

MR Invades, Adopts Social Media Research

Traditional market researchers guffawed at even the thought of Internet-based research when it first sprouted in the mid-1990s. It forced the hand of traditional researchers. Today, online research is far from perfect, but its benefits have become indisputable and new online research capabilities blossom unabated.

The comparable current controversy/opportunity is the application, reliability and value of social research. MarketResearch Careers' 2011 Annual Survey of MR Professionals revealed 46% of MR professionals have been asked to measure social networks. However, as talk abounds about the tsunami of novel data that social media can deliver, most traditional market researchers are still peering from the sidelines as entrepreneurial businesses pop up to deliver social media research wares to curious clients. Arguments about the uniqueness of these outputs have become Lilliputian in size; the stressful uncertainty is deducing what to make of the info generated from these insights.

When social research first appeared a few years ago, P&G VP Global CMK Kim Dedeker spoke of a future time when it might replace traditional, less reliable research. Recently, that was more or less repeated by P&G Global CMK Officer Joan Lewis. Day-after-day—encouraged by clients—a trickle of traditional MR agencies have been adopting and incorporating social media research with their traditional methods.

KL Communications (Red Bank, NJ) President and founder Kevin Lonnie recently shared with **RBR** his company's refusal to wallow in the "caution, resistance and pessimism" that he said is immobilizing acceptance of social media research. Last fall, the pull to add it to his tool kit became irresistible. "We couldn't continue to ignore the opportunity to inject social media analytics as needed into our research," he explained. "The power of these data had become so clear that any of my concerns couldn't dissuade me from looking into adding it to our company's research arsenal."

Lonnie said, "We'll remain a MR company doing primary research, but we have identified multiple ways to integrate social media into our established research platform, specifically enhancing our insights communities. It'll keep discussion topics interesting, members engaged and insights relevant. I don't see social media research ever accounting for more than a

fraction of our revenues. It'll augment it, and we are whetting our clients' appetites with a free trial. So far, everyone sees the value." He conjectured that the social media component might add 10% to a client's project invoice.

Lonnie pointed out that during 2010, social media research might have been applicable in 1 of 10 projects. "To show you how fast social media research is coming on, now I think I would apply it to 9 of every 10," he remarked. "I can't think of a client that wouldn't gain from marrying these data. The question is understanding social media and how to use it."

Lonnie investigated three social media research providers before choosing NetBase Solutions, LLC's (Mountain View, CA) DIY platform as KL Communications' enabler. "We found its capabilities to be robust, dynamic, intuitive and pretty much cut across any of our clients' research needs," he observed. According to the NetBase website, its Social Media Insight & Analysis was created to aid

marketing teams via "tools and scorecards that give market researchers and brand managers a reliable way to understand online brand equity; analyze and compare consumer passion; and generate deep insights that answer their 'why' questions." It states these were "developed in partnership with 5 of the top 10 CPG companies, including Coca-Cola and Kraft."

NetBase's "hundreds of corporate customers and MR firms" include GfK (since April 2011), J.D. Power (which switched from its own proprietary system to NetBase in October 2010) and Directions Research. A homepage sidebar quotes Kraft SVP-Marketing Strategy & Communications Dana Anderson, who at the 2010 Me Conference, stated: "Should you do social media? That's like someone asking if they should buy a light bulb after electricity was invented."

NetBase claims to probe the "what" and "why" behind consumers' expressed feelings to measure "passion intensity." Its ConsumerBase social intelligence warehouse "brings billions of conversations from more than 95 million sources" to clients' fingertips, 24x7. NetBase claims it measures and tracks changes in consumer perceptions, refining messaging and packaging; and measuring a brand's competitive "Love Score."

"Our clients purchase research from us to help make and feel better about their decisions," explained Lonnie. "That



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makes us responsible to do the most appropriate research in the needed time frame. Oftentimes, they ask us to help make decisions pretty much faster than traditionally. That's led clients to look at social media's research possibilities. With the blogosphere and aggregation of Twitter, Facebook and other feeds, they question the need for a

In one year, social media became applicable in 9 of 10 projects, vs. 1 of 10 in 2010

traditional survey. Clients asked me why social media research isn't part of our work—and that became a reality check with tremendous implications on our business.”

Lonnie addressed **RBR**'s question about what the so-called social media data tsunami actually represents, saying, “You can argue it is a truer reflection of consumer sentiment than anonymous responses from traditional surveys. Are the small number of online respondents who take such a vastly out of proportion number of surveys more representative than those in the tsunami? I think in some ways, I'm more comfortable with social media participants.”

He described the output from a traditional research project enhanced with social media as “a labradoodle, or something that hasn't been brought together before but makes sense. We're not going outside as extremely as you might think.” He offered two examples. A research project for a giant publisher examined the iPad's likelihood of becoming the major distribution model for magazines. Secondly, a major airline that integrated social media data with their online community findings said it is appreciative

of the more holistic viewpoint that came about by integrating social media data with the frequent flier community that KL Communications runs for them. “It pulls in not just the sentiment, but also the news and buzz around our new products,” the client told Lonnie. “That's really helpful to keep us from getting sucked into only listening from our

high mileage fliers too much.”

Demonstrating how he has attempted to think things through, Lonnie mused, “I could see our business evolving to the point where we would make a judgement about a project being done entirely via social media as opposed to an online panel—or a common scenario where social media provides deep dive understanding of results from the online research.” About the only thing he hasn't developed yet is a catchy marketing title for the research enhancement. **RBR**

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