

Market Research and Insight: Past, Present and Future

International Journal of
Market Research
2022, Vol. 64(2) 163–168
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DOI: [10.1177/14707853221080735](https://doi.org/10.1177/14707853221080735)
journals.sagepub.com/home/mre


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Abstract

One hundred years have passed since the founding of the first independent market research firm in the UK in 1921. This important milestone inspired this special issue of the *International Journal of Market Research* that explores the role and importance of market research through a historical lens. A historical approach enables recognising and (re)framing both academic and practitioner contributions to market research through the years. Knowing the past allows better understanding and appreciation of the present, while simultaneously enabling envisioning of the future. In this introduction, we briefly review the origins and development of market research before introducing the three papers that comprise the special issue.

Introduction

Year 2021 marked one hundred years since the founding of the first independent market research firm in the UK. This important anniversary provides the opportunity to step back and look at the development of market research from a historical perspective. This milestone also makes this special issue of the *International Journal of Market Research (IJMR)* in market research history not only important but also timely. This special issue sought to explore the role and importance of market research through a historical lens. The role history plays in adding context and richness has long been established as significant in our understanding of market(ing) research development, and contemporary market research practices and policies (Nunan & Yallop, 2019; Tadajewski & Jones, 2014). A historical lens also enables recognising and (re)framing the contributions both academics and practitioners make to the market research and insight profession. In today's fast-changing environment, where research practice faces rapid methodological and technological advances and innovation, the opportunity to reflect on historical changes to prevent 'reinventing the wheel' is indeed important (Tadajewski & Jones, 2014). Knowing the past allows us to better understand and appreciate the present, while simultaneously enabling an envisioning of the future of market research. Here, we briefly provide a background to the origins and development of market research before introducing the papers that comprise this special issue.

Origins and Development of Market Research

Market research and insight has its origins in the social sciences and has undergone various stages of evolution and growth. In the 1840s, early developments by British philanthropists, social scientists and statisticians included survey methods and analysis of statistical data. Through the 1940s and 1950s, market research techniques expanded to include focus group research, probability sampling and experimental design (Schwarzkopf, 2016). Interpretative and qualitative research and analysis of consumption emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Levy, 2006). Later, the Internet and social media research (or netnography) (Kozinets, 2019) were developed, followed by techniques to exploit databases such as data mining. More recently again, big data, data science, and innovations in the processing of big data and information have emerged. In parallel, since the 1980s, the history of market research has enjoyed a significant period of growth with academics exploring the development of market research and its uses and applications in different cultural and professional contexts (Tadajewski & Jones, 2014).

Since the start of the 20th century, market research has played a vital role in the success of many businesses and organisations by enabling improved understanding of consumers and markets through the provision of data and insights that validate business ideas. As the great British economist John Maynard Keynes said, 'ideas shape the course of history'. Hence, market research has played an immense role in business decision-making and made a substantial contribution through time to the development of successful products, services and business concepts.

From Input-Driven to Output-Driven Market Research

Looking back at how the market research sector has developed over time makes it apparent that the sector's evolution has continuously accelerated. The last 20 years or so have witnessed the emergence of 'insight' (or 'actionable insights'), defined by Wycherley (2020, p. 10) as 'contextualised observations about consumer value, behaviour, habits, circumstances, attitudes, market or environment that have the potential to change how an organisation acts and achieves success'. This orientation towards 'insights' has led to a (re)positioning of the field. Traditionally, market research performed an input-driven role focused mainly on data and information as raw 'inputs', and on 'technical' market research skills (statistical and econometric methods, and data science such as knowledge related to the gathering and analysis of data, data mining, etc.). More recently, market research has moved to a more holistic *output-driven* approach that centres around research interpretation, understanding an organisation's information needs, and then managing that information to create value for the client organisation (i.e. 'outputs' rather than 'inputs') (Wills, 2013; Wycherley, 2020). Traditionally, market research's role was to focus on task execution (i.e. collection and analysis of market data by means of varied research methodologies). Nowadays, stakeholder demands include the need for interpretation of research that creates a distinct value proposition for the client organisation (Di Fiore, 2012; Handley, 2016). Because of these increasingly complex expectations, market research agencies have evolved into integrated insight consulting companies (Lewis, 2012). Market researchers must now apply a combination of skills-based competencies and contextual knowledge. To ensure value-creation, a collaborative approach between market research professionals and stakeholders (primarily their clients) is also needed. For this reason, flexible networks that enable effective information flows and knowledge transfer are the key to facilitating collaborative partnerships between different stakeholders (Hardy et al., 2003).

