

Reinventing market research

New age research calls for a seamless blend of old skills and new practices



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Marketing research as a discipline was born in the advertising agencies of the 1950s, as an aid to the account planning function. Over time the marketing research departments in ad agencies got spun off as marketing research companies (IMRB of India was born in HTA, for instance). Then manufacturers realised the need for marketing research and set up their own marketing research departments to interpret the

research data that was flowing from the marketing research agencies. Vikram Sarabhai set up ORG (Operations Research Group) to do pharmaceutical retail audit, to help his pharmaceutical company. One of the many pioneering things he did to transform India.

It was therefore a little shocking to us to hear from Professor Arvind Rangaswamy of Penn State University that there is a new wind blowing through the marketing research discipline in the US. Earlier this year at a seminar he announced that companies like Cigna USA have shut their marketing research departments. Only to set up new department that have a broader focus, with a spanking new name, "Marketing Analytics Department". His is not the lone voice calling out for fresh thinking around how marketing research is managed. A few predictions in the January 2015 edition of *Research World* (ESOMAR monthly magazine) that examines the impact of the

digital era on traditional market research agencies are relevant to India as well: Social listening analytics will be a must have for any marketing research manager; agile research will become mainstream; micro surveys and intercepts could replace long consumer tracking surveys; adjacent marketing services such as feedback management, customer advocacy will have to be brought on board; data scientists will be the new insight experts; predictive analytics will become more important than rear-view analytics.

Today companies are facing a challenge of managing many streams of data. Over and above the traditional sources, the digital age has created many new data sets. There is the traffic to the company or brand website. The engagement level of consumers with the brand's social media properties. The chatter in social media about the brand and its competitors. Smart companies have set up digital listening posts to monitor the brand buzz

in social media. The comments in the most popular blogs, the most popular websites also need to be monitored.

With brand activation becoming a big part of marketing, there is data being picked up about consumers from new touch points.

The traditional marketing research department was equipped to interpret and understand the syndicated research that was flowing into the company. They were also well trained to write a research brief and monitor a commissioned research project, be it a set of focus groups or a large-scale usage and attitude study. They were good at mapping consumer behaviour against the brand parameters. They were good at looking at past data and drawing conclusions. The new age of marketing analytics calls for a new set of skills. They now have to become adept at creating "training datasets" to help project intended behaviour. The new age of data calls for running experiments (in fact business schools are getting ready to train their students to run real life experiments through the creation of Behavioural Labs). They need to be able to build models that can be tested. While doing all this they cannot forget their

core strengths: consumer behaviour and marketing research.

The smarter marketing research departments will transform themselves into marketing analytics departments by marrying the traditional skills of the MR department with the new age skills of managing digital data streams, training data, model building and big data analytics. While doing all this they cannot allow the digital data dazzle them from the core task of understanding consumer behaviour. If this calls for ethnographic study or sociocultural trendspotting, they will have to be ready to do that as well. The traditional marketing research cannot be fully functional if they don't track all the digital data streams that are flowing into the company. In a similar way just doing model building with digital torrents of data may not solve big marketing problems, if the model builders are just mathematicians who may mistake the trees for the forests. Or worse.

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