

MARKET RESEARCH: A NEW GENERATION ON THE GO

**Personal experience in transforming the role of
the market research department from
“data provider” to “leadership for growth”**

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This paper shows how the market research department role can be transformed from being a mere provider of data that brings limited value, into becoming a strategic partner that offers crucial consumer insight and enables sound business decisions. Concrete experience at Unilever Belgium is discussed, revealing their “step by step” approach. The success factors in this remarkable journey are identified: create an aspirational vision that announces the intended added-value and involves the whole team, bring this vision to life within the company; develop, train and coach the team towards new competencies; give visibility to the department through central “added-value” activities, use outstanding processes and tools for “consumer understanding, consumer insights and creativity”, involve research agencies in a “partnership spirit”. In particular the paper illustrates the “Unilever Reconnect with the Consumer for Growth” program to move from a business that is good at market research into a business that is “world-class at consumer insight”, and how it has helped further strengthen the market research role in the organization ... the “virtuous circle of success”.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, there has been a lot of discussion and debate around the role of market research within the industry. Many market researchers feel the need to move away from a position of being mere “data providers” towards becoming real “consultants adding value”.

This paper first addresses the problem with the most common criticism of market research. “The five Golden Rules to increase your impact” are then reviewed. These golden rules are a synthesis of learning through 19 years experience in the field of market research (both at the provider and client sides) and extensive readings (success case stories in the industry). The paper then illustrates, using concrete experience at Unilever Belgium, the transformation of the role from “Researcher” to “Consultant making real impact in the business” and to “Leadership for growth”.

The purpose of this paper is to be practical and to provide the reader with concrete tips and recommendations, in order for the “Research role” to become much broader in the future.

COMMON CRITICISM ON MARKET RESEARCHERS

A recent paper from John Forsyth (2002), provided amazing data about the image of Market Research among CEOs. On the question “How useful is the information”, CEOs ranked Market Research in the last position, after Finance and Accounting, Marketing, Information Services and Human Resources (average rating: 1.8 on a 5-point scale)!

Common criticism on research providers includes: “they are too data bound”, “they are too reactive, rigid and slow”, “they are insular, don’t know our business”, “their presentations are valium”, “they are not integrative enough: they focus on one job at a time”, “they are not good at delivering or generating insights”, etc.

In 2002 there was an extensive initiative (RELEAS) from ESOMAR aimed at helping researchers increase their added value. It started with the “Marco Polo travelogue” (Hofmans and Schellekens, 2002), which explored the “research” world from both clients and providers. They discovered a troubled relationship between research providers and their clients. Marco Polo found that the research buyers (clients) lived on an island: lonely and isolated from both end users and providers. On one side they don’t feel understood and accepted by the end-users of research: end-users do not understand the value that research can bring, that research takes time to be conducted and what the research process entails (complexity, costs etc.). On the other side they feel that providers do not understand their needs and can’t deliver what they want.

According to them, providers don't have enough bright and experienced people who can serve them well, they lack creativity and innovation, they lack knowledge of their products and market as well as of their company. When interviewing providers, Marco Polo found they were desperately trying to cross the border that separated them from the client's territory and saw them failing. They complain that research buyers don't let them have sufficient access to the end-users, that they are not sufficiently provided with business issues and research objectives, that the relationship with most clients is too "project based" and that market research staff at the client side is not sufficiently educated in market research.

Marco Polo highlighted that such a troubled relationship between research providers and their clients might represent a risk for long-term growth and stability of the market research industry, because the added value of market research would be questioned. Marco Polo's travelogue called for a concerted industry action to put market research in the driver's seat for the future. Since then, there have been a number of forums, debate and papers within the industry (cf. ESOMAR RELEAS initiative).

The next section presents the "Five Golden Rules" to increase market research impact within the organization. Although we focus more on the clients' side, the principles remain valid for the providers' side as well.

THE FIVE GOLDEN RULES TO INCREASE IMPACT

Rule 1: Create an aspirational vision that announces the intended added-value

The first thing is to ask yourself some fundamental questions on the value you bring: "What value does market research bring to the organization?", "What would they be doing if market research were not present?", "What are the major strategic decisions taken by my company?", "What was my role in these decisions?", "How could I have had more impact"?

Every successful leader has a clear vision of what the desired achievements and objectives. The same applies for market research. To be successful, it is necessary to first define your vision. A "vision statement" is an energizing picture, based on a view of the future, of what leadership wants the function to become". It contains the following key elements: a fundamental goal, a view of the future, an offering and the sources of competitive advantage. A few examples of vision statements related to market research:

- Research relaunch initiative-vision statement: “To be the fundamental resource for business intelligence, knowledge, and tools that are used systematically for achieving higher levels of market performance and stakeholder value.”
- McKinsey customer insight vision: “To be the pre-eminent consultants generating deep customer and consumer insights to create innovative marketing and business solutions for our clients.”
- Eli Lilly & Co. (USA) market research mission: “Delivering insights that drive decision making.”
- Unilever Consumer and market insight key vision: “Connecting the Business with Consumers” (the insight is: “Great brands are connected with their consumers, average ones are not.”)

At Benckiser (UK), they have defined two levels to measure the success of market research: first through the success of the company; second through the innovation they deliver, and the insights that they have been able to leverage.

Market research does not own the insights. Their success in innovation is because of their systematic consumer driven focus as a company. They do not care about who thought of the idea first ... They are far more concerned with where it goes.

While defining such a vision statement is very important, it needs to be shared within the team, and really be alive. Otherwise, it will only remain “a beautiful sentence”. It also needs to be properly communicated within the organization. Let us conclude that it needs to inspire the teams every day.

Rule 2: Build more business capabilities: evolution of the market research role

Traditionally, market researchers are really experts in their field, with a lot of analytical skills. What capabilities are essential to play a much bigger role and raise our impact in our organizations?

The McKinsey model defines four types of roles, with new competencies:

- *Project Management*: this is the “best known” role of the market researcher. It is about planning and managing the market research budget, conducting market research projects to respond to the needs of clients, recommending the best methodology according to the objectives, controlling the quality of the fieldwork ... and ensuring the data/information/results are used properly.
- *Voice of Consumer*: this is already an evolution in the role: as market researcher, ensuring the consumer voice is heard, especially if business expediency favors an alternative approach. You don’t hesitate to take

personal risks to press the consumer case. You want to develop deep consumer insights, not only from one single study, but in an integrated perspective.

- *Knowledge development*: you are custodian of past and present research work. You proactively drive and motivate teams to use existing information in order to avoid “reinventing the wheel”. You know how to activate the research and consumer insights you have in appropriate forums. You also write summaries of learnings on important consumer themes, when relevant.
- *Advisor to senior management*: you are consulted for advice on strategic decisions. You are included in key business meetings, even if there is no “formal research” to conduct, because you are a “respected advisor”, an internal “consumer guru”.

Of course, new skills and competencies are required to be able to play this bigger role: a balance of commercial awareness, marketing and marketing strategy knowledge, communication and assertivity skills, breakthrough thinking and pro-activity. This will require a focus on training and coaching. The second part of this paper (Unilever experience) will address this.

As expressed by Ravi Parmeswar (2002), Vice President Knowledge & Insights at the Coca-Cola company,

“Research cannot be called research anymore. It will be more about looking ahead at the consumer and the market-place – strategic anticipation, identifying opportunities and how to leverage our core assets to leverage those opportunities, based on consumer needs and the marketplace...”

Let us also quote Wil van den Berg (2002), Chief Marketing Officer at Philips Consumer Electronics:

“Market researchers tend to emphasize the technical part of their job, but I think they shouldn’t do this. Of course we need people with excellent knowledge of techniques and methodology, but it is when they have a vision and judgement that researchers can make a difference.”

