



What Do You Want To Be When You Grow Up?

By Jon Last, MRA President

This month's *Alert!* devotes significant editorial space to the topic of cross cultural research, paying special attention to the importance of keeping marketing research relevant as we cross borders and apply our craft to the nuances and substantial differences of non-U.S. markets.

But the more I contemplated the contents of this, my first column as your President, the more I found a metaphorical relationship between the concept of "cross cultural" research and my personal odyssey into the marketing research profession.

For virtually my entire career, I have been classified as an "End User" (a term that is sometimes troublesome to me) because I've worked primarily in "client side" organizations. However, those who know me well recognize that my role within this profession is a bit of an anomaly.

When I obtained my PRC, I did so as both an End User and a full service provider. Both pieces were important to me because for the past seven years I've operated within the walls of a media company, a full service marketing research firm and consultancy that services golf, travel, leisure and a variety of other industries.

I'm not interested in any new fangled and flawed audience measurement research that purports to have unlocked reader engagement by asking a group of panelists, direct (and unanswerable) questions on whether a specific ad in a specific issue of a magazine led directly to a consumer purchase action. As Briggs and Stuart so articulately said in the book *What Sticks*, "The truth is, consumers can't introspect on how advertising and marketing influences them. Our brains aren't wired that way." [For more on this, please visit my blog at www.mra-net.org]

But I digress. What does any of this have to do with the metaphor for "cross cultural" research to which I alluded above? The answer lies in what I perceive to be huge cultural shifts present, right here within our own borders.


My career to date, has been a reflection of that change in the research industry...specifically that we need to keep marketing research relevant, both as we cross borders and right here in leading U.S. corporations. I'm concerned that many of us in the profession obsess over the esoteric and cerebral notion of trying so hard to keep our work so methodologically bullet proof that we fail to see the

forest through the trees and become more preoccupied with the process of what we do than with its ultimate utility. Others take such extensive shortcuts that they trivialize the unique combination of interpretative art and hard science that make our field so intriguing to this former English major, turned Wharton MBA.

The hard facts are that marketing research, today, is at the crossroads of 'danger' and 'opportunity.' Researchers have at our fingertips more access to information than ever. With this accessibility comes great responsibility: we must conduct research properly and ethically, at greater speeds and with greater insight.

We must deliver results that have clear strategic implications for our clients, rather than just lots of numbers and charts. That's why I have a problem with the term "End User." Because to remain relevant, today's client side researcher needs to do more than just serve as a traffic cop for other people's work. He or she has to have a seat at the strategic planning table and utilize his or her vantage point as the eyes and ears of the consumer, to affect organizational growth and change.

My mother's old question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" has great relevance for our profession today. As the Orwellian vision of 1984 becomes more of a reality each day, the new breed of marketing research professional must indeed grow up to adapt to the new cultural realities of the business world and the consumer market place. So I ask: what do you, the profession, want to grow up to be?

Our professional survival and well being demands that we evolve to demonstrate the value of quality research in being able to synthesize all of the data and perspectives that are out there into a meaningful business vision. If that sounds like a suggestion that we become more like consultants, then I will leave you with a favorite line that I often use in response to an often asked question, "what's the difference between the work you do and that which I get from [insert name of leading consultancy of your choice]?" My tongue in cheek answer, with all due respect to those working in management and marketing consulting firms, is simply...Oh, about \$1 million per engagement. 

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