Research
NEWS

Speed vs. Accuracy

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the client perspective

Ever tightening research timelines was one of the hot topics at the 2018 AMSRS Annual Conference. Building on the discussion, *Research News* spoke to a number of clients to learn what is happening within their organisations, and how they are managing the faster pace.

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National Manager Research – Customer Insights, Stockland

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Elyssia Clark

Head of Customer Insights & Analytics, SEEK

Myra Foley

Senior Leader, Research & Insights CoE, Group Marketing, ANZ

Q Have you seen a trend in the demand for faster research? If so, from whom is it coming and what do you think is driving this?

Claire Macleod
(national manager research – customer insights, Stockland): Definitely. This has been happening for years now but seems to be accelerating; I think it is fuelled both by the availability of faster research options as well as the need to make faster decisions. And of course, when stakeholders experience fast research this can reset their expectations so some can expect it every time!

Virginia Meikle
(Senior manager, Insights and segmentation, NRMA): Thinking back to when I started out in research, there were always projects cropping up that required fast turn around – but these tended to be the exception rather than the norm. In recent years, there has absolutely been an increase in the number of projects with very skinny timeframes. This is being driven by pressure on our internal stakeholders to deliver to tighter deadlines themselves, a much greater focus organisationally on having a customer-led approach and ensuring insights are at the heart of everything we do, and a general awareness that we can produce findings fairly quickly.

Elyssia Clark
(head of customer insights & analytics, SEEK Limited): I think there's two trends driving up the demand for faster research: changing expectations, and greater availability of data.

From a general consumer perspective, we expect to see more efficiencies when ordering, faster delivery, and easier experiences. So, it's not surprising to see these higher expectations migrate from our personal lives into our work. I've seen stakeholder expectations changing, with a belief that technology gives researchers greater efficiency, easier delivery of surveys, faster data, and better analysis. The reality can be, of course, quite different.

The second factor is (perceived) data availability. There's an expectation that we already have a lot of data available, and that this can be used to address research challenges. The reality is the work that goes on behind the scenes to wrangle said data can take as long, or even longer. And that's assuming you've got the right data to inform the issue at hand!

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Q What sort of changes have you been experiencing in terms of the volume, mix, and type of projects you are conducting? What sort of impact has that had on you/your team, your suppliers, and the way you work with suppliers?

Myra Foley
(Senior Marketing Leader, Research & Insights CoE, Group Marketing, ANZ):
There is a lot more demand for small scale agile research that enables the business to get answers to questions quickly and much less demand for traditional large scale, multi-stage projects that span over months. The latter have less flexibility to pivot according to new business priorities and that risks slowing up the decision-making process. There has also been a significant increase in iterative prototyping and testing, co-creation and more immersive research in line with the double diamond design process of divergent and convergent thinking.

There has been a fundamental shift in our organisation to have our internal clients build customer empathy more directly. Immersion is great for that and has therefore taken off so much. Sometimes research per se isn't required and it's enough for our internal clients to 'walk in the customer shoes'.

We have developed new ways of working that focus more on our organisation building customer empathy and involve much more collaboration and face time with our stakeholders and suppliers. We are sharing insights live or on a daily basis and together agreeing on how we synthesise and maximise these insights. We are using new and creative solutions to maximise opportunities for stakeholder-customer immersion rather than inviting them to view consumers through a one-way mirror. We are developing tools and templates to automate processes to maximise efficiency and consistency across projects. We are running much more 'test and learn' processes and retrospectives post-project to help with continuous improvement. The primary things we are looking for from suppliers are innovative and creative solutions, flexibility, collaboration and the passion for continuous improvement.

Macleod: As customer centricity increases, we are seeing the demand for more small-scale projects and at multiple stages in the customer journey. We have been fortunate in that we have been able to increase resourcing to help accommodate this. The way we work with suppliers is also changing and becoming more collaborative. We often work together on the project design, data collection and reporting to ensure both optimal efficiency and actionability of results.