In order to stress the importance of this bigger role, there is a “rebranding” of “research” in the industry. Here are a few examples of other titles used: “Consumer & Market Insight Manager”, “Head of Consumer Insights”, “Head of Customer Understanding”, “Customer Knowledge and Strategy”, “Associate Director, Global Trends, Strategic Planning”, etc.

Needless to say that these new names are only meaningful if they are translated into a real change within the organization...

Rule 3: Broadly scope your target and services

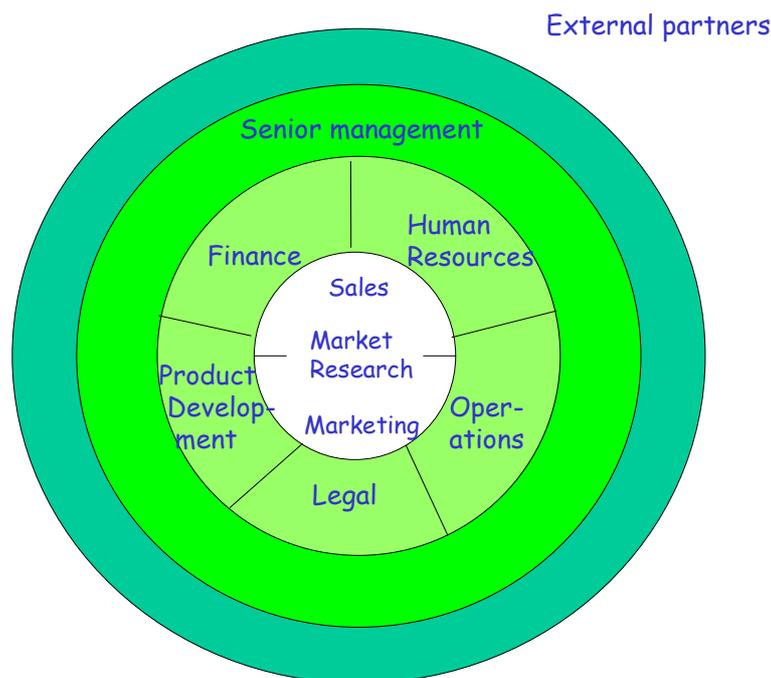
If you want to achieve greater impact, ask yourself two questions (Forsyth, 2002):

- Who are your customers?
- What is the scope of your services?

Traditionally, market research (at client's side) has been a service department for marketing, with two pillars of research: continuous research (retail and consumer panel mainly), and ad-hoc research (e.g. consumer research to contribute to the development of the brands). Only for marketing, there has been a tremendous evolution (e.g. bigger role cf. supra), new tools e.g. Internet, Customer Relationship Marketing ... where market research can offer added value.

With the increasing power of the trade and the increased competition in the point of sales, it has become more and more important to focus on the "shopper" as well ("the consumer as a shopper"). According to POPAI "Consumer Habit Study-Belgium" (2001), 75% of the purchase decisions are made at the point of sales. Market research has also become a key partner for Sales to conduct Shopper Research, help in Category Management projects, Business Reviews, Customer Satisfaction Surveys, etc.

Figure 1
WHO ARE YOUR CUSTOMERS?



As shown in figure 1, the Market Research department can scope customers even broader:

- *Product development*: they need the feedback of the consumers to develop the right products and innovations. It is a good idea to involve them in “cross functional teams” so that the consumer dimension becomes more alive, and drives the development process.
- *Operations*: Market Research can play a valuable role by helping Operations with Sales Forecasts, Promotional effectiveness analysis, etc.
- *Human Resources*: for instance, why not take the responsibility to lead employee satisfaction surveys? Market Research can also play an important role in the company culture. We will come back on that in the second part of this paper (cf. “Reconnect with the Consumer” culture).
- *Finance*: market estimates, market and sales forecasts, competitive assessment ... predictions for annual plans, budget management ...

As already noted, Senior management is also a key potential customer: make sure you are sufficiently involved in the business and strategies to come with the right “advice”, take the “helicopter view” and try to spot new opportunities for the business. Speak the language they want to hear: people in the Boardroom do not want “research”, they want “solutions” to their problems. All too often, some very expensive “strategic consultants” appear on the scene, while client-side researchers are in a unique position to contribute. The challenge is to gain acceptance and recognition from senior management.

In addition to your customers inside your company, you need to think of external partners as well. A few examples:

- *Advertising and media agencies*: market research often has a poor image among advertising agencies. One common criticism is that “advertising tests kill creativity”. However there are constructive ways to work effectively with advertising agencies. You can, for instance, involve them in consumer understanding and insights before the development of new campaigns (teamwork). Having an efficient communication tracking system is also very valuable ... Again with all your knowledge, you should be a “consultant” with valuable advice for communication strategy and you should be involved in key meetings.
- *Retailers*: why not participate in Business Reviews with the clients, where you contribute with your “objective knowledge” of the shopper?
- *External Associations*: networking is important not only for your “personal visibility”, it is also a rich source of new insights and ideas. Quite often, a good “address book” helps get things done more efficiently. Of course, you will need to find the right balance in order not to be overloaded with

external activities and networking. This is a matter of defining your priorities ...

For all your (potential) customers, the question is: “What is my role?”, “What Value does or can Market Research bring to make better decisions?”

By broadening your scope in this way, your job will be richer and more motivating. You will also increase your impact in the organization (virtuous circle).

Rule 4: Focus on knowledge management and clear/actionable consumer insights

We need to increase the perceived value of Market Research. Although we buy “data”, our decision-makers are interested in “solutions”. Let us first look at the Pyramid of Understanding (Hastings, 2002).

Figure 2A
PYRAMID OF UNDERSTANDING



Considering all the layers in turn:

- *Data* is the basic raw material of Market Research. The main concern for researchers when handling data is that it is valid, reliable and generalisable. Data on its own is rarely useful and insightful – even to researchers, therefore it has to be analyzed and reduced into information.

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- *Information* describes something about a market and, as the pyramid suggests, there can often be large amounts of information in a research study that still needs to be reduced by considering carefully the original objectives of the research study.
 - *Findings* are those pieces of information that answer a research question and they are usually of much more interest to internal clients. This is because we are dealing with far less material, where most of it is relevant to the problem that generated the need for research in the first place.
 - *Conclusions* are an interpretation and a summary of the findings that represent the very essence of what that particular research project has to say.
 - *Knowledge* is acquired from combining a series of conclusions from many different research projects and involves a sense of what action recommendations should be taken following the investment in Market Research. Inevitably this final stage involves using strategic planning structures such as Usage & Attitudes studies, the Porter Model, Market Attractiveness/Business strength matrices etc.

The last stage, from moving from conclusions to knowledge, appears to involve skills that are traditionally not associated with Market Research, and yet this is a very crucial stage. Managing the last stage can transform a collection of projects gathering dust on shelves to a strategic plan to guide an organization through a whole series of decisions in the short and long term.

