

DATA: from plot to subplot

Humans' preference for anecdotal forms over numerical analysis is well recognised. *Adhil Patel* undertook an investigation into the role of storytelling in research; in this extract he looks at how it can impact presentation.

When storytelling is mentioned in market research, this is the one area [presentation to clients] that most practitioners will refer to, or think of. Indeed, much has been written for recent conferences on this topic, and there also seems to be a preponderance of new techniques for presenting findings and insights, and some real opportunities to avoid 'death by PowerPoint®'.

Edward Tufte (2007) has famously criticised the 'cognitive style of PowerPoint'. He claims that this ubiquitous presentation tool forces us to think in a specific way, and that it does not enable efficient information transfer. This can clearly be seen in market research, which is characterised by staid, standard presentation templates, with minimal space for creativity, and hardly any room for customisation. This approach assumes that all presentation needs are similar enough to be able to be adequately catered for by one rigid tool.

Despite the availability of many options when it comes to presentation software and mode, researchers tend to perpetuate the traditional methods, and stick with what they know, rather than push the envelope or rock the boat, even if a small change might lead to a big reward.

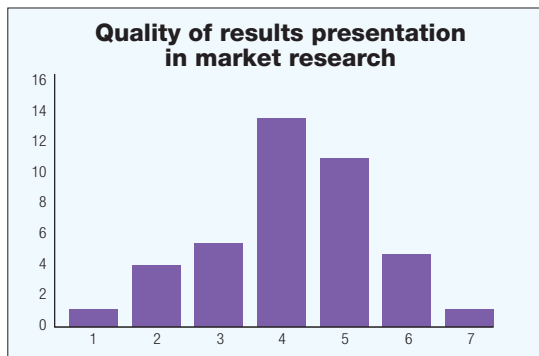


Figure 1: Q.b. How good are market researchers, in your opinion, at getting the most important findings, results and insights across to our clients? (1= Horrible; 7= Amazing)

The practitioners surveyed certainly believe that an improvement is possible in this area, with most responses clustering around the midpoint of the scale, and very few reaching for the top end of the scale.

However, the visuals are only one part of the story. One should also be forming the story in a way that makes for easier transmission of the data, findings and insights, and hopefully leave the audience with a feeling that the presentation and the study were worthwhile.

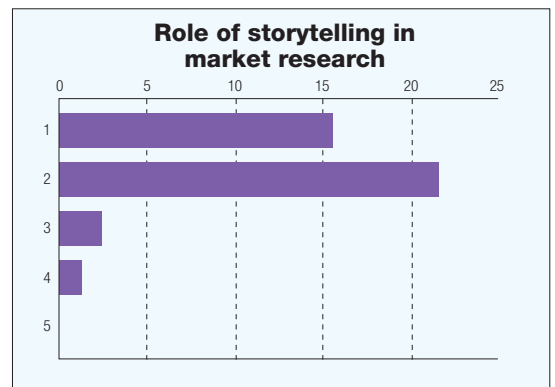


Figure 2: The role of storytelling in market research

Figure 2 shows that the practitioner sample definitely believes that storytelling has a role to play in market research. The codes for the question are below:

1. It is the future of market research. We will not survive without improving our storytelling.
2. Storytelling can help us to become more consultative, and thus retain clients.
3. There are arguments for and against, and I'm not that sure which way to lean.
4. I believe that stories are not necessary in market research. Good research is enough.
5. It has no place whatsoever in market research. Stick to the facts!



There are many ways to build the story, and these are certainly outside the scope of this paper, but suffice to say that the client is certainly an agent that can benefit greatly from a clear story, as opposed to a data dump.

Improved display mechanisms

Infograms, as made popular by McCandless (2009), are beginning to spread far and wide. Their primary use has been in online and traditional news sources and certain magazines, eg *The Economist*. However, it can't be long before these become commonplace in market research. The idea that information can be beautiful should not escape our industry.

One idea that encouraged McCandless to create the first of these infograms, the BBC chart, was the need for a frame of reference or benchmark. He was struck by the fact that a hundred billion pounds was an amount that didn't really mean anything to him.

He addressed this by comparing amounts in the BBC budget to each other, making sure to include items that would make sense and be familiar to the target audience. This chart was a good example of the use of priming (by providing benchmarks), framing (increasing understanding through restatement of the issues) and also agenda setting (as he also was able to point the reader to issues of 'importance') (McCandless, 2009).

Edward Tufte (2007) on the other hand, has become a relatively well-known name amongst those with an interest in better presentation of data. His book focuses on giving readers the tools to understand what makes good graphic representation, rather than just a set of examples and templates to be mimicked.

