

BIG Conference 2007

Challenging the Status Quo

16th-18th May 2007
Marriott St. Pierre Hotel, Chepstow
www.bigconference.org

Workshops

The Delphi Oracle 2007: Using the Delphi method to analyse difficult B2B markets – Trevor Wilkinson, *Purple Market Research*

Arriving at my first BIG Conference, I was presented with a choice of workshops, all of which sounded interesting and challenging. I opted to attend Trevor Wilkinson's. Why? This was something I knew nothing about, so my hope was that the workshop would add another technique to my market research toolbox.

With its origins in ancient Greece, the Delphi Technique is a process of extracting information or data from groups of people to support a hypothesis; the ultimate aim being to achieve 'oneness of mind'. It can be used where information is sought on a subject where there is currently little or no data available. The basic principle is that an idea or hypothesis can be tested by talking to groups of 'experts' on the given subject matter.

The process follows three main steps: hypothesis, antithesis and synthesis. Firstly an idea or hypothesis is formed about a given subject. This is then tested by presenting the hypothesis to a group of experts, allowing them to give their opinions – the process of antithesis. During this stage, experts may agree or disagree with the hypothesis and may suggest that alterations be made to it. Once opinions have been collated, a new hypothesis can be created – the process of synthesis. The process can then start all over again with the new hypothesis until all experts agree on the statement that is being made.

One use of the technique could be the market size of a brand new product. As there would be no market share or point of sale information available, the potential size of the market will need to be extracted from talking to experts on the subject. These could include related industry figures, trade associations and of course potential consumers.

During the workshop, Trevor also followed a three-stage process. Firstly we were told about the technique itself, followed by examples of how he himself has used the technique before finally forming our own group of experts and testing our own hypothesis.

I think all delegates who attended the workshop would agree that the session was both interesting and informative. It was exciting to learn about ways of extracting and collating data that do not follow traditional qualitative and quantitative routes. Trevor's enthusiasm for the subject was evident during his initial presentation and involvement in lively discussion that followed. With the sun shining, the alfresco team exercise was eye-opening. The hypothesis we were testing in teams was based around the future of the market research industry. Trevor had created some ideas for various components of the industry e.g. potential growth, emphasis on different techniques, online research market share etc and the job we had as 'experts' was to either agree or challenge his hypothesis and create our own idea.

With a mix of delegates, the discussion provided some thought-provoking debate and it became apparent that this was a topic that would need some time to analyse.

I enjoyed my first workshop at my first BIG conference. To be amongst peers from the industry and listening to (and sometimes challenging!) their views was rewarding for me. Now I just need to find some experts to test my own hypothesis on...

Using Deliberative Qualitative Methods with Business Audiences – Rachel Lopata, *Opinion Leader Research*

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Another workshop on Thursday afternoon focused on the use of deliberative and collaborative techniques in a B2B context. The session started with introductions and the reasons why delegates should be interested in this session. It then moved on to discuss the meaning of the terminology and why these techniques evolved.

The approaches identified included juries, workshops, forums and summits and were generally qualitative in nature. They tended to incorporate a combination of facilitated discussion and detailed deliberation. However, qualitative data can be obtained through the use of electronic polling, in larger forums.

Collaborative models were deemed to be useful in bringing all the stakeholders together and providing a breadth of perspective on the issues at hand, by identifying common ground and shared understanding. However, it was recognised that these approaches tend to take longer than traditional focus groups and often involve providing information upfront and drip-feeding information throughout the course of the session in order to move participants on. Whilst this increases the participant's knowledge, it is important for the facilitator to be open and to explain the parameters and constraints of the research upfront. Rachel showed two interesting video clips which brought this to life for delegates, and demonstrated the techniques used.

A specific advantage of these approaches is immediacy, in that clients are able to see and hear exactly what their stakeholders think. Another benefit is increased engagement/dialogue with key stakeholders, thus helping to build trust and develop relationships. The techniques also allow clients to start to unpick complex issues, since analysis forms part of the process. They also help to move participants on in a way that is not always possible using traditional approaches.

However, it was generally considered by the group that these techniques will not replace traditional research methodologies but will provide an extended toolkit that can be accessed, as required, to add value to research projects.

The session ended with Q&As and some of the potential risks of these approaches were identified. Issues such as confidentiality of data and the dangers of sharing R&D were considered to be extremely important and there were some concerns raised about how these approaches fit with the MRS Code of Conduct. There was also a view that participants need to be made aware about what their input is going to be used for and how far it is going to be taken, as there is a risk that this type of approach could raise expectations amongst participants.

Overall, this was a very interesting session and initiated a lot of discussion amongst participants.

Why do I need any staff when I have all these computers? - Phil Hearn, MRDC Ltd UK and Malaysia

Phil's workshop focused on providing advice about how market research organisations should go about making IT decisions. He started the session by sharing some wisdom from his many years in the research industry. For example, with programming there is usually someone (often more junior) who has solved the same problem before. And if the cost of finding the expert, plus the cost of buying the expert, is less than the cost of your time, then the expert should always be used.

Another example involved a series of repetitive data processing tasks that needed to be repeated on each wave of a tracking study. By de-skilling a largely clerical task and buying in a new software solution, a new recruit to research could do more or less all of the work. Computers are well-suited to high amounts of number-crunching, repetitive tasks, basic reporting and manipulating data – so computers should be used for these tasks and not people.

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Phil then went on to describe why bad IT decisions are so commonly made by research organisations. Often this is down to the fact that not many research practitioners have good IT or operations skills, and that time constraints often mean that all the options are not properly explored. Furthermore, IT decisions can be derailed if you don't get everyone on board and allow one or two individuals to stand in the way of progress. If this is combined with poor evaluation processes and unclear goals and/or multiple agendas then it is very easy to reject change and just stick with the status quo.

In his view every research agency should be forming and following an IT strategy. There should be a constant appraisal process in place with an emphasis on finding ways to automate wherever possible. It is commonplace for an inefficient task to cost between two and twenty times as much as it should do.

Phil then described how to put together a simple cost-benefit analysis, using the tracking study automation project as an example. Following this, when considering potential suppliers, he described a number of key considerations to think about when formulating an evaluation stage and also gave advice on how to prepare for supplier demonstrations.

When it comes to implementing a new IT solution, Phil provided a great deal of advice, including making someone the champion and encouraging ownership with everyone involved.

He concluded by stating that there is (almost) always a better way of doing things. Think long term; use knowledgeable suppliers; use consultants and external sources of information (e.g. Experts Exchange, The ASC, etc).