

# The System is Set Up to Reward the Appearance of Substance

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# The System is Set Up to Reward the Appearance of Substance

Jonathan Weiner objects to my column on storytelling precisely because he's a good researcher. He is aware of the pitfalls I cite and works hard to avoid them. But my criticisms are general, based on years of observing dozens of client/supplier relationships. Just because Weiner doesn't see these problems in his practice does not imply they are not widespread and systemic.

Weiner makes an excellent case for how research should be conducted. He says there are three fundamentals to a good partnership: technical excellence, listening to the client and effectively communicating the results. If the research isn't technically excellent, it doesn't matter what we say. But all the methodological mumbo jumbo is useless if we can't communicate it effectively. And he claims storytelling is an effective way to communicate the results. With all of this, I agree but ...

Where Weiner's argument goes awry is in the real world. And it goes awry very quickly. His assertion of the three fundamentals to a good partnership assumes that there is a partnership. One of my main points is that often there is no partnership: "To be effective, market research needs to be a collaborative process, a partnership," I wrote in my column. Client-side researchers too often feel the need to order research like they were at McDonald's. They place an order, wait for their number to be called, and then they go pick it up. They do not have time for collaboration.

Weiner claims, "*if we can't be technically excellent, then it doesn't matter what we say.*" Absolutely true but ... client-side researchers, like the products they help market, are rewarded by perceptions of reality, not reality. If your boss likes you and thinks you're doing well, then you're doing well. A good story looks like technical excellence to the marketing vice president. And to some of us, that's all that matters.

Weiner argues that suppliers should really listen to client needs. I agree again but ... Each project should commence with a lengthy, face-to-face meeting where the objectives are discussed in detail and refined or even rewritten altogether. But what usually happens is the supplier gets a request for a proposal that's due in three days. The client is booked in meetings so he e-mails all the documentation available and asks the supplier to e-mail him with any questions that arise as she is pulling the proposal together. Listening to the client is one half (and only half) of the collaboration we all agree should occur. But it takes time that is often not available.

Weiner also claims my statement that clients “*manage a process they do not have the time to understand or participate in*” is a falsehood. He states that I perceive the client as “a shallow, time-starved, ego-driven, marketer wanna-be who only wants to entertain his internal marketing partners to stay relevant,” but the only part that he agrees with is time-starved. He and I agree on the key point, that clients are time-starved, and that agreement supports my first point, namely, clients don’t have time to understand or participate. And we also agree that time-starved is the only part of his assertion about my perception of clients that is true. Clients far too often don’t have time to learn about new methodologies or collaborate in the research process. This is not necessarily by their own choosing, although sometimes it is. It is generally forced on them by the system in which they work.

Finally, Weiner asserts that storytelling is an effective communications tool. It absolutely is. He goes further to say my” assertion that we are crafting a fantasy filling in gaps with our own imagination is farcical. In fact, it would be an egregious breach of responsibility to do so.” It not only would be an egregious breach of responsibility to do so but one would have to be naïve to think it isn’t already often such a breach. I know firsthand of researchers who have used the storyteller’s paintbrush to gloss over flaws in the research, and I strongly suspect that Weiner knows some, too. For many, the temptation to make money, to be lauded, to feel heard, to feel successful can be too attractive to resist. This is human nature. Storytelling can be abused and, therefore, is being abused. That is not farcical. It is unavoidable unless the client demands fact-based documentation (those pesky details) that supports every aspect of the story. And that takes time from both sides.

The fundamental problem is not that clients and suppliers don’t want to do good research, it is that they don’t have enough time to do good research. The system is not set up to reward substance; it is set up to reward the appearance of substance. It is the age-old dilemma of sizzle versus steak.

If you don’t believe this, let me ask you a hypothetical question: Faced with a choice to either miss the presentation deadline of a highly visible project (and disappoint a very demanding VP) or to skip an analysis that may yield additional, potentially impactful insights, which would you choose?

Weiner and I agree on what should be: collaboration at every stage and effective communication of results. We disagree on what is.

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