These display methods together with new presentation styles such as Pecha Kucha, where presenters use 20 pictures that transition on their own every 20 seconds while you try to keep up with them, will hopefully ensure that market research presentations become more engaging.

Better frameworks and metrics

Over many years, the market research industry has become more and more consolidated around a few really big companies. One of the effects of this is that many researchers and therefore many views or philosophies were brought together, and in one way or another, made to resolve their differences. The researchers that had developed these points of view were generally practitioners

that had learned these things empirically, and through years of research.

The numerous mergers and acquisitions meant that resources became available to individuals that might be willing to aggregate and formulate philosophies, about research in general, but also about specific topics such as brands, advertising and the human condition, amongst others.

What these aggregated philosophies have done, is to allow our industry to progress, as the ideas and paradigms of these smaller firms then entered into battle against each other, with winners emerging to compete for client attention. One should note the implied use of the idea of natural selection.

In the end, these points of view or philosophies provide these companies with a start point and a context for any research that is conducted. Without a philosophy, the study would likely be much more unfocused, and in all probability more difficult to analyse and communicate.

Better frameworks for understanding the research make for easier analysis, and easier dissemination of the relevant information. The framework can be communicated ahead of the results (usually even before the study is commissioned), thereby using both framing (a basis for understanding the findings) and agenda setting (suggesting the areas to focus on).

A framework should strike the reader as merely a subtly disguised story, or at very least a plot line, with the details of the story being filled in by the data.

The metrics calculated and used by these companies also tend to go through a similar evolutionary process, with the 'best' metrics moving on, and the losers being relegated to the archives. These metrics are often collated in databases, which are used to establish benchmarks or norms for future studies. This then would be an instance of priming, where items are provided for comparison with the current item under scrutiny (commitment to the brand, advert likeability score etc.).

However, these metrics are also mostly proprietary, and thus the details of their calculation are kept secret. This makes it extremely difficult for our clients to compare similar metrics on any kind of scientific basis, and this perpetuates a retardation of the evolutionary process. A forum or mechanism that might allow direct comparisons of metrics across market research suppliers would allow



this evolution to continue, and for our industry to evolve and advance. This movement towards ‘better’ metrics, whatever that means for a specific metric, is held back by a reluctance to compare, and also a tendency to distort details.

It can thus be argued that better frameworks and better metrics allow us to tell better, more relevant, and more accurate stories to our clients.

Delivering on client expectations

Probably the one thing that researchers can do to improve on the reactions to their delivery of results and findings is to ensure that client expectations are managed appropriately.

The information being presented may be interesting, and even engaging, but it is all for naught if it is not what the client is looking for, and is not totally relevant. However, in order to deliver on 19 expectations, one has to first establish what those expectations are. This drives home the importance of the pre-

presentation, which can help to iron out last-minute issues, but also the statement of business issues and research objectives in as clear a manner as possible, as early as possible in the process. Matching the findings and recommendations to these issues will then ensure actionability of the research.

Though the client is sure to have specific issues that need to be addressed with the research, there is also an opportunity for the supplier to influence the agenda somewhat, and to suggest possible areas of focus. A good storyteller will be able to weave the business objectives and findings together with frameworks and metrics that have been pre-exposed, into an engaging story delivered through a mode that encourages information processing and uptake. ■

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Tall Tales: The Impact and Role of Storytelling in Market Research

Atticus Abstract

On trend

10 Trends for 2011

**Ann Mack, Marian Berelowitz,
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JWT, New York

Being able to identify the trends that will shape the world in the year ahead is something of a Holy Grail; striving to do so involves putting heads above the parapet, and offering hostages to fortune, to mix a couple of metaphors. This is JWT's sixth annual year-end forecast of trends for the near future, loaded with the caveat that trends tend to be intersected with each other,

and they don't fit neatly in one calendar year.

Leading this year's crop is a prediction that brands will apply the mechanics of gaming to non-gaming spaces to drive actions and behaviors. Volkswagen made recycling fun by investing a Bottle Bank Arcade Machine with points and flashing lights for getting your bottle in the right slot.

The economy is a key theme: JWT predicts that a proliferation of ‘act now’ deals will attempt to nudge people back to pre-recessionary buy-now-think-later behaviour. And in a separate trend, there will be a return to renting goods or temporary forms of purchase. People will ‘de-tech’ by switching off some devices some of the time; while more and more of our lives will connect to the Internet, from dog collars to fridges.

Tomorrow's consumers increasingly will be looking not just for personalized products, but for a personalized digital realm in which everything they need where they are is on tap. And they'll be looking to third parties – digital or otherwise – to control their own behavior such as over-eating, over-drinking or over-spending. Interesting times ahead. ■

