need people in a room applying their humanity to shed light on the data and the insights. She asks: "How do we start back at the beginning, and remember that you yourself are a consumer?"

Technology, for all its potential, still needs people pulling certain strings, providing oversight to make sure ideal outcomes are met. Depending on the solution, much of the "heavy lifting" can be done by machines, so humans are freed up to do what they do best: dig into the data for insights that help businesses take positive action.



State of the insights professional's career



With this said, technology has changed the face of our jobs irrevocably. This change, along with all of the other forces at play in today's world and workforce, can begin to affect employee morale, says industry veteran, Jamin Brazil of HubUX. The new work model, with many isolated and working from home, leaves companies struggling with how to attract, engage and relate to employees. Individuals and companies both need to be aware of how a possible lack of personal connection can become demotivating, and put plans in place to help increase engagement for staff, strengthen relationships, and build new company values.

To make a hard situation worse, pressures on insights teams to perform at such a high level with few resources is creating a burnout situation. Kristin Luck of

ScaleHouse said that she's seen the number of work hours among market research professionals rise steadily for herself and her peers over the years. It has become the norm, and the expectation for market researchers to work longer hours. In this reality, it is critical for individuals to seek balance and "be very deliberate about what you're working on, how much time you're going to spend on it, because when you say yes to one thing, it's to 'no' to something else, that 'no' might be just something in your personal life that's really important to you."

Even in the face of these challenges, market research is still a fascinating, fun, and inspiring industry, in which you can build a truly meaningful career. Karen Lynch of Greenbook says that you can do this by being mindful about your overall career

path and taking a thoughtful, deliberate approach toward your "dream" role. It's also important to stay connected within the industry, networking and building relationships to create a collaborative environment for yourself. Despite being a large global industry, the insights space is close-knit and supportive. Tap into that.

Be aware that there are incredible pressures right now in the industry as a whole. So, choose to be thoughtful about your career and put plans and boundaries in place to ensure you achieve your goals, both professionally and personally. Leaders at organizations should focus on people-first strategies that recognize pressures and prioritize employee well-being. The quality and effectiveness of insights generated will be all the better for it.





In conclusion...

It is an exciting time to be in the market research space. Things are moving quickly, data is more important than ever. Insights professionals are being called upon to help leadership make critical business decisions, while at the same time being asked to prove their value, again and again.

The first step in proving value is to be aware of the environment in which you are doing your job, plus the key issues facing your organization and your industry as a whole. Understand over-arching demands for speed, data quality and insights, plus where the key challenges lie in addressing these demands, and make a plan. You'll need the right mix of technology solutions and human talent in your toolbox, and a clear understanding of your own situation and personal goals, to future-proof your career.



Discover Harmoni

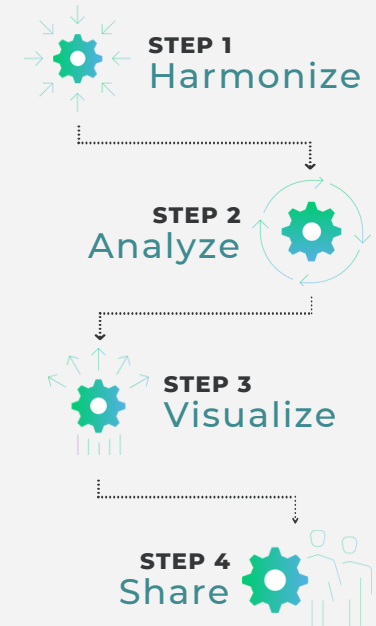
Harmoni is one of the MR platforms that insights teams are turning to, to help differentiate themselves in business by delivering quality insights at pace. A cloud-based software platform, Infotools Harmoni is purpose-built for market research data—from data processing through to analysis, reporting, visualization, dashboards, distribution, and data alerts.

Benefits of using the Harmoni platform






- Reduce the time taken to present meaningful insights to business leaders.
- Combine multiple data sources to enrich your market research intelligence.
- Automate and streamline key tasks to spend more time analyzing data.
- Collaborate with confidence by presenting insights that are comprehensive and holistic.



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