

Making Sense of Information: A New Role for the Marketing Researcher?

Abstract

The value of today's business is measured increasingly in terms of what it knows, rather than what it owns. Even so, whilst knowledge exists in most organisations it is regularly difficult to access. This paper addresses the question of whether the information needs of those engaged in marketing management are being delivered satisfactorily by information providers. It is plainly evident that the use of the Internet and the Intranet as global communication tools has risen exponentially over the past two years. We know therefore, how things are in this increasingly project-driven business world concerning the sheer volume of information available for both support and user alike. However, a question remains as to whether this information is collected and presented in a form - at a level of specificity and depth - that makes for better decision taking.

Today there is talk of the analyst - in this case the market researcher - requiring the skills of the 'bricoleur'. This refers to the need in today's world of multi-source imperfect data of being able to piece together different weights and hues of evidence. While we acknowledge evidence exists of good practice, we believe that more needs to be done to provide practical training on how to operate in this bricolage mode, if we are to keep on top of 21st century marketing information. In this paper, we argue that there are seven issues that need addressing in order to ensure that the information needs of management are being satisfied by the market researcher.

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Information: There's a lot of it about

Increasingly, the value of a business today is measured in terms of what it knows, rather than what it owns. Even so, whilst knowledge exists in most organisations it is regularly difficult to access. This paper argues that those organisational structures, which keep market and competitive intelligence apart from traditional forms of data collection, are largely unhelpful. All too often knowledge is stored in any number of ways around an organisation from database files right through to sales presentations. However, a further question remains as to when this information is collected and presented, is it in a form - at a level of specificity and depth - that makes for better marketing decision taking (Antoniou, 1997)? It would appear that the printed monthly management bulletin (or its electronic offspring) which seeks to draw much of this knowledge together is in need of a complete overhaul. It is simply too slow and too inflexible to meet the needs of the decision taker.

If the goal of knowledge from, and about the market, is to help business managers make more informed decisions, then it is imperative that they work with an integrated picture of what is happening, rather than the piecemeal approach still evident in many large and small firms alike. In this paper, the authors argue that there are seven issues that need addressing - by the internal and external information provider - in order to ensure that the information needs of management are being satisfied.

1. Bricolage: Piecing Together The Information Jigsaw

In order to take advantage of a company's most valuable asset and compete effectively decision takers will need efficient means of rapidly accessing and sharing knowledge. However there is no escaping the frequently articulated observation that organisations remain 'data rich, yet insight poor'. Numerous studies on the subject of management information highlight concerns about decision takers suffering from 'analysis paralysis' and 'information overload' (Smith and Fletcher, 1999). For example, a survey of business managers highlighted that while 25% of managers require an enormous amount of information for their job, 49% felt they are often unable to cope with the volume of information they receive. The study also revealed that 38% claimed that a substantial amount of time was wasted trying to locate necessary information. Worryingly, 94% do not believe that the situation will improve (Waddington, 1996).

So in a world bombarded with different sources of information, the question must be asked as to whether those responsible for collecting, synthesizing and presenting such information are providing a service which actually helps the decision taker (Brady, Tzokas and Saren, 1999). Are there people who can assemble the 'information jigsaw' of available evidence into a sensible, meaningful picture? Here we have in mind, of course, information and market intelligence specialists working in the market and management consulting industries. Some providers have made considerable progress in ensuring that they operate in a more eclectic way than in the past. Drawing on, and piecing together, evidence from large-scale surveys they also feel comfortable in presenting desk and secondary data - all spiced

with qualitative insights (arguably what knowledge management experts refer to as tacit knowledge [1]). Moreover, adding to all this, they show a willingness to accommodate available information from the burgeoning number of customer and other databases (Duan and Burrell, 1997).