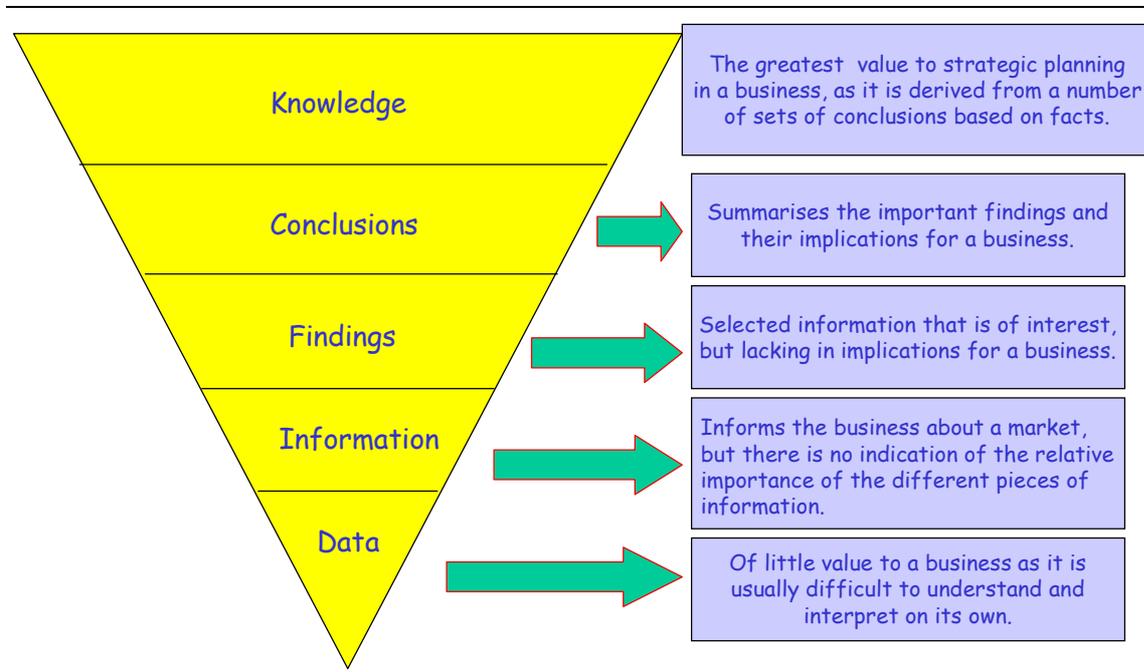
Client-side researchers are in a unique position to make this transition as they have access to other research projects and a detailed knowledge of the client business environment. As already noted, the challenge is to gain recognition and acceptance of senior management in order not to be beaten by expensive strategy consultants. We are in a better position to add value to the research results we produce: we are in the consultancy business!

Turning to the value of each layer in the pyramid, it is the opposite to the amount of material each layer contains (see figure 2B). On the top, we have:

- Conclusions, because they represent the very essence of a research project and the decision-making implications for the organization.
- Knowledge, because it can guide the organization through a series of decisions in the short and long term and it can form the basis of strategic plans.

It is amazing how many researchers still flood an internal client with information or if they identify some findings, they fail to follow through with the implications for the business.

Figure 2B
VALUE OF UNDERSTANDING TO A BUSINESS



Therefore, a *balance of skills and competencies* is required to move from “data, information and findings” to “conclusions and knowledge”. Commercial and Marketing Knowledge is required at all levels of the pyramid.

- Moving from Data to Information and Findings is likely to require more application of specialist knowledge and patient analysis.
- Moving from Findings to Conclusions and to Knowledge is more likely to require competencies with regard to communication and assertiveness.

We need to ensure we have the right talents in our Market Research teams!

Fresh thinking on market research presentations

We must present research in a manner that is challenging and action-oriented!

Highly effective people (both from the client and agency-side) always start at the end:

Figure 3
WORST VS. BEST PRACTICE

<i>The Worst practice:</i> <i>"No to boring building blocks of evidence"</i>	<i>The Best practice:</i> <i>"Yes to an attacking/narrative true story".</i>
35 key findings from the research 10 pages of methodology every analysis conducted narrow perspective: analyses just from that project	the recommendation methodology in appendix only the analyses needed to support the recommendations broad perspective: integrates analyses and insights from other projects as well.

Rule 5: Build good external relationships with partners

In order to maximize your impact within your organization, you don't only need the right talents in your team. You also need excellent "partners" at the agency-side. What do we mean by "excellent partners at the agency-side"?

- First of all, they have to be a "*consulting partner*" rather than a "data provider". Even if you buy data (for examples: retail panel, consumer panels), you need your agency to be able to draw conclusions and recommendations which are actionable for the business. You need them to have a "strategic scope", integrate knowledge from previous research, sources ... You want them to present results in an inspiring and engaging way. In order to be able to play this role, you need to integrate your agency into your business, involve them in key meetings, where they can "broaden their scope" and acquire a business perspective. Working this way is very motivating for the agency: like you, they have more impact on the business, and this gives a bigger sense to what they are doing.
- You also expect your agency to be "*service-minded*". But with a little extra, which is being able to challenge you when necessary (like you need to challenge your own internal clients when you do not agree). The last thing we want is the agency to become "complacent". By this we mean, for example, conducting meaningless research, or telling the client what he wants to hear ... we need to work with integrity to add more value.
- In certain cases, it is worth considering "*Partnership Agreements*" with agencies, for instance in the case of using standard methodologies. This is particularly useful for quantitative research, like "Simulated test markets", "Advertising Pre and Post tests", etc. Advantages include benchmarking, simplification and cost efficiencies. Of course, the agency has to remain competitive and very active to invest in further development, and the

client needs to keep his eyes open on the market, again to avoid the risk of becoming complacent. In the case of qualitative research, I prefer to talk about “preferred partners”, but we should never give exclusivity here. Building expertise and thorough strategic knowledge is key (which pleads in favor of one partner), but fresh thinking and ideas are also very important as well.

By building solid relationship with agencies (“Partners”) as described above, you move to a virtuous circle:

- Your agency enjoys working for you. You get the best talents and the best service.
- It helps you raise your impact in the organization.

Let us now look at our concrete experience at Unilever Belgium: how we managed to move the Market Research Department from “data provider” to “consultant making real impact” and leadership for growth”.

OUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AT UNILEVER BELGIUM

How we transformed the role of the Market Research department from “data provider” to “leadership for growth”.

In 1999, we decided to merge the market research department of the three Unilever Belgium divisions – Hartog-Union (brands such as Becel, Bertolli, Calvé, Lipton), Iglo-Ola (frozen food: Iglo and ice-cream: Ola-Magnum, Cornetto, Carte d’Or) and Lever-Fabergé (home and personal care: Coral, Omo, Robijn, Cif, Dove, Axe, Rexona, Signal). The “Unilever Belgium Market Research department” was born (April 1999)!

In five years, we managed to move from “data provider” to “consultant making real impact” and even “leadership for growth”.

What were the different *key steps* of this evolution of our role in the organization? What are the *success factors* behind this “virtuous circle”?

Step 1: Towards an integrated Market Research department

Before deciding to merge the three departments, there was regular contact between the three heads of department, in order to share best practices and find potential synergies. At that time, I was responsible for the Market Research department of Iglo-Ola. It was obvious in our discussions that we could gain more impact in the business by finding more synergies. We started preparing a proposal for the National Management and looking at different scenarios, with

“pros” and “cons”. We rapidly arrived to the conclusion that the best way forward was to go for one “integrated department”.

The main advantages of having one integrated department were:

- In the first place to add more value to the business: by maximizing the synergies between the three divisions (best practices, cross-fertilization of knowledge, “Unileverage”), having one strong department with critical mass.
- In the second place to make cost savings: by using our internal resources more efficiently, by negotiating better contracts with our agencies etc.

In the proposal for National Management, we started very clearly by defining our mission in the company.

Mission Unilever Belgium Market Research Department

General:

- to ensure that consumer understanding is at the heart of the company;
- to provide added-value service for Marketing, Sales and Board Unibel (NB. In the beginning, we identified those three to be our main customers);
- to be a partner for strategy and decision making.

