

Disruptive change

The new vision of today's research innovators

Necessity is no longer the mother of invention. The drivers of today's market research innovations frequently owe more to urgency and opportunity—aided by what technology now makes possible. We speak to four research iconoclasts who bring disruptive change to what research buyers often consider to be a languid and process-bound industry.

Neil Seeman spotted a rare untapped sample source for internet surveys and used the idea to found RIWI, a radically different internet sample provider. From time to time, any of us using the internet will type in what we believe is the correct URL of a website, only to find ourselves confronted with a directory-like page of ads suggesting other sites to visit. Behind these unlovely pages lies an elaborate system of redirections in place for these non-existent or parked URLs worldwide. But Seeman also noticed that these pages were no longer loved by advertisers and had become something of a wasteland on the web—albeit a high-traffic one.

Seeman's big idea was to use these to serve up very short but highly relevant surveys of between three and 12 questions to the visitors to these pages. "Pre-internet," he explains, "I was a newspaper editor. I was frustrated with pollsters delivering me data that were artificially and arbitrarily segmented by pre-defined

cells of researcher-defined interest (such as age or ethnicity or sex). I wanted the data as 'untouched' as possible."

His company patented and trademarked a method called 'random domain intercept technology' or RDIT™, which uses browser and IP location detection to ensure that the survey is geographically relevant and served in the web user's own language.

"The idea came, in part," Seeman says, "from a passion to solve that wicked problem of how to find global, non-incented respondents and data and a business recognition that the current advertisement models around parked domains' unintentional traffic were not being monetised as effectively as they once had been."

The question is, does it actually work as a sample source? Seeman is convinced it does, and he reports that demand has been "overwhelmingly positive and intense" from research companies, panel providers and research clients. It also recently took first prize in GreenBook's Insight Innovation competition. Curious to know whether it provided comparable results with conventional sources, I asked about benchmarks and was told this work was 'ongoing'—though Seeman alluded to several studies that compared well with previously published research data.

However, he comments, "It would be very unusual to expect head-to-head statistical correlation. The internet is literally our panel, and as such our panel is skewed young." Neither are panels free of bias—but it helps to know your biases in advance.

The short surveys that RIWI permits (the company has also trademarked the term 'Nano-Survey' to describe them) will not suit every research context either, but it is possible to daisy-chain surveys together for larger projects.

"We don't see ourselves as competitors to sub-sectors of data collection but rather as a plug-in, complementary, exclusive global data stream that can add to—not necessarily replace—social media listening or panels or river samples," Seeman says.

DYNAMIC PREDICTIONS

Over the years, research has been an assiduous borrower from other predictive disciplines, but Vittorio Raimondi, founder and CEO of 4Sight Associates, is possibly unique in drawing almost exclusively on models from the engineering-inspired management science discipline of system dynamics.

"We use system dynamics to allow data which can only be a reflection of today or the past, even when there are questions about the future, such as future consumption or usage," explains Raimondi.

“Often innovation can be misunderstood as bringing more complexity and sophistication. Our work really is a call to action for simplicity.”

“When you look at a standard insight report, you get pretty static data. By overlaying a dynamic model, we’re able to project those choices or attitudes into the future to create scenarios and allow current sentiments to become a more quantified explanation of potential futures.”

4Sight Associates would appear to the casual observer to be a market research company: it works with insight managers, market researchers and strategic planners; uses survey data, often tracking data, in conjunction with other internal or external sources of data; and then applies storytelling to communicate the findings. Yet Raimondi strongly identifies himself as a management consultant, not a market researcher.

There are valuable lessons for researchers in what he does to generate insight. First, he works with whatever data he is given and rarely starts by collecting fresh data. “We try to work with the client’s data—they usually have a lot of data. I like to work with consumer data as opposed to shopper or household panel data, because in many ways it is more actionable, ideally longitudinal data to understand consumer or shopper switching patterns.” This he will augment with hard data from other sources in building a model. But Vittorio is keen to point out that actionable insights come from effective communication.

“I initially started naively about 14 years ago to get into the field, applying it to social sciences—I thought it was a very powerful way to tell a story,” he says. “There was a time when McKinsey was using system dynamics, but it fell apart because they found it hard to replicate and make it an off-the-shelf tool. Often innovation can be misunderstood as bringing more complexity and sophistication. Our work really is a call to action for simplicity.”

The insight community is often perceived as being cornered in their field of data mining, removed from the need for decisions. [System dynamics] is innovative in how information is communicated and shared. I think it can help to bridge the gap between data and decisions, between insight people and marketing people.”

SOPHISTICATED SELF SERVICE

Stephen Phillips, co-founder of London agency Spring Research and a partner in Mesh Planning, can be considered something of a serial innovator. He anticipated attracting a few critics with his latest innovation, ZappiStore, a self-service platform for high-quality custom research. A lot of effort has gone into creating an architecture that will build entire surveys from a few simple choices presented to researchers, using a set of core modules that store within them knowledge of

different research techniques and applications.

The online ordering process collects all the detail needed to be able to design and then field the research within minutes of the order being placed. It then alerts the client when the survey is ready and presents them with a custom-built reporting environment to view the results.

“We sit in the space between DIY and full-service market research, offering great market research thinking but in DIY timescales and at DIY prices,” says Phillips.

As to where the idea came from, he says, “It was the realisation that not all innovation in market research should be around methodology and that some of it should be about understanding clients’ business pressures.”

Phillips was expecting the new service to appeal especially to ad agencies due to the speed of execution and the types of surveys offered, but so far the greatest interest has been from big companies.