Meikle: People are recognising that they can access feedback a lot faster to help with decision making, so are seeking it much more regularly. As a result we are seeing many more 'quick check' mini projects and requests coming through. This can involve anything from adding an extra question or two onto an existing tracker for a short period of time; short very targeted surveys; reanalysing or synthesising data from multiple sources; or some small-scale fast turnaround qual work. The challenge for our team is to be able to resource the increasing number of requests we receive from across the organisation. The larger, more traditional projects tend to have much longer lead times, but they make up a decreasing percentage of the project mix.

Q There is some thinking that speed means that you need to trade off accuracy. Do you agree, and why or why not?

Foley: I don't tend to agree. What I feel we are doing here is coming up with new ways of doing research so that our organisation can build empathy with our customers and deliver answers to business questions faster. Does it matter if the key insights from a live chat are shared as they are conducted rather than waiting until they have all been completed, if it moves stakeholders forward faster in terms of collaboration in forming hypotheses? With any research, it's a case of 'rubbish in, rubbish out' so it's important that the research is designed to ensure that the insights are still reliable.

Macleod: It depends on the project. Some research can definitely be done quickly and by setting up some basic processes and a library of common research questions, accuracy doesn't need to be traded off. However big, strategic projects need thinking time and this is where accuracy may be compromised if due diligence isn't done in the first place.

Meikle: For the majority of projects, I don't think you trade off accuracy by doing things faster. If you have a clear view of the audience you are targeting, the core objectives of the research, how the results will be applied, and set realistic expectations about what can be delivered within the time frame, many projects can be completed quite quickly. The trade-off comes much more in the 'thinking time' for analysis and development of the insights. For large scale or more complex projects, there is a high risk in going for speed over taking the time to really get it right.

Clark: I don't think it's that black and white. I think you can speed up elements of the process and still get the 'right answer'. The issue is: do you have the 'right answer' to the 'right question?' In my view, going faster doesn't necessarily lead to less accuracy, but it may lead you to an accurate answer to the wrong question. One of SEEK's core values is to do the right amount of thinking up front – it's the value I'll 'lean in' on should we find ourselves being asked to run faster. Speeding up doesn't necessarily trade off accuracy, but if you speed up without doing the right thinking up front, you risk delivering research that's either not answering the right question or failing to deliver any strategic value.

Q Have you ever said no to a project because the timeframes were simply too tight? If so, how did the stakeholder respond and what did the business do without the research?

Foley: It's been very rare that I've said no to a project due to timing. More often than not, there are creative ways to shorten the turnaround time. These include designing the research around prioritisation of what decisions need to be made first, relying on more face time and workshopping with stakeholders and agencies rather than relying on slow forms of communication, and sharing insights as they emerge rather than waiting for all of the fieldwork and detailed report to be completed. Strategies I use to manage timing expectations include putting forward optional approaches to communicate the limitations and trade-offs of a shorter time frame or smaller budget in terms of answering the business problem and stakeholders get it. Showing a detailed breakdown of the research process helps to clarify the need for minimum turnaround time.

Macleod: Yes, unfortunately some stakeholders don't always appreciate the timeframes needed to do research. I usually find that when you explain the process and why the timeframe can't be met, most will accept what they are asking for just isn't possible. Of course it helps if you can offer an alternative such as using existing insights, waiting a little longer to get the results or using partial results.

Meikle: We do everything we can to assist, but it is a matter of being realistic about how much you can deliver against the brief within the timeframe. We will always work to find a solution, even if it's reanalysing past research or exploring third party data that can fit the need. Sometimes the initial timeframes have more flexibility than first indicated, so we always check that carefully first.

Clark: I've never needed to say no to a project, but I have had to manage expectations around how long different phases of the project would take. One of the advantages of spending significant time on both the client and supplier side is being able to manage stakeholders' expectations on how long things can actually take.