This (re)positioning of the market research sector and profession has largely occurred because of a number of key external drivers of change. Some of these changes are not so positive. The

commoditisation of market research techniques and the rise of ‘amateur researchers’ using more cost-effective DIY research platforms can negatively impact the quality of insights generated. However, a growing availability of secondary ‘big data’ sets and the ability to employ data analytics to automatically collect, analyse and report on data with minimal user input provides significant opportunities. Emerging technologies and automation have (re)shaped the sector and continue to do so. Continuous technological and methodological innovations enable much more data and information to be collected from consumers. By extension, the future of the market research and insight profession is promising, particularly related to the use of artificial intelligence to enhance and extend information-driven business decision-making. Nevertheless, any approach to generating information and insights is only sustainable in the long-term if the values that underpin market research such as ethics, respect for privacy and private information, and quality research practices, are cultivated and respected (Yallop, 2020; Yallop & Aliasghar, 2020).

Articles in the Special Issue

The content of this special issue aims to explore various aspects of the development of market research theory and practice, whilst also taking into consideration implications for the present and future of market research. The three papers selected for this special issue adopt a historical perspective. Collectively, they are emblematic of the significant role history plays in enabling understanding of the diverse contexts in which market research practitioners operate, and some of the issues they have faced in volatile, changing business environments.

In the first article selected for this special issue, ‘The insights industry: Towards a performativity turn in market research’, Carlos Diaz Ruiz explores the implications of external drivers of change, the emergence of ‘insights’ market research suppliers, and the ways in which market research practitioners need to adapt and reinvent themselves as ‘insights’ professionals. Based on three empirical qualitative studies (i.e. ethnography, in-depth interviews and online open-ended survey), Diaz Ruiz conceptualises changes in the market research industry and the practice intended to produce effects (i.e. actionable insights) by applying a performativity lens. The notion of performativity posits some ideas and theories do not just describe the world, but also go on to shape social realities (Callon, 2007). The facts and models employed by market researchers influence and inform the mental models, approaches and decision-making of managers (Mason et al., 2015). Indeed, market research services provide the very knowledge infrastructure within which markets themselves are performed (Araujo & Mason, 2021).

Diaz Ruiz explores how market researchers respond to the commoditisation of market research techniques. He argues that the initiatives market research practitioners have taken to adapt and reinvent themselves shift market research from ostensive (descriptive or declarative) to performative (effectual or actionable). The former approach generates a reassuringly simple, but arguably reductive, representation of the business environment, based on a need for accuracy and orderliness. The latter approach actively steers managers and inspires and shapes action, based on a need for usefulness and guidance. By extension, Diaz Ruiz argues market research professionals can (re)gain a central role in strategy development and execution by focussing on the provision of this type of actionable guidance drawn from multiple data sources. Such an approach requires a careful distinction between useful insights and sophisticated tools. Put differently, genuine insights are a product of sensitive interpretation, sensemaking and solution-generation, not just sophisticated methodologies and complex datasets. In sum, Diaz Ruiz provides a valuable contribution to both performativity and market-shaping research, while also generating useful insights of his own for market research practitioners.

In the second article, Robert Crawford looks back at the market research industry in the post-war years in his paper, 'Seeing the bigger picture: Why market research history matters'. Seeing the bigger picture is undertaken through an exploration of the work of Sylvia Ashby, collected in the Australian Ashby Research Service archive. In so doing, Crawford provides a history of market research practices and makes a valuable contribution to the historiography of the industry. As has been noted elsewhere, little has been written on the history of the market research industry. What is more commonly found is the use of past market research as a vehicle to explore other topics, such as the role of women as consumers, rather than turning attention to the practice and organisation of market research itself. Hence, Crawford's paper is to be welcomed.

