

Research firms should follow their own advice on recycling

By Rutherford
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Market research appears to be one of the few industries thriving during the recession. Desperate to maintain market share, companies of all sizes continue to invest millions of dollars in market research to find the key to consumer spending. Every evening, hundreds of pre-selected individuals take part in research studies where we attempt to isolate and quantify the (often intangible) factors that motivate consumer behavior. Our office has even had to install additional filing cabinets to cope with the increase in participants' records.

Business has been very good, thanks to the popular belief in market research as a source of reliable information about market trends and in our ability to accurately recognize, interpret and articulate the factors that make one product appear superior.

By studying and analysing the responses of typical consumers to different issues, label designs and carefully crafted phrases, we help clients to mold their product (or at least its public image) to meet the expressed wishes of the existing or potential market.

One of the most important of these factors (as we have made a tidy profit by reporting) is the growing demand for corporate environmental responsibility. Indeed, this is now seen as such a major force in modern marketing that it has generated additional work for the market research industry simply to gauge its scope. Advertisers have begun to realize that their ability to compete will depend on their sensitivity to the issues of waste, pollution and overpackaging. With our help, companies have discovered the benefits of good corporate stewardship — and are now falling all over each other in an attempt to paint their products 'green' and their practices as environmentally friendly; ensuring that their operating procedures (even those out of the public eye) are reassessed according to Full Cost Accounting (the system that requires that the depletion of natural resources as well as the full costs of waste disposal are figured into the price of the product or service.)

Given the importance of these issues, it is remarkable to find that many market research companies don't feel the least bit obliged to follow their own expert advice. Despite the truly enormous volume of paper used (and discarded) in the preparation and execution of our studies, some firms refuse to implement even a simple office paper recycling program — despite repeated requests and offers of practical assistance.

In reply to a recent letter inquiring about industry guidelines, the Professional Market Research Society confirms that, "(The) PMRS does not have a policy in this area." Such lassitude betrays an astonishing ignorance of the scale of our waste crisis as well as the depth of public commitment to environmental issues.

Our refusal to take responsibility for our waste not only risks the loss of future contracts as more and more companies demand certain codes of behavior from their suppliers, but more importantly, it raises the most profound questions about our competence and our confidence in the validity of our research.

Incapable of spotting a trend

It seems incredible that an industry whose *raison d'être* depends on a presumed ability to identify significant market trends has, in this case, proven itself apparently incapable of recognizing one.

For many market research firms, it seems the concept of environmentalism is regarded as only the latest in a long series of vacuous public relations gimmicks to sell our clients; simply the contemporary equivalent of NEW AND IMPROVED or ALL NATURAL with no significance beyond its value as a tool for creating a positive product profile.

But this time I believe it's different — and the stakes much higher. The public and some members of the mass media are becoming aware of — and increasingly disturbed by — the gulf that all too often exists between a company's public image and its private practices. That the market research industry has failed to recognize the obvious implications for our own corporate practices suggests that we may be unable to distinguish a passing fad from a revolutionary change in the modern marketplace.

Needless to say, such an admission not only poses a serious threat to the future of our industry, but also reveals a deep-seated contempt for the public whose integrity we are paid to respect.

Such cynicism is, I suppose, only to be expected from an industry that has served as the confessional for the Modern Church of the Shopper; hearing firsthand from hundreds of anonymous focus groups and faceless telephone surveys, we have learned just how easily (and profitably) the public can be misled and manipulated by packaging design, marketing buzzwords and meaningless slogans. Perhaps we might even be forgiven for not taking environmental issues seriously and for our willingness to exploit the public's legitimate concerns — were it not for the glaring contradiction between our advice to clients and our own private practices.

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