For Example, The Skandi Insurance group has constructed a measurement tool called the IC-Navigator which provides a balanced picture of financial and intellectual capital. The Navigator distinguishes among five major areas plus business contexts globally. The financial focus represents the results of the past, whereas the customer, human and process focuses indicate the present situation of the company. Strategic use of knowledge (knowledge navigation for future earnings) is based mainly on renewal and development, which provides a predictive image of Skandia's future earnings potential. BP's "Virtual Teams Project" uses a mix of technologies such as video conferencing and shared chalkboards to connect teams working at different sites around the globe. The US Army uses what it calls an After Action Review in an attempt to codify the soldiers' learning and apply that learning rapidly for the next group going into action. Similarly, Sandia National Laboratories carries out in-depth verbal and video interviews with departing scientists, in the hope of capturing more of their tacit knowledge

However, many organisations still fail to capture, transfer and leverage knowledge effectively and some observers have estimated that organisations use as little as 20 percent of their organizational knowledge (Von Krogh, Ichijo and Nonaka, 2000). Therefore 'knowledge management' professionals need to understand that the processing of information to aid the decision making process rests on two fundamental principles. The first is *the panorama*

principle. It is necessary to recognise that, in essence, *all* data are qualitative in the sense that they need to be interpreted in context, with the full appreciation of where the data came from, its strengths and its weaknesses. And second, there is the *triangulation principle*. The enlightened professionals recognise that data brought together from several sources must provide a more reliable guide for decision taking than data presented in a piecemeal fashion. Increasingly they are finding support to manage such initiatives from new technologies - representing the tools and techniques of the IT side of the knowledge management equation. Software houses such as, Lotus and Domino have incorporated such technologies enabling organisations to host collaborative web-based business applications such as those for customer relationship, interactive self service and supply chain management.

The most recent enhancements have seen some companies develop corporate portals that attempt to bring together internal Intranets with the knowledge resources available on the Internet. These portals combine corporate information with web-based source of data and e-mail on a single screen (Foremski, 1999). However, based on the authors' experience this is not common practice. In the Reuters study, factors such as the holding of files in different software formats and the speed of the Internet at critical times of day remains a major problem. For example, 43% of respondents thought that decisions were delayed and otherwise adversely affected by the existence of too much fragmented information; 47% of respondents said that information collection distracts them from their main responsibilities. They find it difficult to develop strategies for dealing with the information they retrieve (Waddington, 1996). What, the authors ask, would be the potential increase in productivity if all these distractions were removed? Today there is talk of market researchers needing the skills of

the 'bricoleur'. This refers to the need in today's world of multi-source imperfect data of being able to piece together different weights and hues of evidence. The authors believe that more needs to be done to provide practical training on how to operate in this bricolage mode, if providers are to keep on top of 21st century marketing information.

2. Seeing is believing

With so much commercial data drawn globally from a range of sources of varying quality, we (market researchers) have to accept the fact that, in the presentational material, we need to start by assessing the 'believability' of evidence. Gone are the days when the market research presentation could start by examining the classic scientific and statistical concepts of the validity and reliability of information. The authors argue that the organisational (internal) researcher is way ahead of us in this respect (Grant, 1996). Demarest (1997) wrote that "...commercial knowledge is not truth, but effective performance: not 'what is right' but 'what works' or even 'what works better' where better is defined in competitive and financial terms"(p.375). He also referred to such knowledge in terms of the bricolage, that provisional construction of a messy set of rules, tools and guidelines that emerges from the expertise and sensitivity of the craftsman, not the empirical accuracy of the rules, tools and guidelines. This view is significant in that it also allows for the possible reconciliation of different and competing views on knowledge (Tzokas and Saren, 1999). We can imagine a future where an integrated strategic knowledge database embracing all forms of market research and competitor intelligence opens up the opportunity for the decision taker and knowledge

management provider to undertake what we refer to as, *meta-analysis*. By this we mean an integrated and quantified summary of all marketing and competitor intelligence available on a specific issue, with a view to identifying overarching themes and concepts that sit on top of each of the individual studies or pieces of information and intelligence that exist.

But first, we need to examine the way in which the decision taker today scrutinizes the voracity of the ‘package of evidence’ which they are invited to inspect prior to taking a decision. The provider must be prepared - whether they like it or not - to ensure that their evidence is seen by the decision taker as believable. In some ways this, of course, seems irrational. A report that a decision-maker finds ‘hard to believe’ is, of course, not necessarily false or misleading.

