

How can insights managers achieve cheaper, faster and more impactful research?



Sjoerd Koornstra, former global consumer and market intelligence executive at Heineken is partner at the House of Insights.



Here are some key strategies and tools to drive speed, extract value and quality by employing the most relevant skills and technology tools.

Discussion in conferences, webinars and articles about the future of market research often highlights the implications for research agencies and the efficiencies generated by new technology. These efficiencies including automation and standardisation of research, agile research, VR and AI-applications, enable research projects to be delivered faster and cheaper. But what does this mean for the insights departments of companies? How should they prepare for and adapt to a demand for cheaper, faster and better and what are the organisational and skills implications for them?

Companies have an enormous demand for speed and costs savings. This phenomenon is strengthened by more agile business project management and the application of

design thinking, working with scrums and sprints which require fast decision-making and more frequent decision moments. The number of milestones within projects has increased significantly. Here I distinguish between more standard business projects such as producing an advertisement and those that are more agile for which faster feedback for a specific milestone is needed, although this distinction is often not clear cut in practice. These business projects demand research projects from the insights department which must meet the speed and costs requirements to generate impact at the moment of decision-making.

THREE WAYS TO DRIVE SPEED

In more standard business projects we identify three elements: exploiting what you already know, standardisation and automating reporting.

1. Exploit what you already know

Companies have a lot of information in-house which can be exploited if it is well structured and analysed properly using an intelligent approach. If you do this, you are generating speed and operating more cost efficiently to create more added value. Companies which spread the insights team over different business teams without a central coordination point, will experience difficulties in implementing the ideas that follow:

Insights related data

sources: these include brand health tracking, retail audit tracking, media expenses, media coverage and campaign evaluations which are often different, not connected and hardly accessible. However if you analyse these sources mutually, possibly in combination with internal sales data, you can generate useful insights and main drivers. To fully exploit them, you must organise your data household structure, integrate these databases



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into one platform and make them easily accessible to enable fast and substantial deep diving. Companies like Scanmar and Infotools are niche players in this field to make this happen.

Research/knowledge management: often many research projects have already been executed and this is what the company already knows. If all these reports are easily accessible and searchable you can generate intelligence needed for business. A knowledge management system that is structured with tagged projects and meta data etc., is indispensable but needs effort and investment to get this organised. A main player in this field is Market Logic. Enormous progress is being made with an “automated generated summary” on queries like “what do we know about subject X” enabled by cognitive intelligence and Natural Language Processing (NLP).

Syndicated/big/internal data sources: Companies have plenty of valuable data sources (beyond those in-house) at their disposal, often without being aware of their full potential, which are frequently publicly available via API's or sold via data brokers. Companies struggle to connect different sources due to different structures, missing values and other complexities. But the recent and enormous advancements in machine learning and data science mean that with a creative and pragmatic mind-set, the problem can be solved by borrowing techniques from this field of data science. As these sources are often incomplete, judgement is needed about the validity and relevance of conclusions given the business issue.

The insights department is used to assessing conclusions from incomplete sources for research projects but must deal with these issues:

- Data sources are owned by other departments such as ICT which requires collaboration so the insights manager needs social skills to behave tactically and influence them.
- ICT cannot analyse but do not realise this so you need to convince them that everyone has their expertise to contribute to the business, which also requires some social skills.
- Data scientists can analyse but not interpret. You need people who understand the business issues and the advanced data analytics (machine learning etc.). Few insights teams have sufficient workload to justify a dedicated data scientist, who will usually be project contracted, implying that someone in the insights team must acquire sufficient data science expertise to select the appropriate data scientist (discriminate from the cowboys) and be able to draw the right business conclusions.



2. Standardise

You can apply tools that measure the minimum number of KPI's needed for decision making creating the opportunity to standardise tools for repetitive research projects, e.g. pre-testing of commercials or taste testing. If you are measuring the same KPI's, have the same reporting and sampling, this process can be standardised and automated and standardised tools can enable automated briefing by marketing. The insights team is responsible for the process, sampling, tooling and formulation of the right conclusions and recommendations but this implies a clear agreement with the marketing team that has to commit to

standardised samples, no additional questions and limited diagnostics. These issues could be tackled in qualitative e.g for pre-testing.

ZappiStore is the best-known supplier in this area offering stripped back tools from established agencies but other agencies are developing and offering these short and standardised approaches. The advantage is that suppliers have available (or are developing) databases with benchmarks.