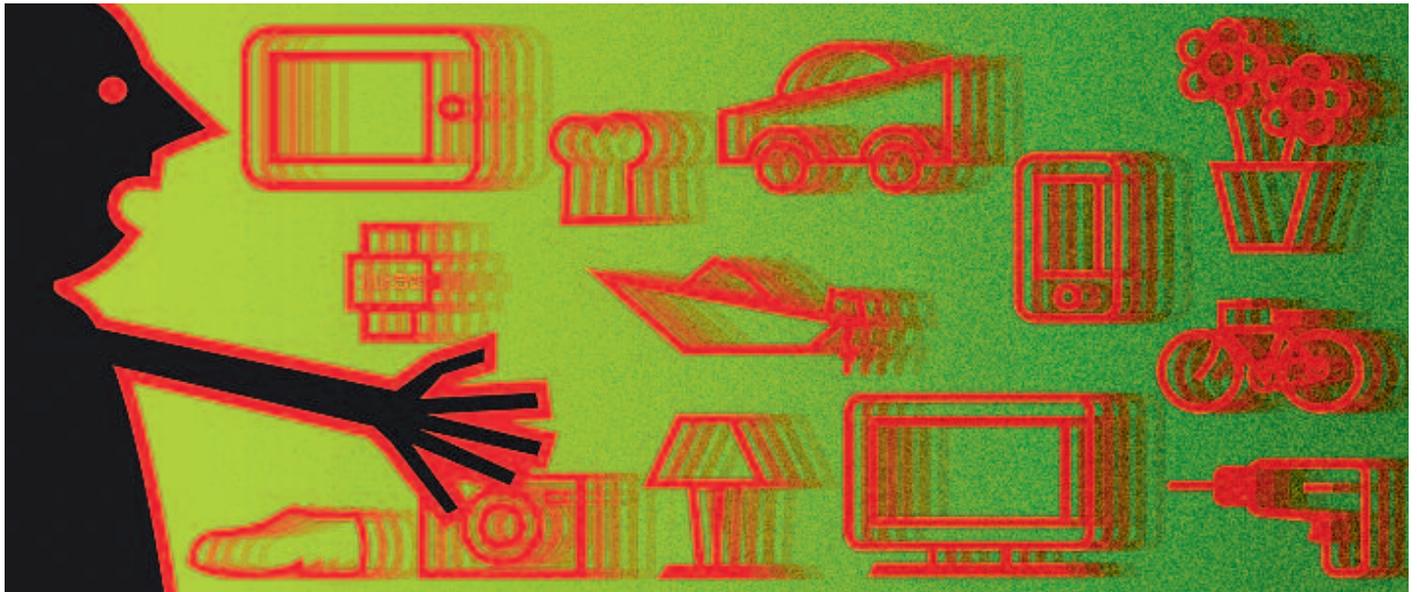
“I think this is down to the time pressures clients are facing,” he notes. “They want to move with the pace of today’s business but are trapped in a world of research agencies offering old-school timeframes.”

But the innovation doesn’t stop there. ZappiStore is about to introduce a research app store, which Phillips likens to Apple’s App Store, but for research companies rather than software developers.

SCIENCE FICTION

Our final innovator, Ari Popper, takes innovation a stage further: he has developed a set of methods that draw on science-fiction prototyping to drive innovation. Popper founded SciFutures to use this immersive landscape of projection and storytelling techniques to help companies seeking new futures for brands, products and services. He also uses the approach to help clients communicate radical or disruptive trends that are having a profound effect on their businesses or markets.

“The reason we believe it works is that it is grounded in the power of storytelling as a serious business tool,” Popper explains. “In the past, there has been the view in business that using stories was fanciful and lightweight, because the existing paradigm of business is the rational, materialistic,



MBA-inspired approach. However, *Harvard Business Review* has recently published two fantastic articles in praise of storytelling. So there is a massive paradigm shift taking place.”

Yet Popper also cites rational underpinnings for the use of what is, by definition, a fantastical approach to knowledge-generation, pointing to the work of neuroeconomist Paul Zak, who has studied the effect of the narrative arc on brain chemistry and the effect this has on observed behaviour.

“Our approach uses a classic storytelling device for our clients to understand the way the world is changing and create inspiring, uplifting futures for their organisations. All our work is grounded in science fact—it might be consumer insights, trends, emerging technologies that are highly disruptive.”

The idea came to Popper when he took time out to attend a science-fiction writing class at UCLA, an experience he enjoyed so much that he repeated it. “When I was sitting in class, I realised this mechanism for writing about the future is an incredibly powerful way to help clients understand where the world is going, potentially, and to get a really visceral sense of the role in the world they could and should play.”

Popper identifies a set of clients coming to him from areas of business such

as retail or broadcast TV where there is, as he describes it, “a sense of impending doom. These clients are very keen to try different things, because their industries are under pressure, and they need new ideas. And there has been interest from organisations that I never expected would be interested.” He cited one arm of the US military that wants to use the approach to look at future warfare scenarios.

Popper, too, declines to style his offer as market research (although this is his background). “This isn’t market research in a classic sense. It is about driving innovation, disruption and communication. There are commonalities with market research, but the overlap is quite small. We aren’t relying on consumers to get

involved, because the concepts we are dealing with are too abstract and too unformed for them to have a reliable opinion. It’s not about today but about ten years’ time or longer. As an approach, it sounds fanciful, because you use the word science fiction, but it is science fiction prototyping, so it is very grounded in the empirical and the facts of the day.”

If there are common threads to be found among these diverse innovations, they are the importance of communication, bringing simplicity and, above all, offering relevance to the business needs and pressures that companies face. For each of our innovators, the real necessity of their inventions is the willingness of market research to embrace change. **RW**



Neil Seeman of RIWI; **Vittorio Raimondi** of 4Sight Associates; **Stephen Phillips** of Spring Research, Mesh Planning and ZappiStore; and **Ari Popper** of SciFutures.

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