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The Quiet Insights Revolution

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Reading the insights trade press these days, you would be forgiven for thinking that research is experiencing a technological revolution like no other that has taken place in this sector before. Even the terminologies used go to support that notion – ResTech, MRX, CX, UX, insights/research/analytics platforms, AI and Machine Learning - are now indelibly part of our lexicon.

And you would be right.

But technology is only part of the story. A cursory glance over the GRIT Top 50 Most Innovative Firms, for example, shows a more nuanced story. Yes, many of them are purely tech players – Qualtrics, Voxpopme, Zappi, Lucid and Medallia, for example. But many are more of a hybrid model - insights firms that are tech-enabled rather than pure technology plays. And so we have companies such as LRW Material, Hotspex, Dig Insights, Delvinia, Reid Campbell Group, Maru/Matchbox and Shapiro + Raj. (On a quick side note, it is notable that five of these firms are Canadian and two are radical makeovers of long-established research firms). Then there are pure insights firms – Ipsos, Kantar, Nielsen are examples – whose roots are deep in research, even though they are using technology to 'pivot' to the new research and analytics environment in many ways. Finally, there are the big management consulting and technology firms who have realized that there's money to be made in insights and analytics.

These are all names with which we are very familiar (at least in North America). But there is another stratum in the geology of the insights industry – a stratum of companies that are not that famous, that don't make the GRIT Top 50, but nevertheless are contributing to the revolution that is remaking our sector in ways that are equally as impactful and just as ground-breaking. I call this the Quiet Revolution.

Quiet Revolution companies might also go under the name of Research Plus Plus. Not content with just being research suppliers, they go multiple steps further in adding value and impact to their clients' businesses. They are equally as versed in qualitative as in quantitative skills but meld these with analytics, design, creative services, strategy and activation. They may be under the radar of the trade press but are very often the recipients of multiple awards (Ogilvy, MRS, ESOMAR for example). A disproportionate number of them are women-owned and womenmanaged. Some are relatively new, but others have been around for twenty years or more and can boast not only ferociously loyal clients but equally fanatical employees.

Here I am going to call out a few examples, but this is not to imply that these are the only ones. There are many more all around the world and all bear investigation by discriminating clients. What binds these firms together is that they are all Research Plus Plus.

- *Basis Research* is a London-based firm, operating on a global level in some of the most demanding countries in the world, that combines qualitative research and ethnography with strategic and innovation consulting. They have been around for over 20 years.
- *Jump Associates* in the U.S. has been around just as long and are also known for offering a product that melds quantitative and qualitative research with strategic and innovation consulting
- *Hypothesis Group,* based out of Los Angeles – another 20+ year firm – offers a cohesive and powerful mix of quantitative and qualitative research with creative design, activation and strategic consulting
- *Point Blank* in Germany says it all in their tagline: “We craft impact”. They provide design-driven research, creative design and activation and measure the impact they have on their clients’ outcomes. They are one of many who have embraced design thinking as the driver for their research approach
- *Hope + Anchor* in the U.K. has won multiple awards for its combination of research, strategy and creative, particularly with its media clients. Their use of creative media in bringing insights home to their clients is particularly impressive
- *Consumer Truth* in Peru melds insights with strategic consulting in innovation and branding, stressing that they are ‘human-centric’. This is a phrase that you will see over and over again on the websites of Research Plus Plus agencies
- *Vital Findings* and *Finch Brands* in the U.S. both stress their ability to bring insights, strategy and design together in one package, and are experts in data visualization (another theme that you will find throughout this group).

There is no doubt that, even pre-pandemic, the insights industry was beginning to bifurcate between technology-oriented solutions and those based on using insights not only to inform strategy, innovation and design, but to provide and ensure activation and impact in all these areas. This should be no surprise, as it merely reflects the priorities of client insights functions and their managements.

What is surprising, however, is that so many of these companies exist under the radar of the industry’s media, commentators and list makers. You won’t find them on ‘most innovative’ lists, nor in industry rankings, although they most certainly belong there. But, be assured, you will find them on client ‘trusted partner’ lists and among the more prolific industry award winners. That’s because what they provide is impact. Not just data, but real, positive impact.

The revolution in the insights today is not one of technology versus consulting. It's not an and/or question. It's and/and. Yes, technology has enabled amazing things and has revolutionized the industry. But so have the under-the-radar Research Plus Plus companies.

The quiet revolution.

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