We expressed that as follows:

“As Market Researchers, we want to be the Partner-Consultants within our organizations, offering the best service and advice with real added-value. We want to be a department of which each member works with passion to deliver the best information responding the queries and the needs of our Marketing, Sales and Board colleagues. A department we are proud of because we anticipate their needs and we offer them the required information and tools to help them in their business decisions.” (Th. van den Abelen, C. Bodart and C. Rosinski, Market Research Unibel, January 1999).

Before explaining how we managed to bring this mission to life within the team and the company, let us discuss some important practical issues linked with the merge in one department:

One department, one boss

We all knew that by recommending one integrated department, there would be one boss only. I openly put that issue on the table: I was interested in the job of course, but what about my two colleagues? We were very lucky: they had other plans, so we could really work together in the same direction!

Organization and hierarchical reporting lines

After having examined different scenarios, we recommended a “bi-polar” structure for the department:

- the Category Market Research Managers, all dedicated to one division or business unit (according to the size), with the objective to become the consulting partner of that division.
- the Central cell (which has been afterwards renamed Market Information Department), which coordinates continuous research for the three divisions (central contact with agency, data quality and standard reporting, expertise and training, etc.) for better efficiency.

As a head of department, I was still responsible for one division as well (still Iglo-Ola, with the help of a trainee). My big challenge was to build a real team, make this department work and add more value to the business.

In order to help me succeed, it was important that all team members become my direct reports, while still having a “dotted reporting line” towards the Marketing Directors of their division. This was not only important on paper, it was a strong recognition on our status and role within the organization. I also had the main responsibility for people management and development.

One department, one physical location

I can assure you: there has also been a lot of debate about the physical location of our department!

Some Directors wanted to have their Market Research Managers still close to their Marketing department. We were very clear to say that one physical place was the only way forward, to achieve our ambitious objectives. And with hindsight, we were right! The only discipline we needed was to have regular contacts with the marketing (and sales etc.) teams, in order not to live “isolated on an island”. This could happen through daily visits (“walk the talk”, regular meetings, etc.). The advantages of being all together are numerous: stronger team building, stronger expertise level, synergies, “cross-fertilization” of good initiatives, mutual coaching, better “step-back” and efficacy (better than if you are in the same office as product managers who keep asking you questions), recognition of our consultant status.

One department, stronger talents and career opportunities

With the integration of the market research department, it became possible to have more career opportunities, still in market research. Even if my advice to people is to broaden their experience and move to the users side (marketing, sales) at a certain moment of their career (because it gives them a more practical business perspective), it has become possible to create several jobs in market research, with a good progression. There are entry jobs, junior and more senior functions, all in the same department.

By building a strong department, it has also been possible to hire excellent external talents and offer them attractive jobs. Again a virtuous circle because these strong talents add a lot of value to the business, contribute to improve our image and increase our impact in the organization, etc.

Now back to the second step: how we managed to build a solid and committed team.

Step 2: Aligning and motivating the team towards the vision: Bringing this mission to life within the company

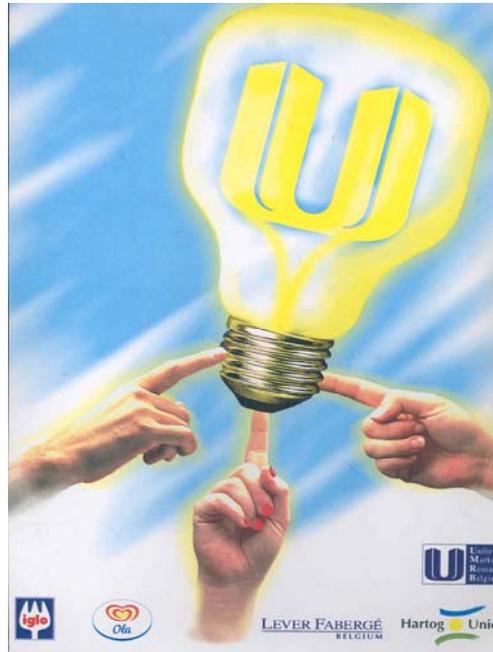
Although we were very proud of the mission statement we had put on paper, I quickly realized that it was not alive for my brand new team! Why? Because it was not defined by the team itself!

One key learning is that you need to involve the whole team in defining the vision and mission statement.

Therefore, we organized a day out (May 1999) with the complete team (12 people at that time). I put them in two groups (syndicates) and gave them a simple task: to make two drawings (see figure 3). The first drawing to express how they feel today as market researchers (as is). The second how they want to feel in the future (to be).

I then asked them to put words on these drawings. What happened? They used almost the same words as in our initial mission statement, but now it was stronger: it was built by the whole team!

Figure 4
UNILEVER MARKET RESEARCH



Now that the team really shared the same vision, mission and values, it was very important to bring it to life within the entire company. In June 1999 (one month after the day out), we organized an “Open Door Day”, a day where everybody in Unilever Belgium could visit us (in our brand new offices). Our objectives were the following:

- To announce and share our vision, mission and concrete objectives with the whole company;
- To install our image and give visibility to our department;
- To give ownership to the team and motivate them as one team (every member of the team was active during that day: everybody presented some key messages, key objectives etc.);
- To educate our clients: we developed the 10 Commandments for a Good Partnership (see figure 4).

Figure 4
MARKET RESEARCH UNILEVER BELGIUM MISSION /VALUES

<u>"AS IS"</u>		<u>"TO BE"</u>
"Data provider"	→	"Consulting-partner"
Support / client service	→	Partnership
No clear vision of the role of MR department	→	Clear vision of our role "Integrated vision"
Conflicts / workload	→	Positive energy Team Spirit Together
Consumer / Brands	→	Link consumer / shopper Marketing / Sales
Reactive	→	Proactive

Defined by complete MR team on Day out 07/05/99.

During our day out we found that one of the problems was that our internal clients (e.g. product managers) were not behaving the way we wanted (examples: quick and dirty briefing, everything urgent, failing to involve us in designing test material, etc.). We found it a good idea to educate them in an intelligent way by developing the 10 Commandments for a Good Partnership. We put these 10 Commandments on big boards and also created a few posters with key messages, such as:

Market Research is like a chicken. If you provide it with bulls__, you receive bulls__. Therefore we need a complete briefing. (In June 1999 we were in the middle of the "dioxin crisis". Therefore this analogy).

If you can think about the problem in time, you can talk about the problem in time (with your Market Research Manager). Therefore, inform your Market Research Manager in time.

Get in touch with the consumer, you will not find him at your desk. Therefore, be present on the field.

This great artwork (we show the Egypt pyramids) was not created in one day! Good analyses need sufficient time.

All these posters were exposed and presented during this Open Door Day. They stayed afterwards in our offices ... a clever and fun way to remind our partners to play the game ... just in case they forgot. And it helped a lot!

