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Empathy: why insights professionals are still needed in the machine age

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There was a time, especially in the United States, when researchers were supposed to be the neutral purveyors of the truth – unbiased, impartial and uninvolved in the business. You collected the data, passed it over to the appropriate decision makers and went on to the next project. What the decision makers did with your data was not something you involved yourself in.

I discovered this the hard way in 1991. Newly arrived in the US from Europe, I worked on a project related to a failing product for a large Fortune 500 company that shall remain anonymous. The time came to debrief the brand team. The Director of MR and I dutifully traveled to their offices and we spent two hours discussing the results. I thought the meeting went swimmingly. The brand team and I had a robust and highly productive conversation, examining various hypotheses and strategies for moving forward. As we got back into his car, the Director of MR turned to me and said, “don’t you ever do that again. Your job is to present the results that are significant at the 95% level and nothing else”.

If research had remained like that, it is very likely that it would now be entirely mechanized, with dashboards taking the place of any human involvement in the dissemination of results. Indeed, in certain spheres (for example, brand and customer satisfaction trackers) that has actually been the case. But, for many companies, this is not how research is any more. In a recent study, conducted by Boston Consulting Group, of CEOs of major corporations, the majority of those interviewed said that what they wanted most from their Consumer Insights functions was business insights that could drive decision-making. They wanted their insights professionals to think like business people, not like researchers.

So, in the space of a couple of decades, we have gone from purveyors of the unvarnished truth (data) to the unveiling of business insights. But insights are not insights unless they lead to action. In the absence of action, they are merely nice to know. In other words, the onus is now on the researcher or data analyst to

ensure that the insights they uncover have actual *impact*. However, for many that it is easier said than done. How does an insights professional in a major organization actually ensure that the insights that he or she delivers really do have impact?

From data to insights to impact

This is a question that leaders of corporate insights functions have been grappling with more and more recently. In essence, it boils down to “what talent mix and skills sets do I need to maximize impact?”. Invariably, consulting skills come front and center, as do communication skills and story-telling. The researcher must also be a consultant or, if that is not feasible, the insights function talent mix must include consultants. This means establishing credibility not only as a researcher or analyst but also as a business person who, in possession of evidence, is able to engage with senior management as an equal and discuss with them the business implications of a particular set of insights.

That in turn means that not only must the researcher-consultant really know the business well, but they also have to have the ability to frame the questions being asked of the data (whether primary research or secondary analytics) in full knowledge and understanding of the business issue at hand. This today is still one of the Achilles Heels of research as, all too often, the stakeholders in any given project might not know or be able to articulate the business issue themselves. The researcher-consultant needs therefore also to be a forensic detective to get to the bottom of the business issue and to gain full understanding of its implications.

Again using forensic skills, our intrepid researcher-consultant will then need to synthesize (as opposed to merely analyze) the data to uncover the insights held within the data. From there, his or her role morphs into great communicator and influencer. (This is where traditional researchers spin in their graves). For, now knowing the insights in her possession and their implications for the business as a whole, the researcher-consultant needs to communicate both to decision-makers with a view to delivering impact.

For many researchers brought up in the traditional mold, this too presents its challenges. Used to delivering all the data (often in 100-page, densely packed

Powerpoint slides), the communicator-influencer-consultant-researcher now needs to impart not only the key insights but their implications in a crisp, 10-slide presentation. For, as a wise CMO said nearly a decade ago, the presentation should last ten minutes, the conversation should go on for hours.

Throughout this entire process, however, there is one attribute or skill that our hero needs above all; an attribute so key that, without it, his or her endeavors will invariably fail. That attribute is empathy. Empathy is what ultimately converts data into insights; and empathy is what allows insights to have impact.

Empathy: the secret sauce to gaining impact

Without empathy, the researcher will have a hard time really understanding the underlying business issue. Such understanding comes not only from comprehending the numbers behind an issue, but also the implications that the results of any given outcome might have for decision makers and stakeholders personally. Would a particular outcome have consequences for the manager requesting the research? Would it place key stakeholders, such as the CMO, in an awkward position? What's riding on the decisions being taken as a result of the insights being delivered? The researcher needs to understand all of this, as it will influence how the implications of the research should be presented.

Similarly, it takes empathy and an understanding of how human beings function to be able to join the dots in synthesis. Are we dealing with System 1 or System 2 thinking? What tangential factors are consumers involved with that guides their decision-making? (In my example from 1991 above, the single most important tangential factor was, in fact, corruption, which posed enormous ethical challenges for the brand team I was advising). What factors that we can't directly measure are leading to choices that might seem irrational? In markets such as pharmaceuticals, such factors can play an enormous role in choices such as compliance with prescription advice from doctors. Knowledge of, and empathy for, such factors is critical in determining whether our insights are true or false.

Finally, without empathy, our attempts at ensuring impact will be severely constrained. If, during the presentation, we don't know why the person at the end of the table with his arms crossed and his defenses up is behaving as he is – and if

we don't have empathy for his reasons – we risk losing him when it comes to making decisions. If we don't have empathy for the fact that the CEO only has ten minutes to listen and understand, we risk losing her. And, crucially, if we can't engender empathy for the consumer (or research participant) in our audience, then we fail to bring to the organization the reality of the market and of customers' lives, upon which the insights engendered by all research are based.

“I empathize with you”, said no machine ever.

No dashboard or interactive piece of software can yet bring the empathy that is needed for real insights to turn into real impact. No algorithm can converse for hours upon the implications of an insight. No machine can understand what outcomes mean for real people. Until the time comes when they can (God forbid), we are going to need flesh and blood insights professionals.

The key to all this, however, is that those same professionals and the functions in which they work need to understand and embrace the importance of empathy and to hone the skills that it informs. If they don't, the machines are waiting.