However, the counter argument is that believability is all that today's senior manager can fall back on given the complexity of the eclectic mixture of information they are now asked to inspect (Johnson and Mathews, 1997). Increasingly, no one item of evidence is likely to be susceptible to assessment via ‘classic’ tests of say, statistical significance. Therefore, given the limitations of classical, statistical interpretations of evidence, what can the decision taker do? Not surprisingly they will inspect the evidence they are shown in the context of ‘prior knowledge’ - just how well do the arguments and evidence being presented square with their own experience? The methodological purist will, of course, continue to baulk at the above observation. But the authors here argue that it is important to accept the way in which evidence is regularly evaluated against this ‘believability’ criterion. However, it is argued that ‘believability’ does have a methodological basis. For example, the whole notion of ‘grounded

theory' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Martin and Turner, 1986) centres on inspecting each piece of primary research evidence, in relation to what other information we have on that topic.

To see whether this fresh information adds to our theoretical understanding of the topic under investigation. The point at which we no longer improve our theoretical or conceptual knowledge of a topic is called by the grounded theorists the point of 'theoretical sampling saturation' - the point at which we should stop collecting new data. In a different context we have writers now discussing the notion of directional indicators as a way of replacing the more classic concepts of pure statistical validity and reliability. Here we are referring to the way in which the analyst will look at the direction indicated by evidence drawn from a number of different desk, qualitative and quantitative sources in order to arrive at its overall directional indication rather than falling back on formal tests of statistical significance (Smith & Fletcher, 2000). An example of a recent project will help. A major financial institution was keen to understand the extent to which UK businesses are prepared for the introduction of the Euro, the single European currency. DVLSmith worked through data from a number of marketing research and competitor intelligence sources to provide a robust directional indicator of the readiness of businesses to embrace the Euro, which is summarised in Figure 1 below.





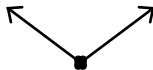


We commenced with desk research (1) which produced expert opinion - from financial and academic journals and reports - on the legal and commercial challenges ahead in preparing for the Euro and trends on the sales of products such as expert accounting systems designed to assist businesses trade in the Euro. Client customer information (2) provided

useful information on the level of enquiries about setting up a Euro currency account and the number of customers currently engaged in overseas import/export activities.

An electronic survey of branch managers indicated the regularity with which they are being asked to set up meetings to talk about the single European account and further market intelligence (4) was gathered in the form of an audit of training courses being run for the SME sector on the financial implications of trading in the Euro. Competitor intelligence (5) highlighted the precise number of strategic competitors actively supporting early entry of the United Kingdom into the single European currency and that one in particular was investing in some leading edge software to help it handle complex Euro transactions. In this case results from group discussions (6) demonstrated sharp polarisation of business customer attitudes towards the Euro - one group thought the government should be doing everything possible to take the country into the single European currency, whilst the other thought that such a move would seriously damage businesses.

However, the quantitative data (7), while indicating that few companies were preparing for entry, revealed that a high proportion would immediately follow the lead of a major competitor if they had started preparing for change. Finally, market segmentation study of SME conducted with a dataset derived by merging a internal data with a 1,000 interview study, showed that the biggest segment was those who were pro-Euro, but were unaware of what they should be doing to trade in the Euro.

Figure 1 The case of the euro -blowing in the wind

| Activity | Emergent knowledge | Overall likely take-up indicator |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Desk research | Expert knowledge Market data |  |
| 2. Client customer intelligence | Enquiries & involvement |  |
| 3. Market intelligence | Local branch feedback |  |
| 4. Competitor intelligence | No. of training courses Software purchases |  |
| 5. Qualitative data | Poles apart |  |
| 6 Quantitative data | A small number are prepared...but if he does I will |  |
| 7. Integrated internal customer and survey data | I'll have some of that - what was it again? |  |

Interpretation:
 The overall balance of evidence suggests fairly rapid UK business of a 'Euro' account. This overall pattern overrides the polarised evidence (which could be due to some of the group discussions over representing the anti European lobby)

The above example provides a useful account of the notion of data analysis informed by the principle of directional indicators rather than the classical statistical approach. In essence all the traditional analysis disciplines will be employed on any one piece of evidence - the content analysis of depth interview transcripts and the use of statistical approaches to summarising data - but ultimately the analysis centres on looking at the overall collective fit of the data set. At this point, the individual statistical significance of any one item of evidence is not the determinant of whether that item of evidence is accepted or rejected. The principle underlying the analysis is the consistency of the overall 'story line' and the ability of the analyst to satisfactorily explain any 'outlier' pieces of evidence.

