THE MOST INNOVATIVE TOOL IN RESEARCH...AND HOW IT COULD RESHAPE OUR INDUSTRY FOREVER

By Isaac Rogers

Throughout the marketing research industry, researchers and marketers alike are seeking a breakthrough technology to revolutionize their insight-gathering process.

In fact, given a headline like this article, you are now likely primed to hear about a brand-new, social media-monitoring, neuroscience-powered, qual-quant hybrid software which delivers powerful new insights in a matter of minutes from respondents anywhere across the globe and costs pennies.

Sorry, but that's not what this article concerns.

Truthfully, there is no "magic bullet" coming right now to change our world forever, no software platform destined to radically redefine market research. Again, I'm sorry to disappoint, but I'm just not seeing such a technology on the horizon.

However, let me suggest a tool that *is* far more formidable than any single piece of software and has the power to dramatically change our industry. It holds the key to providing clients deeper insights to their questions and to giving researchers more innovation for solving market challenges and for growing the field of market research far beyond its current reach. Plus, it will be our defense against the ever-encroaching forces peeling away at the research industry. What mystical tool am I talking about? Risk. Calculated, innovation-seeking risk.

Risk – and, more broadly, the appetite for experimentation, curiosity, change and failure – can be a rare commodity within our industry. When you look at the way we've constructed the research value chain and how projects are designed (from client to agency to suppliers/partners), we are all complicit in developing a system that rewards execution but gives little-to-negative value to risk-taking and new approaches.

So here are steps the industry could (and must!) take in order to ensure we all innovate together.

Developing an industry that generates change

One can easily find copious evidence that our industry is risk-averse. While there are plenty of innovative, risk-taking agencies and marketers all over the world, as a whole, most of our dialogue internally tends to revolve around the struggles we experience while adopting and mastering new techniques and skills.

If you need proof, attend any industry conference. Inevitably, there will be a panel discussion (or two) about how we can better promote change or how we must defend ourselves and our turf from external, non-research entities like management consultants and Big Data experts coming from other arenas. Often, when the panel discussion focuses on solutions, a game of pass-the-baton begins where each level of the MR cycle finds reasons why the others won't support the kind of innovation that we all need to thrive.

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A better question to ask ourselves is: Who exactly is responsible for championing change, and what areas of research are most desperate for innovation?

Arguably, this question can be answered as follows: *Innovation should focus on marketers and brands first*. At the end of the day, it's the insight demands of the end-clients for which we've built this entire industry that matter most. The end-client's desire for change is an often-echoed sentiment: better, more actionable insights, faster and cheaper. And while innovations that improve agency efficiency or engage respondents in more creative ways are important, the lion's share of our risk-taking and innovation should focus on client needs.

As a secondary focus, our innovation should concentrate on the research participants – the living, breathing people willing to share their time, opinions and even expertise to help us build better brands and products. We should strive to understand the human experience in deeper and more useful ways by developing technologies and approaches that help unearth new insights from the respondents.

However, it seems to some in our industry that the innovation we've managed to integrate into common practice has the priority list backward. A tremendous amount of work has been done to innovate data collection, simplify sampling and provide scalable digital qualitative tools – all great for the research agencies – but far less success has been found in client and participant innovation.

In preparation for this article, several of our clients and qualitative research agencies were interviewed to discuss the obstacles they feel stand in the way of innovation. Based on their feedback, along with the insight of several end-clients and our own experience over the past several decades servicing market research agencies, we identified four truths that could spur the element of risk needed to put our industry into innovation overdrive.

Truth #1: Break the cycle of projects and make space for change

Overwhelmingly, the single most frequently-mentioned impediment to change was the project-to-project lifecycle many clients currently live within. For many end-clients, their research is perpetually in one of three phases: recently completed, in progress or planned. As one project kicks off, another is under analysis. Add in research planning, new vendor pitches and, of course, any non-research activities, and a corporate researcher's calendar is oversubscribed. The thought of building in time to innovate processes or to experiment with new methodologies finds its way to the proverbial "back burner" far too often as the day-to-day realities consume all internal resources. The story is much the same on the research agency side, with all of our interviewees expressing frustration with the fact that they rarely have time for the kind of technology and methodology experimentation they would really like to embrace.

How can we, as an industry, begin to break this never-ending chain and give ourselves room to take risks?

Truth #2: Build experimentation into the research process

A method that has been successful in other practice areas is the concept of required "R&D" time or budget. This is a common ritual in industries that thrive on change: software development, consumer electronics, automotive manufacturing, biotechnology and other fast-paced verticals. Most people are familiar with Google's infamous "20 percent free time" policy, where developers can choose to work on other projects or even develop their own ideas on the company dime. Many credit 3M's policy of providing 15 percent free time for the invention of Post-it-Notes™.

While there is much debate about the exact value and cost of these "free time" policies, one thing is abundantly clear – it's less about the productivity during such free experimentation time and more about the *overall culture it creates*. These programs produce cultures that feed new ideas and encourage open thinking.

So where is the "free time" in market research? When was the last time your staff was allowed to drift away from the day-to-day and exercise their creative muscles? How many research projects have you been part of where the goal was to experiment and try a new methodology?

As an industry, we must begin to take that risk and build in budgets and projects that explore new possibilities. One of our clients maintains a portion of their annual budget for testing new methods and evaluating new technologies. Even as a small percentage of their overall budget, this policy has had dramatic impact; years ago, they were one of the first end-clients to experiment with mobile qualitative and are now one of the most sought-after digital researchers for in-the-moment qualitative insights.

