

CAMBIAR

Mastering change

A Deficit of Trust

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A climate of distrust

We are living in an era when trust appears to be at an all-time low. In a recent global study, Ipsos reported trust to be distinctly lacking in various professions that need to be trusted if societies are to function effectively. When asked who they would trust to tell the truth, participants had high praise for doctors, nurses and engineers, but precious little good to say about advertising executives, politicians, government ministers and journalists. What's more, things that we desperately need to trust if we are to beat COVID-19, such as a vaccine, seem to be gradually losing our trust as well. In another Ipsos study published by the World Economic Forum last November, participants in 13 of the 15 countries surveyed showed lower willingness to be vaccinated than they had a mere three months before.

Sadly, our own insights industry does not appear to be immune from trust deficiency. In a 2020 global study of trust, GRBN found that only a third of participants evinced trust in market research companies. It wasn't that research firms were actively distrusted – they just weren't trusted. Worse, less than a quarter trusted such firms to protect and appropriately use their personal data – a bedrock of the promise that we make to our most important asset.

You could argue that research is just caught up in the general malaise, that there's nothing serious that we are doing wrong. It's just the way the world is today. But I would argue differently. Instead, I believe that there are five things standing in our way of gaining and retaining trust among the general public:

- We are not our own mouthpiece
- People just do not understand what it is that we do
- Our main interface with the public – the survey – is an excruciating experience for many
- We have moved from participation in research being part of a social contract to one that is commercial
- We ignore our own inherent biases.

We are not our own mouthpiece

The only time that the general public sees our work product is when it is reported in the media or, more rarely, in various forms of trade press. We do not speak for ourselves, we let others do it for us. And, in many (but not all) instances, they don't do a very good job of it. People know us primarily through polling, which is presented as reporting on a horse race and, worse, a form of prediction. Any time those "predictions" appear not to be fulfilled, we are mocked or vilified. No wonder Ipsos found that only half of their respondents thought pollsters told the truth.

People do not understand what we do

The very fact that polling is presented as "prediction" rather than what it is – a snapshot of sentiment at a given moment – results in a dissonance between what people think we do and what it is that we actually do. Worse, when we engage people in commercial research, we make matters worse by shrouding our intentions in secrecy. We don't tell participants who the client is, we don't tell them why we are doing the research and we rarely, if ever, feed back any results to them. Bob Moran, of Brunswick Group, coined the phrase "rateocracy" a few years ago to describe our love of sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor. Why do we love them? Because we get to have a say and we can see in real time the overall results of what others say.

When you don't speak for yourself and you shroud what you do in secrecy, is it any wonder that people don't understand what it is that you really do, why you exist?

Our interface is excruciating

When I was in training as a market research executive, we were sent out into the streets with four surveys that were designed to be horrific for the respondent and for us. The idea was for us to gain first-hand experience of what a badly designed survey or questionnaire would do to both the respondent and the interviewer. What was a bad interview experience in-person has now been exported lock, stock and barrel onto the Internet. Only there is no human being in the room (the interviewer) to mitigate the pain. Simply put, our UX sucks.

When people don't understand what you do and you then torture them, is it any wonder that they don't really trust you?

From social contract to commercial transaction

When people are asked why they participate in research, some say it is to contribute by giving their opinions. This is a social contract – by contributing, I hope to make life better. Before online research, this was the norm. Today, there are more people who participate in online surveys in order to make money. Some of our more prominent panels even recruit panelists online with the slogan "make money by taking surveys!". That is a commercial contract. As students of sociology and psychology know, there is a world of difference between social and

commercial contracts. The former are built on trust, the latter are based on a premise of distrust.

We ignore our own inherent biases

In an excellent article in the January 2021 issue of IMPACT, Elen Lewis argues that researchers bring their own inherent biases to the design of research and that, in the process, ignore significant portions of the populations, their needs, desires and motivations. How else to explain the anger of those who feel that they are ignored in the U.S., UK, France and many other countries? Sampling by social classification, focusing on segments that offer spending power, ignoring marginalized communities and bypassing the 'difficult-to-reach' all contribute to a feeling among many that they are simply invisible not only to politicians but also to companies.

What can we do to rebuild trust?

While this is a big question deserving of discussion and study, I humbly offer six actions that I believe could start us along the road to regaining and building trust:

- 1) The insights industry needs to reposition itself in the public eye. It needs to tell its story and accentuate the positive contribution that it makes to society. Yes, that takes money. And, no, we haven't been able to do it before. But I believe that this is a goal so important that we have no choice but to commit the money, time and resources to making a supreme effort to do so.
- 2) We need to form media partnerships with the express goal of showcasing the industry's role in society with case studies that demonstrate positive social and commercial impact. These should be explicit partnerships that benefit both sides of the equation.
- 3) Our industry is blessed with some brilliant communicators. Let's put them forward as ambassadors to the wider world, make them our mouthpieces and take back some measure of control over our own message.
- 4) Industry bodies should incorporate UX standards (not guidelines) into their codes of conduct. These should be participant-centric and should focus not only on the look and feel of user experience but also on key issues such as interview length, use of routers, screening standards and rewards.
- 5) The market research community must reach out to and involve the UX, CX and design communities to help us in designing the best research experience possible. We should deploy hard metrics to ensure that we meet goals based on enjoyment, willingness to participate in the future and trust.
- 6) Perhaps most importantly, we must seek to break down inherent biases, both in design and in who we bring into the industry as our future executives. Diversity and inclusion need to be at the centre of this, as does the slaying of some sacred cows. Do researchers really need bachelors, masters or PhDs? Recruit from all sectors of society, train them and listen to them.

These are just conversation starters – but this is indeed a conversation that needs to be started.