

The logo for MACRO CONSULTING, INC. features the word "MACRO" in a stylized, teal, sans-serif font. A thin orange horizontal line is positioned directly beneath the letters "A" and "C".

CONSULTING, INC.

Marketing Research / Advanced Analytics

The background features a light gray grid of small dots. A dashed gray line starts from the left side and trends upwards to the right. A solid orange line starts from the top right and trends downwards to the left. There are several teal dots scattered across the grid.

The Roles and Goals of Marketing Research

Where we've been and where we're heading

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The Roles and Goals of Marketing Research:

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In 1911, Charles Coolidge Parlin became the first “real” marketing researcher when he was appointed manager of the commercial research division of the advertising department of the Curtis Publishing Company, thus birthing an industry.

Why did this one minor adjustment to the corporate structure of Curtis Publishing spawn an entire industry? Because, in 1911, in its infantile innocence and ignorance, marketing research was effective. It increased profits.

After our apex during the Golden Age of Radio (how sad is it that our apex was also our birth?), we declined to the point of being a wallflower at the senior prom. We were invited to the party, but nobody would dance with us. Heck, nobody would even admit they knew us. We became those strange little people, bent over large stacks of computer output, worrying over statistical significance without a clue (or often a care) as to how the businesses we were so earnestly studying operated. We wrote reports that no one read because they didn't contain anything relevant to their business and, more importantly, their careers. We were labeled irrelevant, and usually were. We were outside the power structure, generally failed to have any meaningful impact on the businesses that employed us, and, more importantly, failed to be promoted above the MR ceiling. Thus we were forced to live out our lives in that dank, sleepy backwater called the marketing research department.

Not too surprisingly, some of our ilk have not been satisfied with such a decline from our historically virile past. They want more. Consequently, over the last decade, we've seen seminars offered on how to influence business decisions (speak their language!), how to join the power elite (dress for success!) and how to make memorable presentations (use bright colors!). This desire to earn a seat at the power table has caused an evolution in the market research profession. An evolution that has not transformed an entire industry just yet, but has an increasing number of disciples, successfully demonstrating its genetic superiority over its most recent predecessors.

Here's the Story

The evolutionary mutation to which I refer is a fundamental shift in how survey data are analyzed and reported. How do the avant-garde among us manage to transform themselves from Wallflower Wally to the prom queen herself? From shunned pariah to belle of the ball? The answer is deceptively simple: storytelling.

Client researchers, facing increasing pressure to be relevant or be terminated, are desperate to be viewed in a positive light by their internal clients (thus, for example, honoring deadlines has become more important than providing quality results). Because most corporate researchers spend roughly 120% of each waking moment in meetings, it is difficult for them to find the time or energy to dig through the research findings and translate that learning into actionable, business-oriented results for their internal clients. They have become administrators. They manage a process they do not have the time to understand or participate in.

Enter, stage left, the storytelling consultancy. Storytelling is a brilliant idea. Rather than encumber the presentation with all those pesky details, the storytelling style is to create a narrative based on the research results. Theoretically, the narrative is a broad stroke verbal picture of what has been revealed in the survey data. In practice, this broad narrative is often based not only on the data, but also on the intuition, experience, expertise and/or imagination of the storytelling researcher. In other words, these narratives are not necessarily constrained by the facts. The result is an often entertaining, insightful and original perspective on the client's business problem. It is more fun to sit through a storytelling presentation than one of Wallflower Wally's tedious litanies just as it is more fun to read a Harry Potter novel than a textbook on statistics (at least for most of us).

I see two problems with market research striving to be prom queen. As you may have already guessed, I'm not keen on creative fiction being presented as fact. And let's not kid ourselves. That is exactly what happens, at least frequently. Data reports are sometimes flat and uninformative. Sometimes, perhaps more than sometimes, the research just isn't very good. When you are constrained to report only what you've learned from the research study, some of those presentations can be downright embarrassing. We spent HOW MUCH for this study?

So the temptation to fill in the blank spots on the canvas with a little imagination disguised as "past experience in the category" can be irresistible. But this brings me to my second problem. Almost never does the consultant have anywhere near the "experience with the category" that the client does. The consultant is no doubt very clever and capable of building credible stories, but credible stories not based on fact tightly reconciled with the detailed, messy reality of the category is just fantasy. Credible-sounding fantasy, perhaps, but still fantasy. You may be right. But chances are just as good that you are completely wrong.

This doesn't seem to bother anyone. The corporate researcher gets entertaining results, predigested much like a mother bird who feeds her young meals she's already eaten. This saves the corporate researcher a huge amount of time that he/she would have otherwise spent trying to figure out how to make all those numbers useful. The internal clients get answers they can immediately act on, saving them a huge amount of time they would otherwise be obligated to spend figuring out what business decisions to make based on the survey results. Besides, these presentations are fun!

And the research consultancy. What do they get? Money. They get lots and lots of money. Because they are no longer vendors, they are strategic consultants—they can justify higher fees. And their sales pitches look totally cool because they're entertaining, easy to understand and contain practically no numbers at all, just really cool stories (just like their research presentations). So they close more sales.

Everybody's happy.

But there's a problem. This is not the way to do good research. Marketing research, properly applied, is always a piece of the puzzle but never the whole picture. Never the prom queen.

To be effective, market research needs to be a collaborative process, a partnership. Research consultancies must work hand-in-hand with the corporate researcher and the various internal clients to get the methodology, the data collection and the analysis right. They should do the hard work of spending time together arguing every step of the way about the right next step. Once the results come in, that's when the heavy lifting really begins.

I have seen firsthand the deep insights that can emerge from hours, sometimes days, of passionate discussion when all the key players participate. Often, research presentations can be more valuable as catalyst to strategic discussion than as information source.

So market research used to be useful. It has grown into irrelevance, and its latest greatest attempt to become relevant again is to shortcut the process by going to the prom and dancing alone.

Dancing alone may be better than not dancing at all but it is not enough.

We are an independent **marketing research consulting firm** dedicated to helping you make the most informed, insightful marketing decisions possible. We specialize in technology, consumer, and new product research, and are well recognized for our **State-of-the-Art Research** techniques.

Ultimately, we provide more than just technical expertise. We focus on developing **pragmatic solutions** that will have a positive impact on the profitability of our clients.

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