

# Consumer rese the perfect st

The demands on consumer insight teams are changing out of all recognition, so marketing directors need to be clear on the mindset and skill-set needed in the coming years. **David Smith** questions whether insight teams are ready for the increasing complexity of the consumer environment and advises on what is needed

**O**VER THE next few years, companies will struggle even more than they are now to find differentiating positions for their brands in an increasingly competitive market.

In the past, companies may have paid lip service to the concept of customer-centricity, but over the next few years they will need a much greater focus on understanding – at a more profound level – how people buy and interact with brands.

The pressure is on customer insight professionals in companies and research agencies to raise their game. These individuals not only need the skills to unearth insight, but must also be strategic in their thinking and know how to apply insight to the creation of business growth.

However, questions are being asked about the capabilities of insight professionals in research agencies to meet this challenge. For instance, a recent study showed that 61% of company CMOs wanted to work with market researchers in a ‘strategic business partnership’, but only 29% believed that this was currently being offered.

## LIQUID RESEARCH

Everyone is aware that market researchers must go beyond formulaic focus groups and sterile surveys that ask limp questions and only obtain clichéd platitudes. Understanding what drives people’s behaviour requires market researchers to go beyond the logical and rational to understand exactly what triggers are likely to change their behaviour.

The changes taking place with the arrival of Big Data and fresh thinking on how to obtain feedback from customers via the internet are happening at a breathtaking rate. The immediacy of this new data-heavy landscape means an organisation can now, within 48 hours, analyse its own internal customer transactional data, combine it with

feedback from social media and other instant feedback sources and arrive at the essence of the storyline. These developments have totally rewritten the rules of market research.

This is a massive wake-up call with regard to the skills now needed to make sense of this instantaneous liquid research that flows constantly into an organisation from multiple sources. Organisations are increasingly asking their own front-line employees, and others at key touchpoints in the customer journey, to feed back what they know into the customer insight process. In sum, organisations now see conventional research methods as only a tiny part of the overall process of understanding their customers.

## EFFECTS ON INSIGHT

Customer insight professionals must be up to speed with how they ‘harvest’ insight from these new sources to create business growth. For some, it could be a bridge too far because the new breed of strategic insight consultants will quickly need to acquire three fundamental skills that add up to a new mindset.

### 1. Masters of data synthesis

Being a master of data synthesis, not just analysis, will be a particularly critical skill. Customer insight professionals will need to be ‘panorama thinkers’ who are skilled at using multiple data sources. This calls for people who are comfortable working with holistic frameworks, concepts and tools that allow them to bring together qualitative and quantitative market research data, internal company transactional data, social media narratives and data from other, unstructured data sources.

### 2. Insight creators who can engage at a strategic level

We now recognise that the provision of consumer data does not automatically lead to insight but such data is more likely to surface

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from ‘structured conversations’ taking place throughout the business. Customer insight professionals must know how to get inside the emotional minds of customers while also feeling at ease applying their own intuition and creativity to the insight generation process and defending their corner with senior decision-makers.

