


Market Research in “Time of Cholera”

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After a deadly fight with the enemy, the pilots fly the warplanes back home to the safe hangar; only half of the planes make it back safely, the other half are shot down. “They came from above right and shot at us,” one of the surviving pilots mentioned in the briefing meeting with his superiors. The commander ordered a message to go out right away to warn all pilots that the danger is coming from above right. But the deputy commander asked to talk this through with the other experts in his profession and demanded the message not to be sent because it potentially would further endanger the other pilots ...

To have the right insight into the conditions, thus to be able to draw the correct conclusions is as important today as it ever was. Because one has limited funds available, not as many hands on board as in the past and the overall situation is tougher, doesn't all this make the search for the insight more important—or would you go for less insight when you have the funds, people, and happy times?

The difference is that you are not settling for less when the times are getting tough, in “time of Cholera”; rather that you are looking for creative, innovative, different ways to get to the right insight. And, it may let you also question the way to the insight that guided you in the past. So, in a way, tougher times let us question familiar approaches, the techniques we used in the past and may guide us to enhanced insight.

Here is one way of dealing with the tougher times in a different way: the traditional relationship between the company client and the vendor in our trade is: business question, RfP, proposal (usually three), contract, study, results. There are variations to this concept, of course, and there is nothing wrong with it—it worked for ‘centuries’. A more unconventional approach, however, would be to have a company/client contract with a vendor that allows for discussion, sharing of thoughts, bouncing ideas, etc. without a concrete study in mind. I'm not talking about the traditional retainer-contract,

where the vendor is hired to conduct work exclusively in one area, let's say in pharmaceuticals in the indication of Oncology only. Nor do I talk about consulting that essentially is helping organizations improve their performance, primarily through the analysis of existing business problems and development of plans for improvement (although, parts of the retainer and consulting design as I will show later on in the document may apply here). I'm essentially talking about a **sounding board** for company/client market researcher provided by market researchers at vendors. The (musical) definition of a sounding board or soundboard: it is the part of a string instrument that transmits the vibrations of the strings to the air, greatly increasing the loudness of sound over that of the string alone. You simply hear better, hear more, make sense of the differences in the sound ... the company/client is not the string alone anymore.

The vendor can provide the outside view, has its ear on the market (research). Now, why would this make even more sense in “time of Cholera”? actually, when the times are getting tougher, budgets are limited, a hiring freeze is imposed or headcounts are reduced, the focus of the company market researcher is more inwards to the company than outside to the market: no surprise here, as the company market researcher has to manage the same and most often more

(new product development, life-cycle management, product managers, senior management, operating companies) with less! The sheer pace of today's business, the constant press of meetings and deadlines makes it virtually impossible for the company market researcher to have sufficient time for real strategic thinking.

We may call this the **contraction process** of the researcher at the company level: it is just natural that the company researcher will focus more on a potentially increased number of internal stakeholders, and satisfy the needs of the market research part of the product development process: those necessities are not going away because the times are getting tougher! Contraction also means that the researcher at the company level is limited at staying abreast on the developments in the market research profession. At the same time the vendor market researcher will need to go into the opposite direction: let's call this the **expansion process** of the researcher at the vendor level. Mergers and acquisitions are reducing the number of potential clients, and those clients are increasingly engaged in more products, extra stages of product development and markets. The vendor researcher needs to be able and prepared to respond to all kinds of different requests that go beyond the expectations and learning's of the past. And the market researchers at the vendors are prepared for that:

While a few companies/clients have checked-out of the business of participating in meetings of professional organizations because of the 'contraction process', others still attend but their level of engagement is sometimes challenging for them as many other factors impinge on their time and resources.

Market Research Associations conduct excellent meetings including leading edge presentations on a wide variety of pertinent research topics. However as the world changes and the economic times place increased pressure on budgets, it will be critically important for these associations to show value and relevance to members' professional lives and their commitment to clients to maintain meeting attendance.

