

I'm a researcher – get me out of here!

An occasional series by Simon Chadwick on the post-crisis future of our industry

Just when it's so difficult to focus – FOCUS!

Over the past few weeks, I have been talking to a series of insights CEOs and their corporate counterparts. While many have found this time to be intensely difficult, others are thriving. Why?

The recent ESOMAR report on the likely effect of the Covid-19 crisis on the insights industry made for sobering reading. Overall, the report estimated that the cumulative impact would amount to a 22% reduction in the overall size of our sector in 2020. That is unprecedented in the entire history of research and analytics. I am a veteran of four major recessions and never has such an impact been registered. The fallout in terms of businesses disappearing and jobs being lost will be considerable. Not only that, but it will be uneven. The report makes it clear that smaller suppliers, as well as those specializing in face-to-face research, will feel the impact disproportionately. Those specializing in hard-hit industries such as automotive and travel and tourism will also be much harder hit.

Nonetheless, there are companies out there who are actually doing really well during this crisis and are either meeting or exceeding their growth goals for the year. How are they different?

Some, for sure, are lucky enough just to be focused on industries that are not being hit as hard as others. Many pharmaceutical research agencies, for example, are still thriving, as are those specializing in the insurance industry. But, although these agencies were smart in the first place to double down on sector-specific specialties, they are – if we are honest – benefiting from the luck of the draw.

Aside from these lucky ones, though, what differentiates others who don't have industry-specific businesses but are still doing well? The answer appears to lie in strategic decisions they made well before the crisis began and their willingness to focus relentlessly on those strategies once the proverbial hit the fan.

For many, the decisions they made were predicated on their reading of the trends already prevalent in the industry – trends that are being amplified greatly by the crisis itself. Some, for example, had decided to focus on digital or online research only. As clients move much of their in-person work across to digital platforms, that seems to have been prescient. Others decided that they would move upmarket and concentrate only on strategic research and consulting. Given that many clients are now focusing on post-crisis strategy, that also seems to be prescient. And a few – a very few – decided to do both at the same time. They are seeing revenues increase by as much as 50%.

But what about corporate insights departments? The same would seem to apply. Those functions that were already on the road to actively demonstrating the material impact they make on the business are finding themselves heavily in demand, with management relying on them to chart a post-crisis map for success. Those, on the other hand, that were merely research order takers find themselves scrambling to prove their worth and avoid the inevitable budget cuts that will follow.

To some, it may seem that, since these strategies and approaches had already been preordained prior to the crisis, there is little that can be done now to alter the course of history. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is still not too late to make strategic decisions that could lift you to success in the weeks and months to come. Look at the trends. Study the evidence. Listen to what your clients really want from you. And then tailor your business or your department to take advantage of those trends and those needs. Be prepared to stop doing what is not in line with that strategy and invest in what is.

Sticking to the status quo will not help you. Focusing on your future role will. If anything, this crisis has not changed one fundamental rule: focus!