3. Factoring in intuition

Another feature of coping with 21st century marketing information, is the need to be much more realistic than has been the case in the past in factoring in management prior knowledge and intuition into the decision-making process. In the past, intuition tended to play second fiddle to the formal explicit market research evidence. But, today, there are positive encouraging signs that a more realistic approach is being adopted. This is an approach that gives appropriate weight to implicit and explicit evidence (Grönroos, 1994).. Thus, the authors are arguing that in this new information era, rather than intelligence providers simply presenting data, they should now provide an interpretation that has taken into consideration the perspective of the decision taker (similar to the example shown in Figure 1). We argue that it is good practice to start including in the data analysis and interpretation process some

mechanism for ‘factoring in’ current management intuition and thinking on the topic under investigation. The argument is that by including - in some interactive way - this ‘prior knowledge’ we will be able to improve the quality of the final interpretation of the data. This may sound like heresy to the classic researcher/analyst who wants to keep clear blue water between the interpretation of the evidence and decision taking process. However, we would argue that in today's information and business climate, we should be realistic about the importance of taking management intuition more formally into account (Grönroos, 1997). In some ways, we already have the methodological framework in place to start this process.

The Bayesian approach to decision-making (Akker, Kumar & Day, 1995) provides a useful way of structuring our thoughts in this area. It is sometimes argued that the trading off of ‘prior’ and ‘posterior’ probabilities, that is central to the Bayesian approach is, in effect, nullified when the prior probabilities are management hunches and intuitions, and the posterior probability is survey or market data. The greater robustness and certainty of survey data, it is argued, swamps the probability of prior beliefs, which either add or detract very little from the probability of survey findings. But this view overlooks the important distinction between ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ knowledge. Clients’ intuitions may be steeped in implicit knowledge - everything from the body language of the last customer spoken to, to the market trends revealed in long time-series of research data. In short, the host of hard and soft facts digested by clients in their day-to-day work.

In the understanding of a particular subject, we can identify a form of Pareto distribution, whereby an individual can come to understand 80% of a subject within 20% of the time, which it takes to entirely master that subject. However, the remaining 20% (often

crucial understanding for effective practical action in the area), requires the remaining 80% of the time to master it. This knowledge curve, often difficult to articulate explicitly, could include facts, which genuinely challenge the explicit findings of market intelligence data. So what is required is a method for identifying and drawing out the precise, implicit client intuitions, in order to place them in the Bayesian balance, against explicit research findings. In pursuing this dimension of the analysis process, there are four key 'prior knowledge' areas to take into account. Each is described below (Culkin, Fletcher and Smith, 1999).

- **Normative research experience:** in many situations the commissioning organisation will have a body of normative evidence against which to evaluate specific survey findings. For example, it is well known that a number of leading FMCG manufacturers know, from long experience, that if they have a survey finding suggesting that 30% of customers will definitely buy a particular product, then only a third of this 'top box' figure will actually buy the product. Therefore it is useful to factor in this normative understanding when interpreting the data
- **Near experiences:** it also seems sensible to build into the analysis the experience of the company in similar ventures in related fields. For example, in researching take up of a particular on-line service aimed at 'higher education institutions', it would be imprudent to ignore the success the organization has earlier achieved in marketing a publication to 'further education institutions'.
- **Anecdotes vs. archetypes:** market intelligence providers have traditionally been 'rather sniffy' about the tendency of Senior Managers and Board Members to whom they present, to be driven in their understanding of a subject, by anecdotes about apparently isolated

incidents. But such scenarios may represent genuine insights into a subject. Such instances are not mere anecdotes, but rather archetypes: instances, which are highly representative of a widely occurring fact or phenomenon. Many marketing practices are of precisely this sort - for example, psychological pricing - that is, the widespread tendency for people to think that £49.99 is a far cheaper price than, say, £50.60.

