

Viewpoint on 'Client-driven change'- The impact of changes in client needs on the research industry. (IJMR 48,4)

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This paper clearly identified the reasons why the research industry needs to restructure, and focus on delivering solutions rather than fragmented findings for clients. In looking at ways to meet the challenges of this transition though, the paper not only questioned the ability of current agency structures to survive, but also, sadly, gave the impression that researchers may not have the skills required to meet these changing client needs. Why such pessimism?

The growing demand for 'research as a platform for broader business consulting' should be seen as a welcome opportunity, rather than a formidable challenge for large full service agencies. Adding genuine business impact 'value' to research is surely the only route for survival in the face of increasingly cheap and cheerful sources of customer information.

One of the solutions the paper suggests - 'buying-in' senior business consultants - illustrates the tendency towards self-flagellation often seen in research industry publications! Are researchers not able to hold their own, head to head with management consultants when making business recommendations, based on customer insight? I am convinced that these skills are present within agencies, but as the paper intimates, those who demonstrate these skills are often 'fast-tracked' into agency management, rather than enabled to develop business analysis skills in a customer service role.

I agree with the paper's suggestion that agency's will need to change their recruitment and development strategies, to 'grow their own' business consultants. I would argue though that in the interim, rather than buy-in management consultants, the better solution might be to buy-in operations managers, thereby freeing senior research management to become more involved in client projects. This brings potential advantages:

Greater efficiency - it must be less costly to buy in operations managers than senior management consultants, and such managers would possibly be better at running agencies than most researchers are

Better senior staff retention - not all researchers want to be agency managers when they grow up! The increasing number of senior researchers joining the ranks of the UK's Independent Consultants Group is testimony to the fact that a lot of good researchers want to continue 'doing' research, and to have the freedom to develop more constructive relationships with their clients

Increased self-belief – this vote of confidence in the senior research talent within the industry is much needed. Buying-in management consultancy gives the message to clients that we, as an industry, are lacking in our competitive ability to identify business solutions and develop strategies from research

I would hope that there are organisations out there who are financially benefiting from the ideas and strategies suggested by their researchers, as much as from (if not moreso than) the input provided by management consultancies.

The industry transition is happening. It is probably new, smaller agencies and independent consultants who are at the forefront of this transition. Let's hope that our big agency brothers and sisters can also make the change in a way that effectively supports those clients seeking to broaden the influence of research within their organisation.

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