You also see the arrival of hybrid marketplaces (DIY Automated standardised researches) offering tools which have automated the research process (per research type, data-collection and analysis). Standard templates are available from companies like Quantilope and FlexMR for research types (like brand health, pre-testing, customer satisfaction, price-conjoint) that can be tailored to your needs but do not have available benchmarks.

3. Automate reporting

1. Automated core reports: generated by tracking systems, this is a logical flow of slides to assess the brands and the agency or insights manager only needs to indicate the highlights in the headings. This generates considerable savings and leaves more time for the strategic business issue.
2. Automated exception reporting: If you are confronted with a problem for a certain brand in e.g. tracking studies, you want to know more; is it among specific target groups, certain age classes; does it apply throughout the country or is it present in certain regions? This takes a lot of time but you can develop 'exception reporting' which automates this process and involves huge time-savings.
3. Automated explanations: The next trend for 2020 within BI (Business Intelligence) software systems is the application of augmented analytics which includes natural language query and narration, augmented data preparation, automated advanced analytics and visual-based data discovery capabilities. Natural-language generation and artificial intelligence will be a standard feature of 90% of modern BI platforms. 50% of analytical queries will be generated via search, NLP or voice, or will be automatically generated. The analysis and the



voice interface (you tell the voice bot “give me the dashboard from country X about last year and consecutively the same dashboard but then for Brand X and Competitive Brand Y, split by months”) will drive cost efficiency.

4. Computer aided analytics: (Marketing mix) modeling is usually time consuming, especially when you have to run one model after another consecutively. It would be nice to just define the framework of the model and software automatically runs different models and selects the best model based upon statistical criteria. You need a statistical expert to check for issues but imagine the time this saves to deliver faster results. The QED software package offers this functionality.

HOW TO ACCELERATE FEEDBACK

Agile business projects need faster feedback per milestone and here are some available tools. We observe that companies want to learn by testing and possibly fine-tuning from experience instead of executing research projects but it might be quite expensive, if you only start learning about the main business driver e.g. for a new innovation during testing so it is better to know the main business driver before testing starts. The insights manager should stand up and define the drivers about which you need learnings before market testing, in cooperation with business stakeholders.



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Key agile project tools include:

Quantitative: DIY Tools (like Survey Monkey with targetable respondents) and global consumer panel suppliers (e.g. Toluna, Research Now SSI) have DIY self-service tools with fast turn-around (1–2 weeks). Users construct their own surveys and send them out to a targeted, quota-ed sample of consumers. These suppliers host concept/idea screeners and ad hoc surveys.

Micro-surveys/mobile technology (including at the Point of Sale): Provide internal clients with fast, cheap ‘snippets of quantitative insight’. Usually sample targeting is possible. You can pre-code around three questions at a time. Visual and film stimulus is also possible. Top-lines are often available within 24-hours but sometimes minutes.

Qualitative: On-demand on-line communities for fast indicative feedback or consecutive opinions/tasks you can create an on line community and some companies are using expert/advisory communities. These consumers are highly involved in the category and can be a good sounding board. Several suppliers offer this service, including self moderation.

DIY-self-moderation for fast feedback you can also execute on line interviews with consumers on the short term. This is possible for instance via a video platform for on line interviewing like Discuss.IO offers which with global coverage, recruitment of respondents and a fast

approach, is an appropriate solution especially for multinationals.

DIY-consumer immersion means you will interact with consumers, meeting them in their daily lives and rituals. You can observe, interview or participate in a real life situation.

However, be aware that fast feedback research is not needed for every business decision and an accumulation of small research projects can generate too much cost. Speed does not mean shallow so questions should be correctly formulated and the sample sufficient for proper decision taking.

Furthermore, ultimately it is better suited for tactical and executional decisions than strategic decisions.

DIY research can be time consuming, especially the moderation of an on line community. Plus a distinction should be made between indicative/hypothesis/ideas generating research like immersion and proper feedback useful for evaluation/adjustments.

An insights-manager participating in an agile business project team could be optimal if they understand the business decision to be taken, can challenge at an early stage if research is needed, can act quickly and avoid marketeers approving their own concepts.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Generating speed and cheaper solutions has clear implications for insights departments which need to shape an infrastructure to exploit what already is known. For insight managers with a strong project-by-project management background, this might be challenging.

In addition, collaboration with other departments might be needed to exploit relevant databases that they “own”.

Sufficient data science expertise is needed to understand the outcomes from data scientists and translate them in business recommendations. Data science (machine learning and NLP) will acquire a more dominant place in daily business systems.

There must be clear agreement and commitment with the stakeholders (marketing) on automated standardised research projects. And finally, there must be a trade off between business risks, speed, quality and time consumption for agile research projects. **RW**