Figure 4A
THE 10 COMMANDMENTS FOR A GOOD PARTNERSHIP

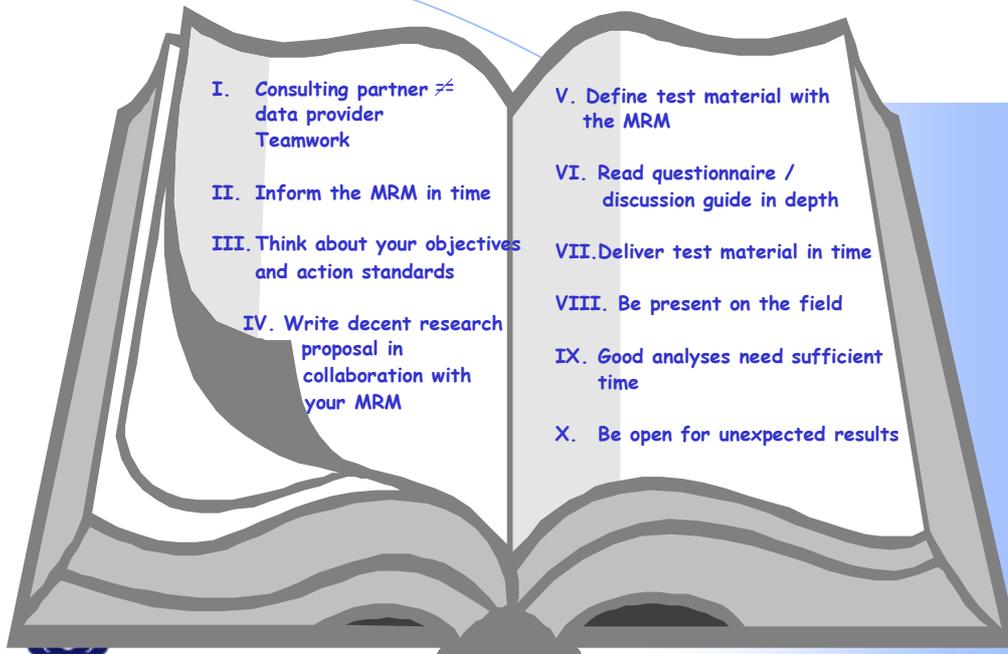


Figure 4B
KEY MESSAGES FOR OUR PARTNERS: KEY MESSAGE 1



Figure 4B
KEY MESSAGES FOR OUR PARTNERS: KEY MESSAGE 2

**If you can think about the problem in time,
you can talk about the problem in time (with your MRM)**



Inform your Market Research Manager in time

Figure 4B
KEY MESSAGES FOR OUR PARTNERS: KEY MESSAGE 3

**Get in touch with the consumer
You'll not find him at your desk**



--> Be present on the field

Figure 4B
KEY MESSAGES FOR OUR PARTNERS: KEY MESSAGE 3

This great artwork was not created in one day!



--> Good analyses need sufficient time

Last but not least, we had a “golden book” in which every visitor could sign and write a testimony, a few words to encourage us, etc. We received a lot of “congratulations” and positive strokes, such as: “Great initiative! Good luck to your fantastic team”, “An excellent start, go for it!”, “Super idea, super team, well done!”, “A great start, success guaranteed!”, “A wonderful team ready for excellence”, “Great! I promise I will follow your 10 commandments” etc. We also gave special t-shirts with our logo to each visitor.

It has been a tremendous success: about 150 visitors, a lot of positive word-of-mouth about our department, and a motivated team.

Now our challenge was to deliver and really become the Consulting Partner we wanted to be!

Step 3: Coaching the team towards the “Consultant Making Impact” role

When we merged the three market research departments, the team was quite heterogeneous in terms of experience: a mixture of new trainees, junior and senior market research managers. In order to move into the direction of Consulting Partner, it was important to work at three different levels:

- Translating the vision and mission into clear plans.
- Individual and team coaching to leverage the potential of the complete staff to play a bigger role in their division.
- Team initiatives to give visibility to our department.

Translating the vision and mission into clear plans

All too often, a market research plan is an assembly of brand team bids rather than a coherent strategic plan to address fundamental knowledge gaps and business priorities. It was important to step back from the day-to-day and take stock of what we know and do not know. Together with the Marketing Directors, it was important to come to approve the Annual Strategic Understanding Plan in order to systematically prioritize the budget behind strategically important projects.

Although we would still keep some flexibility around these plans according to emerging business needs, this type of plans was key to focus our resources on the most added-value activities.

Individual and team coaching

The transformation of the role from Market Research Manager to “Consultant Making Impact” requires a shift in the type of activities:

- More time is spent on:
 - * preparing and managing big scale strategic projects

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- * mining the work for foresight and insight
 - * synthesizing the multiple strands into actionable knowledge
 - * raising the profile of consumers in the business.
 - * playing an "advisor role" in business meetings
 - o And less time is spent on:
 - * administration
 - * quality checking
 - * method development
 - * small scale evaluative projects
 - * repetitive research

Within Unilever, this transformation of the MR function to a more strategic/planning role resulted in a re-branding of the function as CMI (Consumer and Market Insight).

Although we should not underestimate the expertise and specialist skills which are necessary to play this bigger role, we will concentrate here on two core leadership competencies, which have been a key focus within Unilever in the transformation of the role: Seizing the future and Strategic Influencing.

- o Seizing the future: “Outstanding individuals are constantly focused on taking action to get to the future first. They monitor closely what is happening, both internally and externally, and take decisive action today to create new growth opportunities for tomorrow. In a world where being first into a market is key, they act with speed and decisiveness to stay ahead of the game, maximizing growth opportunities for the business.” What does this mean for CMI? To identify growth opportunities and push these pro-actively. It is important for CMI to do this, because we have the best perspective on trends and unmet needs and aspirations. It is a great way for us to fuel growth.
- o Strategic Influencing: “Outstanding individuals use Strategic Influencing to build commitment to their growth agenda and to influence others without using hierarchical power to adopt a specific course of action. They use influencing strategies positively to orchestrate organizations”. What does this mean for CMI? To use our skills to build a persuasive case and find ways to influence decision takers to adopt this. It is important for CMI to do this, because we do not have the hierarchical power, so we need to influence others if we want to have an effect, to make a difference – if not, we will be back room technicians.

To achieve this transformation of the role, it requires a lot of training and coaching, both at individual and team levels. As defined by Philippe Rosinski, an expert in coaching and leadership (*Coaching Across Cultures*, 2003), “Coaching is the art of facilitating the unleashing of people’s potential to reach meaningful, important objectives.” As stressed by Philippe Rosinski, there are important key elements in this definition:

- concrete objectives: coaching is oriented towards concrete impact and results;
- important and meaningful for the coachees: the objectives must resonate with coachees’ inner motives and values;
- potential: coaches are deeply convinced that people have more potential than are currently able to display;
- facilitating: coaching is an interactive and developmental process where the coach enables coachees to find their own solutions;
- people: coaching can be applied to individuals and to teams;
- art: choosing an effective approach in a given situation.

Now here are the big lines of my coaching approach:

- At the individual level: according to a person’s needs, I have regular coaching meetings with them. I act as a facilitator and help them find their own solutions and implement actions. I trust them and empower them to act as real managers in their respective teams. I don’t need to be front line, unless they want me to do so. I always express pride in other’s accomplishments, enjoy seeing my people grow. Everybody in my team knows that I put a lot of care in their own development plans and career opportunities, even if it is not the best solution for the department, because it can sometimes create discontinuity. But I am a firm believer that by putting a lot of attention on people in this way, they feel motivated and will do a great job. It is a real win-win situation! On top of regular individual coaching meetings, we undergo a more formal review, twice a year: summary of performance, evaluation of the skills and competencies and personal development plan. Each individual has clear objectives with a concrete work plan.
- At the team level: we have regular monthly staff meetings where we share best practices and cross-fertilize good initiatives so that we can leverage the team. We define the future together, which means the vision and top priorities for the department. “Genuine commitment is found where team and individual objectives intersect. This creates congruence, a resonance, which is the basis for true synergy.” (Ph. Rosinski). We also organize regular Day-Outs on specific topics to raise the potential of the teams and

further consolidate team spirit. We always try to find a good balance between business and relational/team spirit in these outdoor initiatives. Finally, there are also collective trainings on skills (Consumer Insight) and competencies (cf. supra).

