Welcome to the industry, now get the hell out!

Contributed by Alex McCluckie
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Itâ€™s 2011 and there I am, mug of tea at the ready, laptop open, ready to write a blog post. Although relatively new to the market research industry, this was a rather familiar setting for me; poised to let rip with my latest article that will glue the industry to their computers, marvelling in awe at the thought-provoking insight I am about to provide. Funny thing is, just as I am about to put (virtual) pen to paper an odd thing happens â€“ doubt. Indeed, for the younger me at least, the ideas were never the problem â€“ I have a whole notebook that is testament to that.

My desire to write posts stems from a steady flow of ideas along with the enjoyment I get from reading the ideas of others. Itâ€™s always useful to understand the latest thinking and counter-thinking contributing to market researchâ€™s evolutio and as a result, the evening catch-up of the latest industry goings-on on GreenBook, Research-Live and Market Research World among others is (mostly) an enjoyable and worthwhile experience. Enjoyable, that is, until I read derivatives of the following: Â

â€œObviously, Jason has neither appreciation nor understanding of the true value of market research. Maybe HEâ€™s the one who needs to get out of the industry.â€•

This somewhat heavy-handed response is something that (sadly, in my view) I see creeping into discussion threads occasionally - the mere presence of an â€œUnsuitable or offensive? Report this commentâ€• option at the bottom of any article published on, say, Research-Live suggests that a certain amount of venom can be present from time to time.

Now, just to be clear, the purpose of this article isnâ€™t to convert you all into passive, unquestioning consumers of blog related content â€“ dealing with a certain type of criticism is an important skill after all (and is no doubt one I will be exercising upon the publication of this article!). No, there is a deeper point to be made here, as even I wouldnâ€™t want an industry like that. To arrive at this point I will come at it from two angles â€“ first historical and second present day, after which I hope you will agree that there is much for the industry to gain from reflecting a little more before hitting the â€˜submitâ€™ button on any particularly sharp comments.

Being wrong is in us allâ€¦

Nassim Nicholas Taleb*Â has touched on this topic in his widely read The Black Swan. Adopting a historical perspective, Taleb points to the work of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne. A former businessman, magistrate and mayor of Bordeaux during the 16th Century, Montaigne was a busy man who retired in his late thirties in order to focus on his introspective writing. Montaigne, Taleb notes,

â€œâ€¦fully accepted human weaknesses and understood that no philosophy could be effective unless it took into account our deeply ingrained imperfections, the limitations of our rationality, the flaws that make us human.â€• (p.191)

Montaigne it seems was a bit of a rarity when it comes to self-reflection, reflexivity and the notion that oneâ€™s own knowledge is fallible. In fact, fast forward a few centuries to the present day and we bump into journalist Kathryn Schulz - a self-styled â€œwrongologistâ€• who has written about how error is treated in todayâ€™s culture and who, during a 2011 TED t provided a telling example of how we are drilled with an understanding of how to treat error from an early age.

Imagine if you will, that you are at school, the exam papers are being handed back and one unfortunate soul finds theirs is covered in red ink! Well, as Schulz points out:

â€œâ€¦you know exactly what to think about the kid who got this paper. It's the dumb kid, the troublemaker, the one who never does his homework. So by the time you are nine years old, you've already learned, first of all, that people who get stuff wrong are lazy, irresponsible dimwits -- and second of all, that the way to succeed in life is to never make any mistakes.â€•

Schulz goes on to say that the result is that â€œwe freak out at the possibility that we've gotten something wrong. Because according to this, getting something wrong means there's something wrong with us.â€• Applied to market research, having peers who reinforce and even exacerbate this fear of wrongness, I feel, is something that has the potential to stifle the industry.

As I am baring all at present, letâ€™s take myself as an example. It took two years before I felt comfortable offering my views to the industry via social media and other outlets, and this delay wasnâ€™t due to a lack of ideas.

It was through fear of saying something deemed wrong.

Now, heavily involved in our agencyâ€™s graduate recruitment scheme and with management responsibilities of my own, I see the same nervousness and lack of confidence that I once grappled with. Assuming the younger me was not alone in this, the current me would like to rally the new crop of industry recruits (and older more introspective types alike) to embrace their own ideas and to â€˜put them out thereâ€™. Truth be told, we all lose if it takes people too long to start showing their capabilities and sharing their thoughts.

There is so much talent out there â€“ I see it every day in the current DJS Research bunch, the fantastic entries to the IJMR Young Research Writer Award and of course in meetings with prospective new graduates and interns. These bright sparks need the encouragement to share their ideas, in the knowledge that criticism or comment will be constructive â€“ something thatâ€™s not all that easy when they can see other far more senior members of the market research community telling their peers to â€œget out of the industry.â€•

It is important to discuss and debate each otherâ€™s ideas certainly â€“ this is, after all, how the boundaries of market research are pushed and greater understanding arrived at. But the sarcastic and barbed comments that can sometimes be found in peopleâ€™s comments can be seriously counterproductive.

So what do you think? Have you seen, experienced or been put off by such industry shenanigans? Are you sitting on ideas just because you fear the looks and comments of your peers? Or, alternatively, is it time I put my soapbox away and â€œman-upâ€•? Either way, I would love to hear your (constructive!) views.

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*It should be noted that Taleb himself would probably be the first to throw this article on the fire. Even a cursory reading of his books makes clear his disdain for certain peopleâ€™s viewpoints and his belief that you should be able to â€œbe confident about what is wrongâ€•. For instance, descriptions of economists as â€˜charlatansâ€™ abound!Â

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References

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