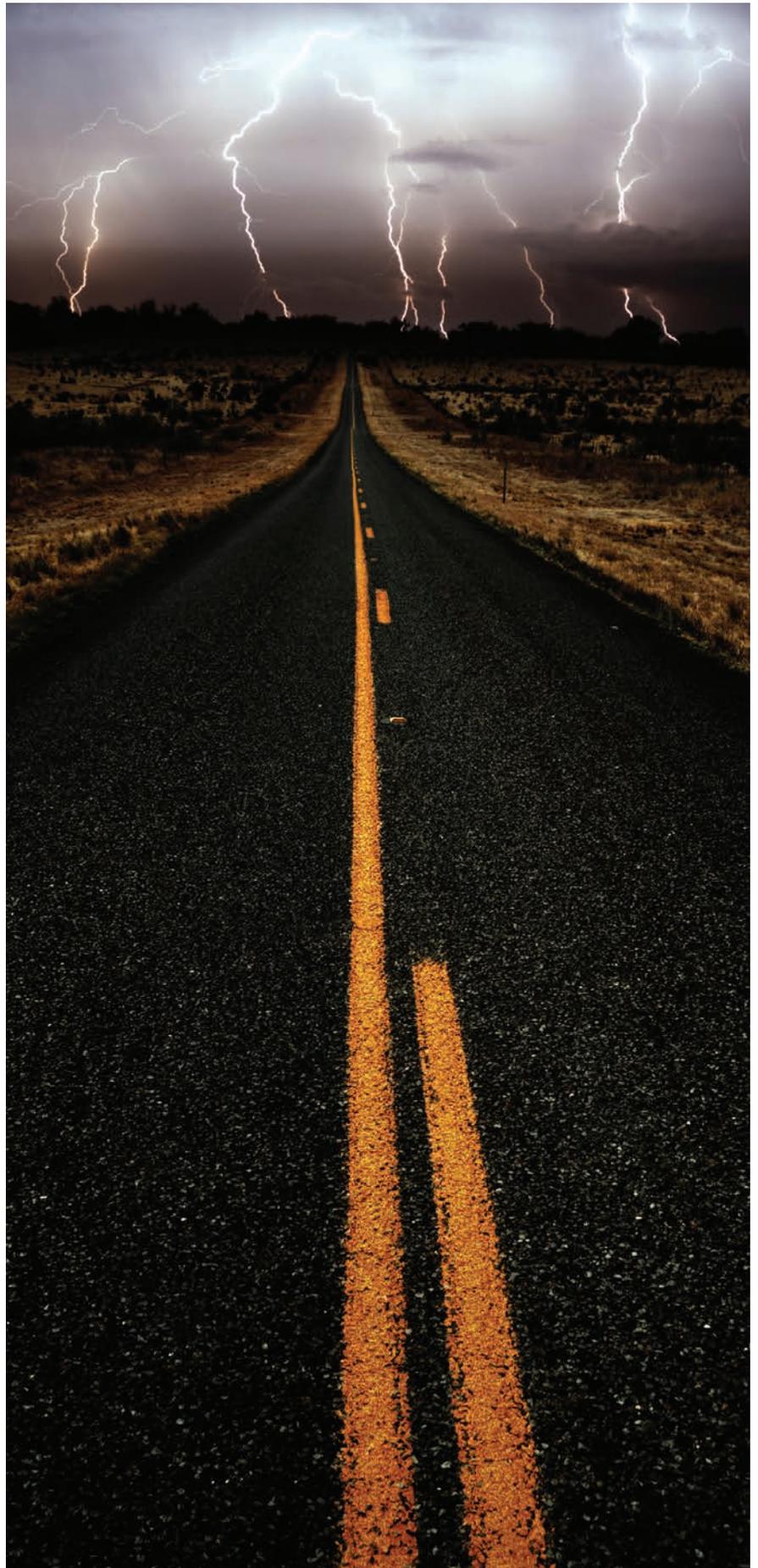
They will need to be strong, creative personalities. It is now being recognised that the insight process requires magic and imagination – that elusive X factor that often stems from creative tension.

So the true ‘Customer Insight Detective’ will not only be a forensic data synthesiser but will also have the energy and confidence to engage with senior management in strategic dialogues to unearth actionable customer insights.

### 3. Information designers and business storytellers

The information design element means taking data synthesis skills to the next level – going beyond knowing how to reduce data to its essence, to being able to turn data-centric problems into readily understandable, intuitive solutions.

At major organisations, big ideas for discussion – everything you need to make the decision – are often initially pitched around a one-page diagram. Senior management wants complex issues explained on one, easy-to-understand chart >



that taps into the business heuristics – the rules of thumb – they use to make sense of the world. This is about developing a conceptual design mindset that moves away from data-centric thinking and towards the visualisation of complex ideas using whichever medium best suits the situation.

This skill-set segues into the companion skill of business storytelling: engaging an audience with a powerful, emotional message that will tap into the way decision-makers think. This is now a critical business skill.