- **Likely competitive response:** although as explained above, a good market research study will attempt to understand the competitive context in which a respondent is offering their views, there will still be an advantage to building into the interpretation process the client's assessment of the likely response of competitors to a particular initiative. If management think that a key competitor will start a price war in response to their new pricing strategy, then - arguably - this view should be factored into the analysis process (Dexter and Fletcher, 1999).

4. Conceptual models

It is going to be difficult for those in marketing to absorb the individual meaning of so many pieces of incoming information, without having access to conceptual models that provides a framework for understanding this information. Reasonably enough, today's decision takers will be dissatisfied by a pedestrian and literal presentation of the evidence, without any attempt to link it to wider, contextual issues. Moreover, there is a growing expectation that the intelligence provider will go beyond the immediate evidence and will be able to develop a conceptual model or framework that allows a decision taker to generalize

from the specific evidence and start understanding some of the wider, overarching trends and forces at work (Elkin, 1997).

Thus today, the pressure is on the intelligence provider to identify the shapes and patterns that lie behind the data. Those in the information industry - including market researchers - are extending their range in order to be able to provide clients with these 'pattern identifying skills'. For example the authors have recently conducted research on attitudes towards government funded information services (on-line). In this study the authors' were able to go beyond a traditional report stating how managers felt about the different service providers in the market. The conclusions started to explain what, in general terms, seemed to be happening in terms of how managers (in this instance high growth small firms) responded to the availability of such provision, and their possible take-up rate.

On this study we realised it was well documented that with regard to new service technology, there is normally an 'early adopter group' who are first in to the new forms of offer, and at the other end of spectrum, a group of 'technophobes' who feel uneasy about embracing anything new. In between there are often businesses that will keep a watching brief - neither committing to, nor rejecting, the new offer. Given this often large, 'watching brief' category, good practice dictates that we should unpack this mindset, rather than simply accept it. For instance, we know that certain individuals' attitude towards a phenomenon, such as the Internet will, in part, be a function of his/her own individual beliefs and attitudes, but will also be the function of the individual's perception of what they think others think about the Internet.

In the light of this insight, we can start unpacking this ‘watching brief’ category by exploring the wider context of respondents’ perceptions of what others currently think and may be about to do. For instance, one could start exploring the extent to which an individual’s willingness to embrace say, electronic on-line information services would be changed - triggered - by external events, such as learning that a key competitor was now on-line and putting their own business at a competitive disadvantage. By providing a model that explained this ‘watching brief’ category, we were able to provide the decision taker with insights that will enable them to interpret similar market opportunities.

5. Making market research more actionable

Over the years, market research has been a solid source of insights and information about the world of marketing, but it has always suffered from criticisms that it should be more actionable and applied to the decision-making process. Encouragingly, there is evidence that there are various developments taking place within market research that register the importance, at various stages in the market research process, of ensuring that the research will be actionable. Stephen Covey (1994), in his best selling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, talks about the importance of *starting at the end*. This lesson seems to have been learnt in recent years by market researchers, who have now put in place a number of initiatives to ensure actionability. For example, researchers are now much more aware about ensuring that the evidence presented to the decision taker is kept to a manageable proportion. Specifically, it is important for intelligence specialists to have a disciplined approach - an

analytical framework - in which they operate, from the outset of the project. People can no longer develop effective personal strategies for managing information. Faced with an onslaught of information and information channels, they have become unable to develop simple routines for managing information.

The old adage that a problem well defined is a problem half solved remains as true now as it ever did. Thus at the outset of a project or market study, it becomes critical to clearly define, the information needs and to predict exactly how this will help the decision taker. Particularly important here is sorting out how different individuals at the initial project briefing stage will present the problem. Some will come at the problem by listing possible survey questions (how would you describe the bank's counter service?). In contrast, others may elect to communicate the problem in terms of research objectives (what is the customer's overall level of satisfaction with the standard of counter service?); whereas others pose the problem in terms of decision outcomes. For example, we must be in a position to decide:

- (i) whether to maintain on line support standards at existing levels, or
- (ii) allocate additional resources to extend the range of services on offer.

The skilled intelligence suppliers will be alert to the different ways in which the problem may be initially expressed and, using all these different 'languages of problem definition', will work towards the design of a project or study that is manageable. If just one question is allowed at the outset of the study it should be, 'on completion of this project, what

question(s) do you expect to be able to use this research information to answer?’(Tammo, 1996).