Team initiatives to give visibility to our department:

Once a year we build a departmental work plan together which reflects the key priorities of our department. This plan is approved with the Marketing Director's Committee (a forum which groups the Marketing Directors of the three Divisions), and then cascades in the different teams. This work plan gives common directions for the individual work plans (see above) and also includes central team initiatives.

One year after the Open Door Day, we organized a Market Research Fair for the whole company to communicate our main achievements, to further stretch the vision and communicate our objectives, to further reinforce the team. Again every team member was involved into this by owning a topic and moderating it (in special workshops run in parallel). I presented a short introduction in plenary, where officially I launched "Reconnect with the Consumer", a major step in the evolution of our role towards growth (see below).

Since then, we organize one or two big events per year (central conferences) for the whole Unilever Belgium company in order to add value for the business and give visibility to our department. For example:

- The Teenagers
- Trend Watching
- A-brands versus private labels: Survival of the fittest?"
- The Seniors

All these conferences have been a great success: with the collaboration of external and internal speakers, we managed each time to present a lot of new, holistic insights for the business. A good way to inspire the teams for their plans, while giving strong credibility and visibility to our department.

Let us now concentrate on the major world-wide Unilever initiative called "Reconnect with the Consumers", which has helped raise our role further, and how we implemented it within Unilever Belgium.

Step 4: Implementing "Reconnect with the Consumer for growth"

Our growth depends on one thing above all others. Consumers. If we do not get better at understanding our consumers and meeting their needs, wants and

aspirations, we will not grow. It's as simple as that" (Keki Dadiseth- Unilever HPC Division Director, Patrick Cescau- Unilever Foods Division Director).

The challenge

An international survey carried out in 2000 among Unilever managers and suppliers revealed that most of us rarely engaged directly with consumers, that we spent far too much effort on the evaluative and far too little on the illuminative:

"We use Market Research to eliminate risk (the well-known "umbrella effect"), but not to illuminate opportunity."

Unilever's Path to Growth agenda demands significant increase in our rate of growth. To get that growth we need a stream of consumer-relevant innovation brought to market fast – and that in turn calls for change in the way we connect with consumers.

As shown in figure 5, we want to put more focus on “strategic understanding” and “direct consumer contact”, in order to generate better “insights” and be able to make more intuitive decisions. That means we have less need for “risk reduction research” and can be faster on the market with more “consumer-relevant” mixes.

Figure 5
THE GOAL: CHANGE TO GROW



Our Unilever vision and goals

Our vision is “Growth of our leading brands driven by insightful people who have insightful ideas and are connected by powerful knowledge management and shared learning”.

Our key goals are:

- Faster and more intuitive decision-making based on greater consumer intimacy.
- A decisive shift in emphasis to insight/foresight, and of budget from the tactical/evaluative to the strategic/illuminative.
- A radical improvement in our retention and sharing of knowledge.
- Greater simplicity in all we do.

The tools for change

- Reconnect with Consumers is a package developed by Unilever that pulls together smart ways of working from around the world.
- It is about turning from a business that is good at Market Research into a business that is world-class at Consumer Insight.
- An interlocking set of new tools and disciplines designed to effect a step-change in how the consumer is put at the heart of our everyday working lives.

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on two pillars:

- Direct Consumer Contacts
- Insight Activation

Before explaining the fundamentals of these tools, I want to emphasize that implementing Reconnect with the Consumers has been very powerful to achieve the goals outlined above. The fact that it has been strongly driven by the CMI department with the full commitment of the Top Management gave us an outstanding booster in our role and impact within the company. We firmly believed it was the way to go and the whole team was 100% committed.

Every CMI manager has been trained to fulfil this new, exciting vision, “Connecting the business with the Consumers”.

This meant in practice more focus on new roles, such as “Consumer guru” (passionate about understanding the consumer-strong advisor for project leaders and senior management), “Consumer Voice” (put across the consumer case in business decisions), “Consumer Process Expert” (on top of traditional research, manage a process to encourage direct consumer contacts sessions, facilitate Insight Activators projects), “Guardian of Consumer Knowledge” (access past insight and research work and bring it into current projects, share knowledge and fill gaps).

The importance of direct consumer contacts: a real eye opener!

One of the fundamentals of Reconnect with the Consumers is that all of us should spend more time interacting directly with consumers – much more in most cases than we currently do. Typically, we underinvest in this because: we perceive ourselves as short of time, we assume that it is someone else’s job (marketing, market research, the agency), we lack confidence in how to do it.

The prime purpose of direct consumer contact is to bring us closer to consumers, so we have a much greater feeling for how our brands fit in with their daily lives and we become even more consumer-focused.

The importance to “connect” with the consumers for effective marketing becomes widely recognized within the Industry ... but still not implemented enough in practice. Let us quote Jim Stengel, Global Marketing Officer from Procter & Gamble:

"Consumers are changing as so must we. As an industry, we are simply not doing enough to know our consumers and connect with them. We cannot easily reapply old strategies to this new consumer. Marketing strategies must be dynamic and holistic - to connect with her where and when she is most receptive."

Within Philips, market research played a big role in shifting from a product oriented into a consumer and market driven company. *"Philips had decided that it was too much driven by its technological know-how and heritage, and too little by a good sense of what consumers want."* (W. Van den Berg, 2002).

The fact of starting a real consumer reconnect program is a real step change in consumer mind focus, as suggested by the testimonials below:

"The difference between sitting behind a mirror in a focus group and sitting talking to consumers face-to-face is a million miles".

"It is a real eye opener!"

"Now you really see the consumers through their eyes, deep in their world-not through your own "marketer subjectivity".

"The importance of personal experience: what I hear I forget, what I see I remember, what I do I know."

There are many possible forms of direct consumer contacts: face-to-face at home, accompanied shopping, connecting with him in different places (e.g. cinema, leisure park, petrol stations, going out). You can combine observations and interviewing. What can also be very insightful is to meet experts who can provide another perspective on the subject. For example, on a project for deodorant we met dermatologists, perfumery shop managers, psychologists ...

We also organized an event for Unilever Belgian Marketers: Reconnect with the Youth. We spent one Saturday afternoon, evening and night in different places with experts and consumers: trendy fashion stores, trendy DJ, trendy bars and discos to “reconnect with youth night life”. This event was very insightful and has inspired the underground launch of Lipton Ice Tea Green in Belgium (how to start first with opinion leaders, trend setters, peers, before targeting the mass.)

The message is also to be a consumer yourself (we sometimes forget), be curious and open-minded towards the world around you.

Training is very important before undertaking consumer interviews. We have developed a simple process of providing practical training for every person involved in this (The 10 golden rules for active listening). This gives them the confidence they need to get started and get the most of their interviews. Of course, practice makes it even better. The feedback we had so far was unanimously positive: it is an enormous step change in consumer mind focus.

Since we started with this in 2001, the success of direct consumer contacts is continuously increasing. Almost every function can be involved in projects. We started with Marketing, then extended to Sales, Advertising agencies, Development, Finance, etc. Every project we undertake with direct consumer contacts are led by CMI Managers with very clear objectives and deliverables. Debriefings are facilitated by us in order to draw the best insights (see below).

It is worth mentioning that direct consumer contacts is not a substitute for research. It is particularly useful in exploratory projects to gain understanding, to get started with all the team being involved (including advertising agency, development, pack design agency, if relevant). It can be productive in preparation of a big study (prepare stimulus material based on consumer insights), to learn about the relationship between the consumers and your brand. It is very motivating and stimulating for the whole team, and makes our discussions richer and more productive.

As CMI Managers, the possibility to run direct consumer contacts is now part of our toolbox. We know when to advise it in the projects we run. It is great to run direct consumer contacts. We also need the right tools to generate relevant consumer insights.