Gone are the days of dumping silos of data on the audience. Today, everything must have a clear message, articulated with a compelling theme and be presented around a well thought-out structure while making use of personal storytelling techniques.

It is a fantastically exciting time for insight professionals. Some organisations are already talking about abandoning formal presentations in favour of inviting stakeholders to reflect on an issue by inviting them into a ‘customer experience immersion room’.

What will these look like? They could have the following ingredients.

**Watch and listen:** a vox-pop of an archetypal consumer talking about their experiences.

**Touch the screen and explore:** a deep dive to expand a specific consumer profile of interest.

**Go live to the consumer’s home:** access to a webcam that allows you to dip into and experience a customer’s life for a while.

**Social media watch:** a whistle-stop tour of what, in real time, is the word on the street about a particular topic.

**Beam me into that place:** be transported into an experience, such as a retail channel, along the customer journey.

**Question an expert:** speak to a specialist and test to destruction your belief in the evidence.

## DEVELOPING THE PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Commentators on this issue tend to outline a number of different requirements but often fail to explain exactly how these will all be delivered. Here are three ways to go about it.

### The polymath: the total customer insight professional

This model is premised on the idea, to pursue a sporting metaphor, that everybody in the team is able to play in everyone else’s position. Thus every

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individual within the customer insight team is comfortable handling different types of data. The view is that we have a generation that has been brought up in the Apple and Google age, who should be naturally comfortable operating in left and right brain mode.

The argument is that this generation is at ease making sense of multiple, often chaotically delivered data and is skilled at quickly seeing the shapes, patterns and concepts in data.

This may be desirable but it is probably unrealistic without a solid grounding in how to work with multiple unstructured qualitative and quantitative data sets – a major challenge for the market research industry going forward.

### The symbiotic power of specialist professionals working together

Another view is to acknowledge that the skills needed to make sense of Big Data, as well as undertake a linguistic analysis of complex unstructured data and narratives, are so demanding that it is unlikely to find these skills in the same person.

This returns us to the structures in place at the very outset of market research, with teams of statisticians working in their specialist silos while the qualitatives operate on a different plane. It is true that some organisations, such as Google, have worked hard and imaginatively to get science and art-based graduates to work together in a symbiotic way, but this is the exception.

Elsewhere, there seems to have been less progress, with a cultural arts and science divide still in place. Thus we need to be smarter in how we get specialist teams to work together.

### Investing in creative ‘superheroes’

This approach calls for creative individuals who are not necessarily natural team players, but who can bring some magic, friction and creative tension to drive out consumer insights and put them on the business agenda.

Arguably, these people are the genuine ‘outside in’ thinkers. But if we want this individual dimension then we need to

explain exactly how this is going to work. Again, there is a lot of debate about the need for this ‘edgy’ dimension, but we often duck out of celebrating the power of exceptional individual talent in this team-playing world.

### The shape of things to come

When it comes to forging a successful customer insight team, the most likely outcome seems to be a mixture of the above three approaches. It seems likely that all customer insight professionals will need to feel more comfortable as ‘polymaths’, operating with left and right brain capabilities in the way that account planners in advertising agencies are required to do.

It seems almost inevitable that ‘customer insight’ will cease to exist as a discrete unit or function within a company. Instead, customer insight professionals will become ‘facilitators’, working throughout the organisation to develop symbiotic relationships between insight experts and different stakeholders engaged in the insight process.

It also seems that as the pressure mounts for that ‘wow’ insight factor, individuals who also have that elusive creative DNA will be in great demand. Our ideal structure will probably need to accommodate polymaths and team players, along with more dangerous, edgy individuals.

## BE PREPARED FOR THE PERFECT STORM

If you are running an organisation, you need to make sure your company is ready for the ‘perfect storm’ in customer insight. The driver is the increasing challenge of differentiating brands in intensively competitive marketplaces, coupled with a massively changing customer data landscape.

Now is the time to make sure you have in place intelligent capability programmes that will deliver the professionals your organisation will need over the next few years.

*David Smith is chairman of strategic marketing consultancy DVL Smith david.smith@dvlsmith.com*