It is often joked that the value in much of a business gets up and goes home for the weekend on a Friday afternoon and in many industries it is increasingly common for those managers to stay in a company for only one or two years before moving on. Traditionally, their knowledge and experience goes with them. A recent survey in Marketing suggested that seventeen months is the average for senior Marketing Managers. It therefore becomes important for the Manager, during their time at a particular helm, to concentrate on what is achievable. Of course, the idea that there can be a clash between the individual goals of an employee and the goals of the organisation is hardly a new observation. But the authors would argue that the time pressures placed on management in recent years have brought this issue into sharp profile. We have already noted the example of Sandia who have realised the need to carry out in-depth verbal and video interviews with departing scientists, in the hope of capturing more of their tacit knowledge. Thus, an individual - knowing that they must produce results in the short term to keep a career on line - understandably tend to associate themselves with projects and tasks that are achievable within reasonable time-frames (Saunders, 1996). There is less interest in projects with wider and longer-term pay-offs. This emphasis means that when, for example, Marketing Managers are listening to market research presentations, they often become irritated and frustrated if some of the issues that are being addressed are not cast within what we have termed as 'the achievable zone'.

The information managers receive in order to make decisions not only has to be in the achievable zone, but also be possible. Here it is important for the intelligence providers to

recognise the importance of providing information at the level of specificity now required by management about to decide what to do when faced with different types of evidence (McDonald, 1996).

An example from the UK illustrates the point. At a recent Market Research Society Conference, reference was made to a cable company's customer satisfaction survey, which reported dissatisfaction among customers on the 'standard of the engineer's visit'. The client dismissed the feedback as too general and insufficiently specific to be actionable. This led to identification of the fact that the specific problem was the creation of dust caused by the engineers drilling through the outside wall of customers' houses in order to insert the cable. This specific information led to direct specific action being taken in the form of providing the cable company's engineers with hand-held vacuum cleaners so that they could Hoover up the dust when they had completed their installation (Smith, 1997).

6. Impactful presentations of evidence

Following on from the above is the growing recognition of the need to provide impactful presentations of the market research evidence. Gone are the days when management would be satisfied with feedback from their intelligence provider that painted a general overview about the topic under investigation. Information presented to the decision taker must be directly for them. This reflects the fact that today's decision-makers are, quite reasonably, more accountable for their actions and decisions than was the case in the past. In a modern business environment there is enormous emphasis on measuring exactly what

benefits flow from what action (Devlin, 1998; Myung-Sul, 1997). In this setting the pressure is, in turn, on the information provider to present data in a more participative style. Thus, the decision taker is looking for the provider to identify, for example, the three key issues that underpin the whole study, and for the evidence to be presented in such a way that it helps them decide how to interpret each of these three issues (Grönroos, 1998; Shaw, 1998).

This is to be contrasted to presentations -especially given by market researchers in the past - where what may be termed the *dipping of one's toe in the water* approach to a presentation is pursued. This would involve first presenting a body of evidence from desk research, followed by a body of qualitative, then quantitative evidence, and so on through the remaining steps of the programme. At the end of this *toe dipping* process, there would often be a big gap between this evidence and the decisions still to be taken by management.

Nevertheless, today the emphasis is on the 'participative' style that relentlessly works its way through to the conclusion the decision-maker must make. There is probably still some way to go for the market researcher to perfect this participant art form, but it is generally recognised that the knowledge management professional seems to be getting there. They are reducing the gap that has so often existed between the data and the decision. For example, Novartis (formed by the 1996 merger between Sandoz and Ciba-Geigy), is a company with extremely sophisticated and diverse knowledge. Its business incorporates basic technologies, scientific research, manufacturing and marketing but it has found one solution to marshal its dispersed and compartmentalised intellectual resources. This problem faces any knowledge-intensive, global industry, large and small, but Novartis has addressed it with a three-pronged strategy: using Web-based technology to foster collaboration within its worldwide workforce;

created a system of development grants (think of in-house Fulbrights) for projects that will make different business units work together; and hosting periodic knowledge fairs to spark ideas (Abramson, 1999).