Now, is it possible to get information about the progress in the Market Research business, creative and innovative ideas via online courses, and subscribing to professional magazines—sure. Is it possible to hire Market Researchers with fresh ideas—sure, if you have no head count freeze! But you can't replace the exchange of professionals, the condensed information that is made available, the questions and answer sessions, and the focus that is provided during the association meetings with online courses. However, vendors are there: they participate in much larger numbers in annual meetings of professional organizations, courses, seminars (expansion process). Are they doing it because they see the opportunity to 'get acquainted' with the few potential clients that participate—certainly! But above and beyond that objective they see the window into the Market Research potential, the future of our profession.

It can't be disputed that numerous market researchers at a vendor are engaged in lot a different areas: today

a market researcher in pharmaceuticals maybe working on Oncology, tomorrow on Schizophrenia, and the day after tomorrow on a Gastrointestinal Disease. As discussed earlier, the researcher needs to make himself familiar with the indication area, to be able to communicate in a comprehensive manner with the potential client and to write a winning proposal and eventually conduct the survey. The vendor market researcher learns across indications, and what he learns in indication 'A' maybe applicable to indication 'B'. To be sure, I'm not advocating a breach of confidentiality: what is learned during the course of a study for a certain company/client need to stay in the frame of the agreed-upon confidentiality agreement.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about: much information is published and the knowledge and experience the market researcher gains in some studies may help him to search for the right, published information, allows him to understand a topic and make connections that otherwise would take a lot of time and effort. The researcher expands his tools, because nobody can seriously deny that learning is internalized by the market researcher and used in the same indication or in other indication areas when talking with a potential client—that is just human. Think about it like the case of a candidate for the US Supreme Court: this justice—if confirmed—has final appellate jurisdiction and leads the federal judiciary together with the other members of the court. By doing so, interpreting the U.S. Constitution, certain legal areas set forth in the Constitution and federal laws, the justices can hardly deny their background and individual history: they worked in Law Centers, Courts, Law Schools, as Attorney General, etc. It is the other way around: their experience is invaluable, I would say necessary to make the best possible decisions—and to do it independently and in the best interest of the country.

Now, thinking about a Market Researcher and the same concept applies to a new case/study he/she is working on: put your background and experiences to work, collect data in a systematic, objective way to achieve an increased understanding and insight of the subject matter. That is actually an argument against a retainer contract with a vendor for one indication area only if there is no exchange within a vendor to ensure learning and a culture that encourages development.

These are just two examples that illustrate the opportunities and advantages that can result from the sounding board approach. Here is one way how this could work: A company/client may approach a trusted vendor to set up a sounding board contract. The vendor will name a senior market research contact that will be available to talk with members of the company/client market research department about business questions, market research issues, etc. The vendor would need to organize the sounding board approach internally with the senior market researcher being able to reach out to other employees of the vendor to gather information and potential pathways to solutions. The vendor would be paid an agreed upon sum (per hour, day, for the agreed upon time frame). Per request of the company/client the ven-

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dor could present the information gathered this way or at a market research association meeting in the company of the client. Should the outcome of these contacts be that the vendor is eventually winning a study contract? Maybe, but don't expect an automatism here! **It is really about a sounding board where there is no obligation on either side other than to be an honest and excellent partner in the sounding board relationship between the company/client and the vendor.** We just need to apply one of the major principles of our own profession to the sounding board relationship: market research is about the systematic objective way to understand and communicate through the organization the voice of the customer.

For this approach to work we have to realize once again that we as market researchers—independent of our affiliation with a company or vendor—belong to the same profession. Furthermore, the realization that the **contraction process** of the researcher at the company level and the **expansion process** on the vendor level are natural developments in “time of Cholera” that will make one appreciate that the systematic objective approach should extend to the relationship between company/client and vendor and together will add value to the decision making processes. Of course, as vendor or company/client researcher our employers and goals are

different and the competition is fierce even when the “time is not Cholera”. The sounding board approach needs to be framed with safe-guards and confidentiality agreements—Health Care Compliance issues may apply. The sounding board approach has the potential to locate the right and sometimes life-saving approach to the challenges of the (market research) day.

Thinking about our example from the beginning of this article: the deputy commander collected carefully the best available information and was able put a different perspective to the conclusion of his commander: everybody that survived saw the enemy planes coming from above right—but they survived. We really don't know if the ones that didn't make it home were attacked from above right: they may have perished because the attack came from a different angle ... providing information to the other 'pilots' that they should be looking out for the enemy to come from above right could potentially end up catastrophic! ☺

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