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# Driving more value from what you know

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**“If we only Knew what we Know” has been a popular refrain inside large companies for a decade. It’s the kind of phrase which meets with sage approval around the corporate meeting room, without necessarily triggering any action.**

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As organisations have become ever larger, more complex, and more global, they have invested huge sums both in conventional market research and in customer databases. The resources they have at their disposal are vast. And yet many companies still appear pre-conditioned to approach each new business challenge as a venture into uncharted territory. When faced with the unknown, there is an almost primeval instinct to commission yet more research.

The normal modus operandi of the market research industry validates and reinforces this instinct. Despite years of self analysis and some genuine efforts to change, the industry still finds it too easy to reassert its traditional model. Client has need; client issues research brief; several agencies pitch; one wins; project is conducted; findings are delivered.

In an era of unprecedented corporate prosperity, the inability to leverage existing customer knowledge was horrendously wasteful. In the new age of economic realism, it is unsustainable. The simple truth is that most businesses already possess much of the raw material they need to take any decision they are likely to face. New research should be focused on filling the gaps in understanding.

When companies harness their customer knowledge effectively, the results can be extraordinarily powerful – and surprisingly economic.

## To take some examples from our own experience:

- The owner of a world famous brand was able to develop a global framework to help it identify its biggest strategic growth opportunities, determine innovation priorities for different types of markets, and drive increased marketing efficiency and effectiveness. The framework was created without commissioning any new research whatsoever, and utilises a combination of market measurement databases, existing consumer research, and socio-economic information freely available in the public domain.
- A major organisation developed a new customer proposition for a key b2b segment using mix of employee knowledge and new customer research. Although the company had previously underperformed among these customers, it quickly became apparent that some employees within the business knew a lot about the sector. Once this knowledge had been assimilated and connected with the marketing challenges, it became possible to develop realistic hypotheses for a new customer proposition. New research was then used to explore customer needs in more detail and develop the full proposition.
- A leading customer business built a new communications plan by first linking its customer data with existing research to develop hypotheses about customer needs and potential messaging strategies, and then targeting a programme of new customer research to explore opportunities within specific priority segments.



This is powerful stuff – practical business strategies created from real customer insight without enormous investments. A “no brainer”, to return briefly to the language of the corporate meeting room. So why do so many companies struggle to harness and utilise what they already know?

This happens because, for one reason or another, organisations fail to adhere to a series of basic principles. None of the points are complicated - some of them seem insultingly obvious when committed to print - but it's often the simple things that hold companies back. If they are not addressed, businesses rapidly revert to spending money on finding out what they already know, or to trawling for “insights” when a more focused and practical approach would be much more effective.

- 01** Be really, really clear about the practical result which needs to be delivered for the business, and the decisions which will have to be taken in order to achieve this. This sounds the most obvious of all, but it's the point at which almost all ineffective research first goes off the tracks. Open ended data mining may uncover the occasional gem of unexpected insight, but the rest of the time it serves up tray after tray of sand. Focus is everything.
- 02** Conversely, once the issues are tightly in focus, cast the investigation itself as wide as possible. The insights which drive the most effective decisions are usually mosaics, created by integrating particles of knowledge from a variety of different sources to create a practical solution no one has uncovered before.
- 03** Commit the necessary resource. Some companies staff up their insights functions to a level which allows them to reanalyse data extensively; many don't. People who are already over-committed are unlikely suddenly to find the space to take on a new assignment which requires a significant amount of time and fresh thinking. Assess what can realistically be achieved internally and bring in the right resource. Companies are sometimes reluctant to do this, feeling guiltily that “we should be doing this ourselves”, but dedicated resources and fresh eyes get better and faster results, and it's much cheaper than commissioning a piece of new research which the business doesn't need.
- 04** Use your colleagues. Companies talk about “institutionalised knowledge”, but much of that knowledge resides within individual people. Drawing out customer and market insights from employees – in an objective way, not one which promotes self-interested lobbying – can be a powerful means of understanding the issues and developing hypotheses.
- 05** Figure out what the business really doesn't know, and focus any new research. A company may already have a lot of what it needs to address the latest challenge, but the likelihood is it won't have everything. The aim is not to abolish market research, but to ensure that what is done adds new insights rather than repeating old truths. The results are likely to be a lot less expensive and a lot more incisive.
- 06** Agree a timeline and stick to it. Freed from the shackles of field schedules and reporting deadlines, companies can drift into endless “digging”. A lot can be accomplished in a small number of weeks, so mapping out a practical schedule and sticking to it creates an important sense of momentum.
- 07** Finally, the work needs to promote practical action within the business, and not just deliver findings. This is another obvious point, but mining existing information can be fascinating – “well, I never knew that” – and it is extraordinarily easy to be seduced into a “Here's Some Interesting Stuff We Found” deliverable. Even if the conclusion is that new research is now needed, for example to get clarity on what really drives customer decisions, the interim work should move the commercial issues forward significantly.

Connecting customer understanding to decision making is the key to success in any business. Companies which successfully leverage the knowledge they already possess will have a huge advantage.