“Insight is the cornerstone of brand marketing, yet only 28% of us have a formal system for developing insight” (Unilever Consumer Understanding Survey, 2000).

The importance of insights

Good insights are the lifeblood and inspiration for successful brands and feed all marketing activities: brand key, innovations, communication, activation.

- An insight is a penetrating understanding which provide hooks or clues that lead to brand building opportunities. (Definition from Unilever Marketing Academy).
- A brand identity insight is that element of all you know about the consumers and their needs, which the brand is founded upon.
- An insight is something you should feel in your guts, not just think in your head. It is “a creative link”: from consumer understanding to market response. Consumers insights are opportunities to create value for consumers, to improve aspects of their lives, as shown by the examples below.

Examples of consumer insights and applications in brand marketing

- Dove (soap, shower and bath products):
 - * Consumer Insight: soap leaves skin feeling tight and dry
 - * Brand discriminator: Dove contains 1/4 hydrating cream. So it leaves your skin soft and smooth.
- Axe (male deodorant & perfumery):
 - * Consumer Insight: the “mating game” is a major preoccupation for young men. Feeling, looking and smelling good is essential for success.
 - * Brand discriminator: Axe is a cool brand whose products are designed to help me get the girl.
- Becel Pro-Activ (margarine):
 - * Consumer Insight: understanding the consequences of having cholesterol is frightening.
 - * Brand discriminator: Becel pro-activ spread is a revolutionary spread enriched with plant sterols, an active ingredient which lowers cholesterol levels.
- Lipton Ice Tea (beverages):
 - * Consumer Insight: young people want it all: pleasure, excitement, goodness.
 - * Brand discriminator: with Lipton you can have it all, live life to the full and do yourself good.

The brands which have fully embraced the process of Reconnect with the Consumers have shown the best results and impact on Unilever growth.

So what we need is great consumer understanding and insights: it is the basis for great Brand Marketing.

Within Unilever, an excellent process has been developed to help generate great consumer insights and ideas: it is called the Insight Activator. For confidentiality reasons, we will limit ourselves in this paper to the major principles of this approach and the benefits it provides. In particular, we will explain how we have implemented it within Unilever Belgium with great success and how it has helped strengthen our role further in the organization.

The Insight Activator: A powerful tool

The Insight Activator is a set of creative and inspiring tools and techniques to generate superior consumer insights into their underlying needs and behaviors. It is used as the key tool on projects to gain a better understanding of consumers, through acquiring key insights from real consumers and then applying them to building brands. It assists in driving Consumer and Market Insight into the heart of brand building and helps us develop Insight Platforms for accelerated brand growth.

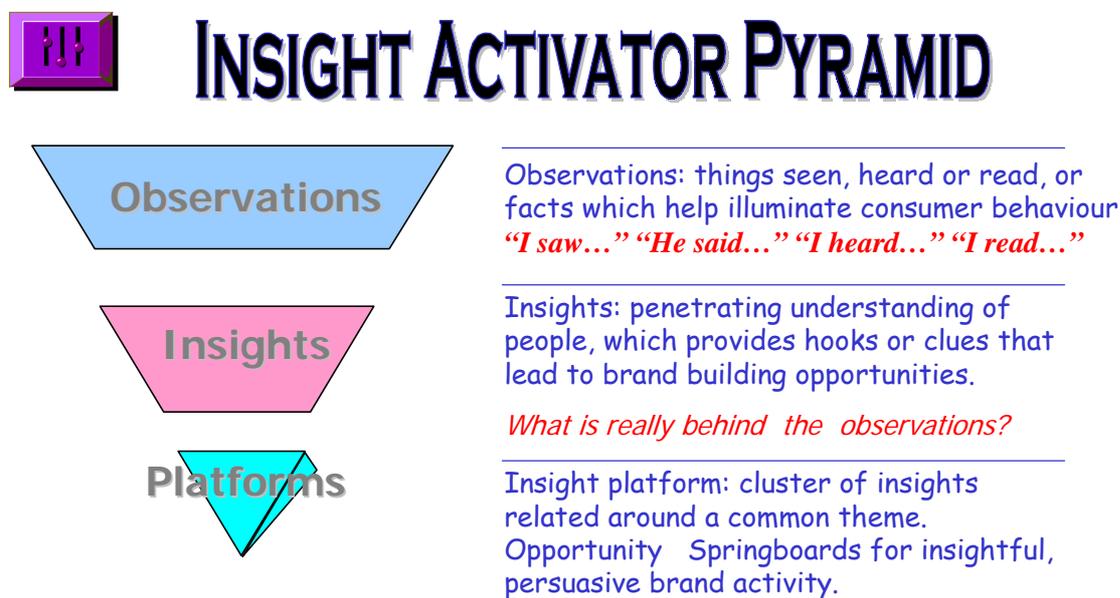
The Insight Activator process has a series of stages:

- Define the task (Briefing): whether it is to drive brand positioning, innovation, communication or brand activation. The briefing contains key information such as background, objectives, consumer target, deliverables etc.
- Enlist a strong team: there must be a good balance between the number of people and the right mix of disciplines. The involvement of senior marketers is key (experience, support, sign-off). Typically, participants of the core team should be marketing team (including team leader/decision maker), CMI team (which facilitates the whole process), creative agencies, trade marketing, development.
- Review existing knowledge: we do not need to reinvent the wheel! Consult existing knowledge (reports, internet, etc.), experience and trends in the light of the task, and clearly identify gaps and hypotheses, before commissioning any new research.
- Explore the world further: expand understanding and stretch thinking using personal experience, direct consumer/experts contacts ... and if necessary commission new research.
- Collect learnings together, make connections, cluster and craft them into insight platforms, via an intensive “mix” workshop. Mixing all the observations, learnings and understanding together is really magic: it feels exhaustive, creative and satisfying for the whole team!

- Select the most powerful insight platforms to answer the brief and use them as springboard for creativity to generate ideas (product innovations, communication or brand activation...).

During the insight activator process, we move from observations to insights, and from insights to insight platforms, as shown by figure 6. An insight platform is a cluster of related insights around a common theme. A platform is richer and yields more opportunities than just one single insight. Insight Platforms help us find many new and relevant ways to satisfy our consumers.

Figure 6
INSIGHT ACTIVATOR PYRAMID



This is an example of an insight platform for oral care:

Insight Platform: Oral Care On the Go

I need easier oral care because I'm always on the go.

Key supporting insights:

My kids cannot brush their teeth at school.

My kids tend to snack more and more.

My children need extra oral care protection.

After eating, I can't always brush my teeth as I would like because I don't have my brush with me.

During the day, I often wish my mouth felt as fresh as after brushing.

Sometimes kids do not even brush their teeth in the morning due to the rush and unwillingness to do so.

Opportunities areas:

Products which offer convenient oral care solutions (e.g. chewing gum.).

New types of oral care kits/packs for “on the go”, easy to put in the bag.

Special “on the go” solutions, quick and fun for kids.

