



# Bring on the Competition

People who know me well can correctly assume I licked my proverbial chops when I saw that this month's issue of *Alert!* was about competition. To put it mildly, people have often remarked that I tend to get more than a little competitive about many things. Maybe it's an alpha male gene, but I enjoy the opportunity to go out and "prove it," whether it's on the playing field or in business. Anyone who has seen me manage a baseball game, coach a basketball game, play recreational sports or even watch one of my favorite teams play, knows that I can get pretty spirited about competition.

And while I contemplated using this space for sharing vivid recollections of some of my own athletic memories, I'll spare the details. Rather, I'd like to address the issue of competition within our profession.

One of the truly wonderful things about marketing research is that relative to other industries, there seem to be a disproportionate amount of genuinely nice people in our profession. I've often remarked that I owe a debt of gratitude to many of the association leaders who came before me. They welcomed me with open arms, showed me the ropes and invested in my growth.

But in today's economy, it is incumbent upon us to take a serious look at the competitive dynamics of our industry. This is why – several months ago – I formed an MRA task force to take a close look at industry competition. This is also why, that as you read this issue of *Alert!*, several of your Association leaders will be assessing our findings as part of the formal Association Strategic Planning Process.

One framework I've found helpful in reviewing the competitive landscape is Professor Michael Porter's model of Five Competitive Forces. While this space does not allow for a thorough application of Porter's model to the research industry or research association landscape,

suffice it to say, we have taken a rigorous approach to this as part of our formal strategic planning work. Porter's work remains "required reading" for MBA students, some 30 years after they were first defined. Here is his list, with particular emphasis on two competitive forces, which I feel are particularly relevant at this time:

1. Buyer Power
2. Supplier Power
3. The Intensity of Intra-Firm Rivalry
4. The Threat of Substitutes: Porter talks of substitutes as a competitive threat where customers can easily switch to alternatives. Within the research profession, I've often put D-I-Y tools, gut instinct and consulting firms as substitution threats. In the association world, online communities, other vertical and horizontal niche associations and alternate sources of education are competitive threats that may fall into this category. In either scenario, we need to create viable points of differentiation that make these substitutes poor alternatives to what we offer. The ability of research professionals to think and act like marketers enables us to mitigate the threat of consulting firms that lack the expertise in marketing research that we enjoy. Our capacity to put our craft in succinct terms, while simultaneously demonstrating that what we do is rigorous and requires specialized proficiency, can protect us. The recognition of this competitive threat was one of the driving factors behind MRA's push to develop the profession's only accredited certification program. It has also driven us to introduce member benefits like the Exchange Evaluation Program (EEP) and the new Online Panel Quality Evaluation Tool – the first rigorous panel audit to ensure online data quality. Further, I maintain that as your professional association, we must always be mindful that you have a choice regarding what organizations you wish to become affiliated with. It has

always been my belief that MRA offers the most comprehensive representation and programming in the entire profession, and it has been my overarching goal as your president, to insure we continue to answer that call amidst the ever changing dynamics of the environment in which we compete.

5. The Threat of New Entrants: Porter speaks of building high barriers to entry as a way in which we can combat this competitive threat. When one looks at the proliferation of new data collection and analytical tools that have entered the research space in recent years, it's easy to see in many instances we have not erected high barriers to entry. On the association level, I feel we have done a better job of combating this competitive threat. One of the great sources of strength for MRA is the way we have built services and mechanisms that speak to the widest array of research practitioners and End Users in the industry. Our education programs and member Virtual Business Guide are just two exclusive benefits that position the Association as the preeminent source for all in the profession.

Competitive Strategy is a rigorous discipline that has always been personally fascinating. Because I've always viewed competition as both healthy and welcomed, I'm glad that our Association leadership has chosen to embrace it, and am pleased that this should enable MRA to emerge from this year's strategic planning better positioned to confront the challenges that face us in the coming years.



---

MRA President **Jon Last** is president of Sports and Leisure Research Group. He can be reached at [jl原因@sportsandleisureresearch.com](mailto:jl原因@sportsandleisureresearch.com).