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Why Insights Impact is now Critical

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Back in February of last year – those halcyon days when we flew to and gathered at conferences, visited our clients in their offices and shared memorable times with colleagues from around the world – I wrote about the importance of our profession actually measuring the impact we have on our organizations. In what was (I thought) a cogent, data-driven article, I sought to show that consumer insights functions that measured their impact and actively marketed it around the enterprise were way more likely to have greater resources, larger budgets and more respect. What's more, they would be perceived as strategic partners or sources of competitive advantage, and would be treated as investments rather than as line items on the P&L.

So, why I am returning to the subject today?

Simply put, because impactful insights in the pandemic era have proved invaluable to companies whose markets have been turned upside down and who have to navigate in a world that is markedly different from anything we have seen before. Talk to the Head of Insights of any major organization and you will hear the same story: we are busier than we have ever been (to the point of exhaustion), we are more in demand by senior management, and we are at the center of strategic decision-making in a way that has eluded us in the past.

And the question they are all asking is "how can we ensure that this lasts?".

The answer may seem very simplistic, but that's because it really is simple. *We have to prove the value that we bring – over and over again.* Sad to say, but business is the natural home of the mantra "what have you done for me lately?". Where Consumer Insights are concerned, it would be all too easy for managements to slip back to the bad old ways of viewing research as a necessary evil – or worse, a cost centre. We have to prove that there is a real return on investment.

The only way in which we can do that is to measure that return – consistently, realistically and reliably.

About one-third of consumer insights functions in major corporations do this. They may not always be able to measure immediate financial return, but they can and do use surrogate measures that then can be modeled for likely ROI. Measures such as customer churn, brand awareness, likelihood to try, changes in customer satisfaction. And today, when such measures can be synthesized with enormous amounts of internal data (transactional, CRM, call centre volumes, social media trends), the ability to build ROI models is closer at hand than it has ever been .

So, based on the copious amounts of research that have been done by the likes of GRBN, ESOMAR, BCG and Cambiar, here are a few tips for those brave souls considering making the leap into impact measurement:

1. **Start small**. Choose project types where it is easier to show a more direct link to return on investment, then ensure that these projects are always measured.
2. **Set up a process**. There needs to be structure to the way in which impact is recorded. Design a process and establish it as a routine for all your team members. Templates for such a process can be found at www.roiofinsights.com. Insist on regular reporting intervals.
3. **Don't accept make-work measures**. A common trap into which many team members initially fall is to report on things such as how many projects they worked on this month/quarter. That's not what we are measuring! We want to know what impact their work had on the business.
4. **Embed impact measurement into the departmental culture**. Everyone in the team needs to know, understand and believe why impact measurement is important. It has to become part of the culture. This will involve investment in both training and coaching.
5. **Align with other data analytics functions**. As you become more and more sophisticated in measuring impact – and as you employ it to measure more and different types of work – you will need to tap into other sources of data and to employ more complex modeling. Bring analytics on side in this endeavour.
6. **Embed measurement and insights activation into your stakeholder relationships**. It becomes much more difficult to measure impact unless there is a shared understanding among stakeholders and researchers as to what the real business issue is, how different scenarios would impact the business, and what the action criteria and standards will be for decision-making.
7. **Bring your agencies into the picture**. Let them understand not only how important this is to you but also how they can help. Bring them into the feedback loop so that they can also analyse how their input contributes to impact and how they can improve on this in the future.
8. **Ensure that senior management knows you are measuring impact**. Let them understand that you take very seriously the value that you bring to moving the business forward. Get on their calendars for regular meetings where you showcase key projects and the impact they had on decision-making and the enterprise as a whole.

9. **Get Finance on your side**. If you can convince the CFO, with real numbers, that you are bringing a real return to the investment in insights, you will have a real ally in the board room.
10. **Spread the news**! Don't only go up the line, let the organization as a whole know the value that you are bringing. Market your triumphs widely through whatever internal marketing channels work best in your company. Infographics embedded in emails have been found to work wonders in this respect.

In many organizations, both commercial and otherwise, the current global crisis has opened up an opportunity for the insights function to move into a much more strategic role. Now is the time to cement that role and it starts with impact measurement and impact communication.