

Research Defanged

Gwenaelle de Kerret and Jerry W. Thomas

Over the past decade or so, many large corporations in the U.S. have renamed and repositioned their research functions. What used to be called the marketing research department is now often called the “consumer insights” department. This transition to “consumer insights” is a U.S. corporate fashion trend and will most likely continue—as the corporate copycats all dance to the same music. This renaming and repositioning of the “marketing research” function might well be a great strategic marketing blunder.

This trend is rooted in the growing corporate group-think that the end-all and ultimate purpose of research is “insights,” whatever “insights” might be. There is a definition floating around the research industry that an “insight” is a “penetrating discovery...” Now, if we only knew what a “penetrating discovery” is, then we would know what an “insight” is. Somehow, “insight” has risen in the collective corporate imagination to an almost mystical and magical ideal, the ultimate knowing that all marketers seek. The emphasis on “insights,” the faith in “insights,” and the blind pursuit of “insights” (whatever they are) often overlooks the reality that simple data, simple facts, can often lead to profound marketing discoveries and decisions.

Regardless of the origin and reason, the gravitation to “consumer insights” is a great strategic marketing blunder. If corporate researchers want to diminish their domains of responsibility and move toward mysticism, then “consumer insights” is an apt and appropriate branding and positioning strategy. But if researchers want to expand their responsibilities and exert greater influence on corporate strategy and decision-making, the name “consumer insights” is sending the wrong messages. Why do we say this? What kind of heresy do we preach? And how could we possibly challenge the “consumer insights” fashion and the “insights” mythology?

Let’s go back to the beginning and look at what “marketing” means and what “consumer” means. “Marketing” is a

broad, encompassing term. It includes market analysis, sales planning and management, branding and positioning, advertising, promotion, distribution, credit policies, trade management, competitive assessment, consumer research, shopper analyses, retail optimization, and customer satisfaction. Note that the “consumer” is only a part of the whole domain of marketing. By adopting “consumer” as the domain definition, rather than “marketing,” corporate researchers are shrinking themselves into a tiny corner of the marketing domain, reducing the span and scope of their responsibilities. The latest U.S. corporate fashion trend toward the creation of “shopper insights” departments is evidence that “consumer insights” is a narrow, limiting term. Shopper research was always a part of marketing research, but now a whole new department must be created since “consumer insights” is not broad enough in meaning to permit the inclusion of shopping behavior. But domain shrinkage is only part of the great marketing blunder.

Let’s look at the word “research” versus the word “insights,” based on semiotic principles. “Research” refers to a disciplined process, the application of the scientific method to marketing questions, the study of “cause and effect.” The word conveys an aura of objectivity, of facts, and proof. “Research” tends to be an authoritative term, suggesting credibility and the search for truth. Contrast these connotations with the meanings associated with the term “insights.”

“Insight” is an oxymoronic term, literally meaning “to see inside” where we cannot see. “Insight” means to look at the shell and know what is inside of the nut, or to look at the cover and discern what is inside of the book. This suggests a magical or mystical ability to see what cannot be seen. It hints at intuition and supernatural abilities. Further, in some of its uses, “insight” conveys the idea of seeing something from the inside; that is, the viewer adopts literally a subjective point of view. He sees the object of

analysis as if he were inside of it, or as if he were it. By adopting the consumer's point of view, the researcher loses his exterior, objective perspective—which is exactly what a good researcher should not do. Moreover, the plural form of “insights” suggests a conception of research as the sum of heterogeneous findings. Pursuing “consumer insights,” marketing research would aim at expressing mere flashes of the consumer's perception—an almost undisciplined and insubstantial reflection of reality, without any transversal analysis or strategic conclusions.

Let us now look at the origins and possible reasons for the renaming of marketing research departments. The term “consumer insights” as the name of the “marketing research” function has come about as a fashion trend in corporate America. It was adopted because management consultants were suggesting it, and other corporations were using the “consumer insights” term. Corporate America is highly susceptible to fashions and fads, since corporate headquarters tend to be fantasylands untethered to reality. “Consumer insights” was and is one of those fashions. The term was never carefully evaluated and considered. It has most likely been adopted as a copycat fad, but could there be deeper reasons for the rapid adoption of “consumer insights”?

Someone, somewhere, started the “consumer insights” trend. How and why did this happen? The real reasons may be lost in the mists of time and foggy memories, but

let us speculate. Once upon a time, many years ago, corporate marketing research departments were very, very powerful. The researchers wore the cloak of authority and science, and used this power to exert influence within the corporate hierarchy. Too often, perhaps, the researchers exercised this “scientific” power to veto the hopes, plans, and visions of higher-ups in the marketing department and the senior management of the corporation. The higher-ups resented this power, the veto, and the negative feedback on management's ideas and plans. The name change to “consumer insights,” we suspect, was an attempt (whether conscious or not) to reduce the power and influence of the marketing research department. “Consumer insights” is something management can accept and act on, or reject. An “insight” is not binding and inviolate. It's only an “insight.” But, “research” is far more demanding. “Research” findings cannot be ignored. “Research” findings reduce the decision-making freedom of brand managers, marketing managers, and senior management. We hypothesize that the conversion from “marketing research” to “consumer insights” was and is an attempt to pull the tiger's teeth, to reduce the influence of marketing research in corporate decision-making.

Now you know! Now you can change your department's name back to “marketing research,” raise the flag of scientific authority, give yourself a raise, and reclaim your past glory!

About the Author

Gwenaelle de Kerret works for a major European research agency, and lives in Paris, France. She specializes in linguistics and semiotic analyses, and holds a master's degree in communication (linguistics and semiotics) from La Sorbonne University, Paris. She can be reached at gwenaelledekerret@gmail.com.

Jerry W. Thomas is president/CEO of Decision Analyst, headquartered in Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas. He is a student of marketing strategy and positioning. He can be reached at jthomas@decisionanalyst.com or 817-640-6166.

Decision Analyst is a global marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new products research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.



604 Avenue H East ■ Arlington, TX 76011-3100, USA
1.817.640.6166 or 1.800. ANALYSIS ■ www.decisionanalyst.com