

# Carpe Diem:

## THE NEXT GENERATION OF MARKET RESEARCH

By Communispace: Manila Austin, Ph.D. and Julie Wittes Schlack



The world of market research has changed, probably forever. The emergence of social media and other technologies has opened up unprecedented avenues for learning, co-creation and insight generation. But so far, as an industry, we have been slow to fully seize these opportunities. Concerns about quality, response rates, questionable respondents, and sample size are understandable; but if market research is to thrive in future years it must evolve and expand its methods.

It is not that the nuts and bolts of research are unimportant, but our diligence creates a blind spot.

**We need to open our eyes to—and broaden our understanding of—what constitutes “quality.” We must seize the day!**

In order to do this, we need to rigorously think through what we are gaining and risking as we adopt participatory, technology-enabled, and transparent methods (particularly those enabled by social media). To this end, we have tried to formulate a new framework that transcends the “qualitative vs. quantitative” paradigm in favour of an approach that more meaningfully reflects new realities. We have identified eight tradeoffs researchers should weigh to maximize opportunity, enhance (rather than sacrifice) quality, and make their work more timely and actionable:

### **Purity for Pragmatism:**

It is more important for research to be actionable than irrefutable. This means that we must expand our approach to go beyond quasi-experimental designs that aim for the perfect, bias-free study, to one that pragmatically applies a range of techniques, generating results that are timely and “good enough.” We need to focus on synthesizing a range of findings to produce insights that are relevant and actionable.

### **General for Specific:**

If the goal of research is to generate relevant, useful data, then there’s more to be gained from listening to the “right” group of people than by trying to generalize findings to an increasingly elusive “generic” population. If you want to deepen customer loyalty, who better to engage than members of your brand’s loyalty program? If you need to broaden your brand’s appeal, then hone in on the fans of your competitors’ brands. This trade-off doesn’t require the surrender of confidence; results from the “right” participants can inform our understanding of the larger consumer population.

### **Artificial for Natural:**

One of the great benefits of social media is that it brings research into the consumer’s world and allows for comfortable, convenient participation. Creating an intimate, natural space for consumers to relate to each other and generate their own discussions yields authentic and detailed insights that are likely to be missing from traditional, artificial approaches.

### **Anonymity for Transparency:**

Simply said, people are more forthcoming and their input is more useful when they know who they’re talking to. In our experience, unbranded approaches require researchers to conduct “decoy” studies to maintain anonymity; but when identity is

revealed, engagement increases and conversations become more relevant and valuable.

### **Distance for Relationships:**

A common fear is that feedback from people in branded communities will be inflated and biased as a result of their ongoing involvement and growing affinity for the brand. Our research finds that the opposite is true, that long-term relationships actually result in higher quality, genuine feedback, that when a customer cares about the brand they are more likely to provide useful insight—even critical insight—precisely because they feel more invested in the brand’s success.

### **Randomness for Purpose:**

Researchers today would be hard-pressed to find a truly random sample of people who aren’t market-savvy, survey-taking, review-reading consumers. And honestly, why would they want to? The notion that the best participant is a fresh or unpracticed one seems antiquated for today’s largely participatory consumer climate. Instead, we find that well-versed, veteran participants actually provide clearer, more detailed feedback. That’s because seasoned participants are highly engaged, motivated, and eager to share.

### **Control for Collaboration:**

One reason that researchers favour surveys and one-on-one interviews is a fear of “group think.” The realistic researcher, however, must remember that group dynamics are a very real part of today’s online consumer climate. No one lives in a bubble. Tapping into this environment of open exchange gives researchers the opportunity to harness the creativity, candid feedback, and influence strategies that are evident in consumer-to-consumer conversation. It also elevates consumers to the role of co-investigators, bringing them into the fold and the learning process.

## Looking Forward for

### Looking Backward:

“Irrefutable,” nationally representative data are essential only if we limit the role of market research to testing and confirmation. We suggest, however, that the role of market research should be more concerned with creation, not simply prediction. Today’s social technologies enable brands to collaborate with their customers much earlier in the new product development process, thereby optimizing the likelihood that the products they’ll eventually test are relevant and resonant.

In a world where social media is evolving and expanding exponentially, these tradeoffs will allow researchers to take advantage of a social landscape in which open communication is paramount. All lend themselves to a more transparent and collaborative mode of market research that values consumers as human beings (not “respondents”) with unique insights and ideas, creating and maintaining strong bonds between consumers and brands.

For more information on the Global Market Research 2010, ESOMAR Industry Report, please visit <http://www.esomar.org/>