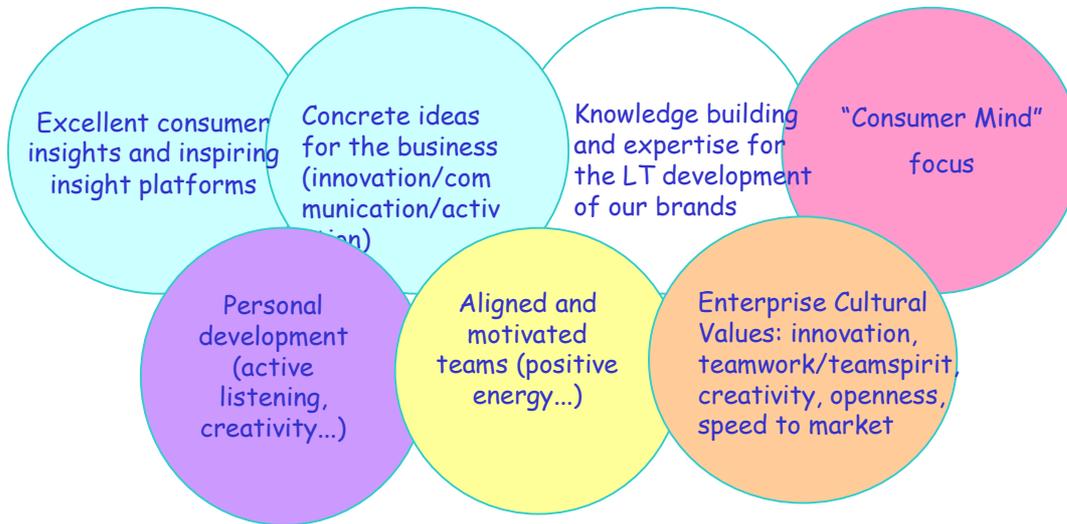
Great insight platforms are rich and ripe. They are inspiring, are expressed in clear consumer language, capture the essence of the insights, have an emotional hook and if possible a memorable headline.

Since we introduced the Insight Activator Process in Belgium, we have conducted about eight projects on different brands, with different types of objectives: generate new product innovations, new communication, activation ideas, drive brand positioning.

All these projects have been driven and facilitated by the CMI team. All team members have been trained to facilitate Insight Activator, and I have acted as a coach in all projects. It was a real challenge and “stretch” for the team. Some were afraid of not having the skills and experience required to facilitate this (especially running the big “mix” workshop and creativity session). But with appropriate training and coaching, and by working “step by step” through the different stages, they all managed to run these projects successfully, with great satisfaction from the whole team, starting with the decision maker.

As shown in figure 7, the benefits we have experienced with such a process are numerous. In the first place, it helped us to complete the task, by generating great consumer insights and platforms, and from that, concrete ideas for the business. Moreover, it provided the whole team with a strategic framework and a thorough understanding for the long-term development of our brands. Compared to a process where one single person has a brilliant idea, we have a very powerful team process where everybody feels aligned and motivated (the amount of positive energy is incredible throughout the process!). Needless to say that this process also increases consumer focus, is by the way beneficial for personal development (active listening, creativity) and company cultural values (innovations, team spirit, speed to market). And finally, a tremendous benefit CMI Managers is that it put us in front of the scene, with a strong leadership role!

Figure 7
INSIGHT ACTIVATORS : KEY BENEFITS



+ Leadership role for CMI

Step 5: Towards the “leadership for growth role” and virtuous circle of success for CMI

Implementing Reconnect with the consumers and in particular leading Insight Activators projects have been a springboard for our CMI role. While gaining confidence in the process, we started to apply the process with flexibility for other strategic reviews. Some projects require a full Insight Activator, others can be done with a lighter approach. With experience gained, we realized the approach can be done in modules, according to the objectives, and then it is less heavy (which is good for our Belgian market).

Here are a few examples of the type of projects we are now leading, using the philosophy and tools from the Insight Activator in a flexible way:

- Brand Reviews: we organize a one day meeting around our key brands, with multi-disciplinary teams (marketing, trade marketing, advertising agency, media agency, ACNielsen (retail panel agency), GfK (consumer panel agency), ad-hoc research agency). These one-day meetings take place out of the office, in a nice and inspiring location. The purpose is to review the brand thoroughly and to shape together the strategy and action plan for the future. Before the meeting, every team member is briefed by us in order to make a short, to the point presentation on the brand, using their knowledge and expertise domain. All these presentations happen that day. We facilitate the meeting in order to make everybody active and contribute throughout the day. We ensure we finish the meeting with a common

understanding of the key issues and next steps. Often, we organize direct consumer contact activities for every team member prior to the Brand Review in order to immerse them better in the subject.

- Brand Positioning Workshops: the purpose of this kind of Workshop is to review current positioning of the brand and to shape together the future positioning. This is particularly useful when we feel there is a gap between the current/desired positioning and current perception by the consumer. To make this kind of Workshop very productive, we also organize some type of connect activities prior or during that day.
- Consumer Target Workshops: for example, The Seniors. The purpose of this kind of Workshop is to gain better understanding of the consumer target (for example: Seniors, key for the future with the tremendous demographic shift!), and to define an action plan for our brands to better capitalize on the opportunities of this target group. Again, it is very powerful to have consumer connect activities either before or during the day.

We have run several strategic Day-outs of this kind, with considerable success. All team members are very enthusiastic and it is a very efficient way to involve a whole team around an important subject, and to design the strategy and action plan together.

In January 2004 we conducted an internal Satisfaction Survey in order to evaluate the satisfaction towards our CMI department in general, and in particular towards Reconnect with the Consumers. The results were very positive:

- Most added-value CMI department: For the question: “In what way did the CMI department bring added-value”, the top spontaneous answers were:
 - * Getting better Insights (33%)/Insight Activators process (29%)
 - * Nielsen/GFK Workshops (for Sales: 37%, Nielsen: 31%)
 - * Qualitative research (27%)
 - * Consumer Trends (19%)
 - * Getting to know the consumers (15%)
 - * Helped me to have direct consumer contacts (15%)
 - * Helps me to build the future of my brand (13%).

(Comment: Those who have already been involved in Insight Activators put it first.)

- Reconnect with the consumer. Big hits are:
 - * CMI: focus growth and building future of our brands, adding value for the business.
 - * Direct Consumer Contacts: new insights through direct consumer contacts. Gives marketers (and sales) a new and relevant point of view, with “real life” focus.
 - * Insight Activators: improved the quality of insights + turn insights into actionable ideas. CMI are leading IA projects effectively
 - * Conferences: added value for the business
 - * Brand Health Review Workshops

The results were very motivating for us as a strong recognition of the added value we were delivering to the business. On this basis, we further stretched our vision as illustrated at figure 8:

Figure 8
VISION CMI DEPARTMENT: VIRTUOUS CIRCLE



In 1999, when we merged the market research department from the three divisions, we were data provider (data/information). We gradually moved to Consulting Partner by focusing more on knowledge and advice. With Reconnect with the Consumers, we moved further to Consultant making impact by Connecting the business with the Consumers (CMI), and focusing on insights and ideas. Now, we want to stretch ourselves further, Leadership

for Growth, by leading team projects where we also ensure we generate concrete ideas and actions for the business.

This vision, and the related CMI department work plan, have been fully endorsed by the senior management, which is again a sign of trust and strong encouragement for our initiatives.

The fact of reviewing performance (like with the Satisfaction Survey) proved again useful at different levels: motivating feedback for the team, further build the department, gain support and commitment from Senior Management, give visibility to our department (all the users received the key results from the survey, as well as the derived vision and action plan). This is what we mean by building a “virtuous circle” of success...

OVERALL LEARNINGS: OUR SUCCESS FACTORS

Finally, what are the key success factors of this fantastic evolution of our role?

We can summarize in seven points:

1. Develop your vision and involve your team
2. Training, coaching (individual/team) and learning by doing. We have stressed the importance of new competencies, which are a real stretch for researchers!
3. Implement the changes step by step.
4. Give visibility to your department, the vision, objectives and concrete initiatives.
5. Use the right processes and tools. A real consumer driven culture with a clear process for consumer connection and consumer insights – alive within the whole organization!
6. Involve your research agencies ("partnership" approach.)
7. Move to the “virtuous circle”!

... Don't be afraid to change!

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