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Utilization Of Communication Research Findings:
Theory Versus Practice

By

Y P Chan
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Utilization of Communication Research Findings:
Theory versus Practice

by

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As we all know, communication research covers a very broad field indeed. I come from the advertising field, and naturally I would like to stick somewhat more to this turf.

First, let me state at the outset, that research practice as a whole in Singapore, and in the advertising field in particular, measures up pretty well to expected standards. Therefore, I cannot think of many aberrations, apart from the few more glaring ones.

So, let's look at the principal areas, and see how practice deviates from the norm.

Telling it as it is

In theory, research findings are supposed to be presented in an unadulterated form.

In practice, we sometimes come across instances where professional integrity gives way to the temptation to sugar coat the negatives. There have been instances where a piece of unsavoury result is presented in better light, and even omitted altogether.

I must hasten to add that this surreptitious interpretation of research findings rarely happens; but it has, and at any rate, the temptation exists.
Looking beyond the obvious

Research of any kind is becoming increasingly costly, and thus it becomes imperative that maximum use be made of the results.

Allow me a moment please, to illustrate just how cost prohibitive research, specifically media research, can be.

Survey Research Singapore (SRS) are the only organisation which undertake media research here, and they make a very good job of it. But their fee structure indicates quite clearly they are taking full advantage of their monopolistic position.

Without any doubt, agencies and advertisers need the research facilities offered by SRS to enable them to do a competent and professional job. Let me tell you however, that few, and only the larger communications organisations, can afford such costs as the following:

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<th>SRS MEDIA RESEARCH PACKAGE FEE</th>
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<tr>
<td>MEDIA INDEX GENERAL REPORT</td>
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<tr>
<td>MICROSCOPE COMPREHENSIVE PACKAGE</td>
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<tr>
<td>AD SPEND FULL PRODUCT CATEGORY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV DIARY: HARD COPY + ON-LINE + DISKETTE</td>
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An agency needs at least a $½ million dollar account just to sustain this facility on an annual basis.

Costly as research is, it is unfortunately not uncommon to come across cases where voluminous reports are relegated to the back of a proposal, after a perfunctory analysis. This practice of padding up documentation tends to be more rampant where syndicated media research is concerned. Often, there is a failure to look beyond the obvious.

Woolly objectives

Research is designed to assist in fine-tuning directions and strategies.

All too often, however, objectives, whether they be marketing or advertising, are "woolly" rather than specific.

Hence, we come across such loose objectives as:

To expand market share.

To increase advertising awareness.

This is lamentable, since research is supposed to provide some basis for more focussed planning, so that more specific objectives may be forthcoming.

Example:

To expand market share by 15% within 18 months.

To increase advertising awareness by 10% within 6 months.
Why the disparity?

My experience indicates that this gap between theory and practice is mainly due to the following reasons:

1. Both the client and agency not being precisely clear what should be researched into.
   Consequently, findings do not quite relate to the real issues, which were not thought of in the first instance.

2. Analysis and interpretation (or lack of) by inexperienced staff.

3. The desire not to be implicated by any results that are less than positive.

Remedying the situation

A number of steps can, and should, be taken to bridge the chasm between what is expected and the unexpected.

1. More emphasis should be placed on schooling marketing and advertising personnel on the correct use and interpretation of research findings.

The tendency is to leave this vital aspect to the research company.

For 2 reasons, this practice of leaving the analysis and interpretation of results to the research company is not quite viable. First, it is the job of the research company to simply present the facts in a totally unbiased manner. Secondly, the research company is seldom as comprehensively appreciative of the situation as the client or agency, to make as valued a judgement as possible.
2. Research should be viewed as an integral component of marketing planning, rather than as an adjunct, or worse, as a necessary evil.

3. Research should be made more widely accessible through a more affordable basis; this will promote broader application and familiarity and competence in the use of this important facility.

Steps taken today to improve the quality of analysis and interpretation will ensure a healthier research environment for all concerned.