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Mastering change

Is Research a Dirty Word?

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Ray Poynter, as he wont to do, started an interesting conversation on LinkedIn recently when he highlighted an article by Dave Fish on the definition of “market research”. Fish consulted a panoply of sources and found himself unsatisfied due to most of the definitions he uncovered being focused on the process of market research rather than its outcomes. This led Poynter to propose his own definition (which I love) which was “better decision making through understanding people”.

Not content with solely pondering the question that Ray had posed, my mind wandered off (as it often does these days) to wonder why our profession has run away from the term “market research” so comprehensively in the last decade or so. It’s as if the last thing we want to be called is “market researchers”. Corporate researchers led the way, rebranding themselves as “consumer insights”, “market intelligence”, “decision intelligence” and any number of nomenclatures. Then, as I pointed out in my last article in this series, we had suppliers doing the same thing themselves – and so we have “customer experience”, “user experience”, “behavioural science” and “data science”.

If we are honest, the term “market research” has always been a bit of a turn off, often being the subject of ridicule in movies and TV series. And who has not had the dread of answering the question at parties “what do you do?”. As soon as the words are out of your mouth, eyes glaze over and the questioner is desperately searching the room for someone else to talk to. Once, when I was heading up the agricultural research division at Research International, I was asked ‘the dreaded question’ at a dinner party. “Oh, I said, I am in agricultural research”. This was obviously more interesting than market research as the young lady who had asked the dreaded question followed up with “do tell me, how come there are more chicken legs in supermarkets than there are chickens?”. “Oh”, I said, “that’s easy. Those legs come from diseased chickens – they are the only bits they can sell”. Just then the hostess entered the room with a platter full of chicken legs. I have never seen people push food around their plate in such silence before or since.

Is “research” really such a dirty word – a word that we want to avoid at all costs? After all, it most certainly is not in other circles such as medicine, the law, academia or science. Or is it

instead the modifier “market”? If you say you are a social researcher or a medical researcher, this would appear to be a much more socially acceptable status than if you say you are a market researcher. Indeed, Poynter in the LinkedIn conversation said outright that he liked the word “research” – and perhaps we all should. So, is it perhaps time to find a different modifier? Should we be calling ourselves “behavioural” researchers? “Human” researchers? “Business” researchers? After all, markets are just one aspect of the research that we do. Go back to Poynter’s definition above. So much of what we do is about understanding people – how we think, how we behave, how we choose. It’s about the lives we live, the narratives we tell, the decisions we make, not just in markets but in politics, our social lives, our health and our beliefs. Perhaps we should be “people researchers”.

What do you think?