The market research community has a debt to pay to Ashby. She was an Australian researcher working in the inter-war and post-war periods whose curiosity and ambition led her to travel the world visiting other research agencies. Fortunately, for the market research community, Ashby committed her delightfully opinionated observations of a dynamic and fast-moving industry to paper. Not only does she capture the offices, organisations and methodologies of market researchers of the day, but she also provides inklings of the various personalities who ran those organisations, including such luminaries as Daniel Starch and Ernest Dichter. Her work reflects an industry with a rich history.

Crawford argues market research is essentially future-focused, an observation that rings true for all practitioners. Market researchers collect data so their clients can anticipate the future, form policy and plan accordingly. Advertising, a reason for much research going back over the years, is perhaps even more future-focused and at times actively eschews the past. This future mindset can be at odds with any desire to look back and preserve the thinking, the methodological details, the findings, the tables and recommendations that went to launch a product or campaign. However, there are enough researchers who believe the past is worth preserving – not just as a way of understanding the present but for its own sake. The tales of Ashby are a prompt to market research historians to gather accounts of how research agencies were organised and how methodologies were created, developed and favoured. Without knowledge of how the market research industry developed, future development can seem unnecessarily challenging.

The third article of this special issue, 'The contribution made by Market Research Society's (MRS) journal to the history of market and social research', portrays the fascinating history of the *IJMR*. Written by Peter Mouncey, former Editor in Chief of the journal, the article offers an interesting account of the journal's evolution over time in a competitive context, identifies the journal's key contributors, and highlights historical changes to the title, content and nature of the journal that serves both academic and practitioner communities. Since its establishment in 1946, the UK MRS and its journal, *IJMR*, have created opportunities for both market research practitioners and scholars. These opportunities include sharing knowledge, interests and expertise by driving debates, conversations and dialogue around the challenges and opportunities faced by the sector. In so doing, the market research and insight profession has been both promoted and improved. For more than half a century, MRS has played a key role in shaping the nature of what is perceived to be market research. In 1959, the journal of the MRS was launched, initially called *Commentary*, which focused on practitioner members. However, an increasing number of submissions from academic researchers grew over time. In 2000, the MRS rebranded its journal to become the *IJMR*, as it is known today.

Concluding Comments

This special issue is an attempt to raise awareness and improve knowledge of the history of market research. Drawing on some of the themes that appear in the articles in this special issue, it is clear

that historical research exploring the past, present and future of market research offers unique insights. The three articles selected acknowledge the significant role history has in the advancement of market research and insight, provide interesting points of view into the development of market research through time, and highlight the significant role industry and professional bodies, and research outlets and publications play in shaping the sector.

Belief in the preservation of the past is reflected in the Archive of Market and Social Research (AMSR), which was set up 5 years ago. Archive of Market and Social Research houses a broad collection of past surveys, qualitative reports, opinion polls, conference papers and much more. The qualitative reports are already proving invaluable to social historians. There are very few archives such as those held by AMSR, which contain documents that cover a nation (being mainly UK-based). Archives of businesses are just that: records of a particular company that comprise its various brands and products. However, while hugely valuable to business historians, such archives are curated by the companies themselves; hence, are potentially biased. More challenging is to get a picture of a market and its constituent behaviours, practices, decision-making and competition. Such a purpose is catered for by AMSR, one of the few archives that provides such a broad base of information. Further explorations by market research scholars are encouraged.

Further, reflecting the history and development of *IJMR*, it is clear the journal offers an important outlet for academic and practitioner discussion and collaboration. Such activities are increasingly important as accusations of an expanding gap between academic research and practitioner usefulness grow (e.g. George, 2014; Palmatier, 2018; Reibstein et al., 2009; Vaara & Durand, 2012). Finally, further work is needed to explore the guiding or shaping role played by market researchers (and other types of data and insights providers) on managerial mental models, and by extension, markets themselves. We hope that research into the history of market research and insight will be written about more in *IJMR* and other leading marketing and management journals in the future.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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