7. A new information paradigm

Although, as this paper has illustrated, there have been various improvements made over recent years to ensure that market research is meeting the needs of decision-makers. The authors take the view that the market research industry does need to consider launching a *new* what may be termed paradigm for the way in which *new* as opposed *old* market now operates. When we refer to a new paradigm, in actual fact, we are really referring to putting in the public domain what many market researchers already currently do. This is important if we are to build the confidence of management decision takers in the market research process. For instance, with the analysis of data, market researchers will be using holistic concepts such as the weight, power and direction of evidence. But, each individual agency and data-using company may apply these principles in a slightly different way. So there is benefit if there is a pinning down of the new holistic analysis paradigm. This will provide a focal point for training, educational texts and other initiatives, aimed at ensuring that market research meets the needs of decision takers.

Conclusions

As we can see from the examples in this paper there are companies that have established intelligent systems for capturing and using information. These companies recognise that information is a valuable commodity and a business asset. At the same time, these and other companies are looking for ways to realise flatter organisational structures that can reduce costs through eliminating intermediate layers of management. Whilst this is taking place at the organisational level, the authors have seen an explosion in the number of 'multi-project' driven business environments. An increasingly complex environment in which managers find themselves leading a team on a high risk, business expansion project in the morning and in the afternoon they are contributing to a meeting as a member of a HR review team. So, whereas in 1990, a large company would have had a small number of decision takers, today that same company has many more - with the number growing. As a result, decision taking has become more decentralised with more than enough information captured to keep managers occupied for the foreseeable future. However, a flatter organisational structure should not simply mean devolving responsibility - it must be about empowering everyone in the company. With such a structure, people require access to information needed to enable them to make effective decisions.

The authors would argue that market intelligence professionals - if they are to provide a service to management decision takers - must anticipate the fact that management will be moving to a position, possibly in presenting a business case, where they will need to use the evidence being presented to 'win' a particular argument. It could of course, be argued that

this does not fall within the remit of those providing the information. But we would take the counter view, arguing that we exist in an era where individuals' ability to absorb information in any depth is becoming severely tested. According to this view, we will simply become a nation of zappers, clicking from one 'top line' piece of information to the next, in search of some superficial, 'apparent' solution to our particular problem. We can already see the signs. Radio and TV programmes want answers to be provided in 30 seconds; politicians and business people are forced to accommodate their wishes by providing top line soundbites on issues, rather than detailed evidence. Therefore, new generations of individuals grow up with this as the accepted way of trying to make sense of the world.

Looking to the future, as we enter a world of online information databases, the authors argue that many of the issues raised above will come into even sharper focus. Knowledge management specialists frequently claim that 85% of the information a company needs to compete successfully already exists within an organisation. However, this does not of course mean that simply locating internally available information can solve all of an organisation's marketing problems.

We envisage increasing calls for information from different sources to be pieced together and that in the face of an overwhelming amount of information, there will be more emphasis on concentrating on what is achievable, and also making sure that the outcomes are entirely actionable. The authors know from their own desk research experience that while we can get tantalisingly close to the solution of a problem using *existing* information, we often find that the all-important critical insight requires some form of diagnostic, ad hoc qualitative and/or quantitative research study.

We believe there is also going to be a competitive advantage to those market research and information providers who, at the outset of studies, can help define the problem in a manageable way. While at the end of the study helping the decision taker through the decision making process. The authors believe that knowledge management systems offer an ideal framework for such providers to help clients ensure that they are 'insight rich' not merely 'data rich'. We believe that the integration of information from a range of different sources into Intranets, which can be renewed constantly, will go a long way towards solving the data overload problem and help decision takers make information decisions.

To be effective, data suppliers must find ways of factoring in the manager's own intuition and prior knowledge on the subject. In addition the successful providers will set the information in a wider analytical framework context and act as a coach to the decision taker in the way to present and win the case in the arena in which the argument must be presented.

[1] Explicit knowledge is the stuff of books. It is easy to articulate, capture and communicate. Tacit knowledge resides in the heads of people and is gained mainly through experience. It is often personal and difficult to capture but arguably it has the most value.

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