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Q **Have you had pushback from suppliers because timeframes are too tight? What do you do to manage the relationship and find a way forward in those situations?**

Foley: Again, it's very rare that suppliers have pushed back due to timeframes being too tight, it's usually more that they haven't got the resource to jump onto the project straight away, in which case I just find another supplier if timing is critical. It's the same approach really: identifying creative ways to shorten the timeline and working out what can be delivered when and communicating that with stakeholders to see if that will be acceptable or not.

Macleod: Yes and, having been on the consultancy side myself and having developed long-term relationships with key suppliers, I think this really helps in these situations. I will usually position as 'I know these timelines are really tight but can you let me know what is possible?' If you are empathetic and don't do this all the time, in my experience most good suppliers will go out of their way to try and meet urgent deadlines. I think it's worth adding that, as a client, I respect suppliers who do flag when something is not possible or going to be difficult. I would much rather have an open dialogue and work out an acceptable solution than have a supplier tell me that they can meet a deadline and then not deliver.

Meikle: I would always prefer that suppliers are upfront about what they can or can't do in the specified timeframes, as it's incredibly frustrating to have a supplier over-promise then fail to hit the critical dates. Occasionally we do get pushback from a recruiter or research partner if deadlines are really tight or they are going through a busy patch – but generally our suppliers are pretty good at working through options with us. Based on experience, we know when there is likely to be an issue, and will flag a potential problem with the timeframes to the internal client in advance to manage expectations early.

Clark: I've got a lot of respect for our research partners – if they say they can't do something within a given time, then the onus is on the team and I to manage that decision at our end. That said, one way we tend to avoid this situation occurring is having our partners spend time with our stakeholders – so they can witness first hand how their research is being used, and the decisions being made as a result. Spending the time to cultivate those relationships means that our suppliers are usually very understanding of the occasional need for tighter turnaround, because they've got visibility of the bigger picture issues.

Q What sort of projects do you think should never be rushed, and why?

Foley: Any time the brief is unclear and fuzzy - the research will end up being less than useful.

Macleod: Large strategic projects, particularly those that are complex, new or multifaceted or where a significant financial investment is being made in the research or the outcomes form part of critical business decision-making.

Clark: Significant strategic pieces of work should never be rushed, like work-around value propositions and segmentation studies. The broader the reach of the work, the more time should be invested up front to get it right.

Q What are the key developments you are seeing that you think are really helping deliver faster and more accurate research?

Foley: The agile approach to research is helping our organisation to build customer empathy quickly and deliver answers to business questions in a more timely and efficient manner. Experimentation, innovation and creative solutions for conducting research is key as is collaboration, flexibility, more workshopping and face time, automation of processes, greater utilisation of latest developments in technology and less email.

Macleod: Online research communities and other self-serve tools, as well as reporting tools, means you can turn-around projects quickly and see live results before the research is even completed. Of course, insights can also be delivered outside of traditional research and with the increased use of big data, this can be both quick and often more accurate.

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Meikle: I think our changing business practices are really helping us deliver research faster and get it more embedded in what we are doing. New survey platform developments, better self-serve tools, improved data integration, more agile suppliers, and more collaborative practices generally mean that past barriers around perceptions of research taking too long or costing too much are disappearing. I'm loving all the options available that advances in technology have brought, giving us greater opportunities to 'test and learn' to optimise the way we collect feedback and deliver findings and insights to the business.

Clark: There's so much to look forward to! Mobile devices make it easier than ever to connect with people, and I think companies investing the time to get their mobile survey design right are well placed for the future. I'm hearing more market research companies talk about how they can stitch together market research metrics with internal behavioural data — this will open up a world of opportunities in delivering accurate, actionable research quickly. I suspect there are significant opportunities to further leverage online communities, and mobile ethnography is another area I'm keen to pursue at some point.

Q Any final thoughts on speed vs. accuracy?

Foley: I'm wondering whether the debate about speed vs. accuracy is the right one to be having. To coin an ANZ phrase I use, it feels very 'old ways of thinking'. It would be great to see the debate move to being more about what innovations and creative solutions and ways of working can we develop and utilise to help our organisation build more empathy with our customers quickly, deliver more timely insights to the business and help them move from less certainty to more certainty faster.