One of the reasons given to oppose built-in experimentation projects is the cost of execution. And thefieldwork, logistics and software costs can seem daunting in the face of ever-shrinking budgets. However, what might come as a surprise to most marketers is that the down-chain providers often heavily discount or even give away their services for free if the project is related to testing or experimentation. You might be shocked to learn this, especially if you've never taken the time to ask your providers. The rationale behind this is simple: When research software companies develop new technology or methods, they need to find researchers and marketers who are willing to *take the risk and try something new*. Without a shared enthusiasm for experimentation among all levels of research delivery, new innovations will rarely find success.

Truth #3: Create not only dialog, but partnership in the innovation cycle

Another often-cited reason for the lack of innovation adoption is the sheer complexity of a typical project. Most full-service research projects incorporate agency personnel, one or many fieldwork partners or sample providers plus a technology provider. Oh, and don't forget the participants themselves. No one link in the value chain has omnipotence; each piece of the delivery process sees just a part of the entire process. In a way, project design can become a rather large game of "pass the message."

When it comes to adopting new innovations, much of the learning happens from the bottom up (fieldwork and technology provider) while the designs and project expectations come from the top down (marketer and agency). New methods and innovative technologies hit the pavement at the bottom of the chain; it's the fieldwork partners who wrestle with the unexpected needs of a new

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method or it's the technology partners who grapple with bugs, glitches and participant expectations. Whenever a new technology comes to market, it's the people at the bottom of the chain generating most of the new knowledge. However, the projects are designed and managed from the top, yet speaking as a "bottom of the chain" partner, I can tell you that we are rarely brought into the conversation and our guidance seldom requested when an agency pitches a new approach.

For innovation to thrive in our industry, we have to implement a new tactic when it comes to developing new methods. All parties need to be involved so that knowledge can flow freely from the point of learning to the point of need.

One approach that has been highly successful is to break down the somewhat artificial walls between the parties and learn from each other more freely. Today, several of our clients allow us to go and visit their researchers, to sit with them for a day and watch them work. Our project teams get to see the frustrations and struggles our clients are having with technology and we can better empathize with their needs. Those same clients may then come visit us, also. They sit with our project managers and observe how we take their information and

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needs and digest them internally. These "vendor days" allow a supplier to come learn directly from their clients and get a better understanding of how we can work together more effectively.

Such learning sessions are massively important when a researcher wants to adopt a new method or technology. Seeing exactly how it works and precisely what a participant experiences during a project can be critical to successfully adopting a new method. Otherwise, agencies are largely guessing at exactly how a new technology works and those guesses often end up setting bad expectations for the marketer.

Truth #4: Keep the antibodies at bay

Many companies lack the foundation required for innovation; we build our organizations to be highly effective at running a type of project that fits our business model. We promote our managers based on hitting budget goals and growth targets, but don't have a method to reward risk-taking behavior that often has longer-term benefits for our organizations.

One of my favorite stories about promoting innovation is how IBM developed their first successful personal computer in the 1970s.

At the time, IBM's revenue came largely from expensive, enterprise-focused mainframes and "minicomputers," all serious, high-grossing, high-margin business equipment. As the world began to ponder the role of computers for home and entry-level use, a team at IBM was tasked with creating a consumer-friendly, low-priced personal computer. Rather than develop it in the shadow of existing teams at the IBM headquarters in Armonk, New York, their executives made the bold decision to develop a prototype with a remote team in Florida. This decision would prove critical to the success of the project as the innovation team was free to make decisions that would, potentially, be threatening to the core mainframe and enterprise business. The quote I will paraphrase here is that "if we'd developed it in New York, the antibodies would have killed it." Had IBM developed their personal computer down the hall from the mainframe teams, it would have been developed in a non-threatening way to the core business. Instead, the remote team was able to innovate, not in the right way for IBM, but in the right way for the customer.

I believe this story has considerable bearing on our own industry today. Are we doing enough to keep the antibodies at bay? Or have we developed a robust immune system that keeps our current way of business healthy, yet eliminates risk?

Intentional risk taking; two steps promoting the change agents in our midst

As an industry, how do we reward those failures in a way that doesn't make us afraid to make them? How do we keep the antibodies of "what works" away from the potential innovations in front of us?

The first major step toward this end is to *promote risk-taking*. We must find ways to promote people and projects that take real risks with the hopes of trying something new with the intent of making products and services better. Whether this means we must build in some percentage of R&D budget each year, or work with our downstream providers to efficiently trial a new method, we must be intentional and diligent about taking time to experiment and try new approaches.

The second step we should take is to *remove the fear of the new*. Whenever a new method develops in our industry, or an adjacent force begins to "muscle in" to market research, many people begin to point out all the reasons it won't work. For years, online qualitative was dismissed as "bias" because it was accessible only by participants who had a home PC. In the year 2000, that concern was valid and had the potential to create significant bias.

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Yet most researchers and marketers were trumpeting that same resistance well into the past decade, far past the point where the bias could be eliminated. Today, one could argue that there is less bias for an online sample than for those individuals we can assemble in a face-to-face setting.

Without a healthy level of proactive risk-taking in our industry, many of the "sky is falling" voices sounding the alarm about encroaching forces like Big Data, predictive analytics and DIY methods will prove correct. If we are not willing to invest time, resources and efforts toward change – including change that involves risk – others from outside the traditional market research space will make the change happen for us.

Then, we as an industry will be forced to take on risk. Whether we like it or not.

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