



the starr conspiracy



Why marketers should give a shit about data



AND THE DATA THEY SHOULD ACTUALLY GIVE A SHIT ABOUT — A PROFESSIONAL ARTICLE

By Aaron Delgaty

Why research matters to marketers

Like Sherlock Holmes says, you can't make bricks without clay. As it was with Holmes, data is the marketer's clay. With it, we build the bricks of durable relationships between consumers and brands.

Building a brand is all about building relationships.

- The work of branding is a science of connection: determining the fundamental attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that drive individual entities (be they consumers or brands) and putting them into dialogue in such a way that chemistry is likely to happen.
- It's the art of matchmaking, finding the balance between romance and practicality that creates a lasting relationship.
- It's the study of context, what is going on at the ground level, the personal, organizational, and cultural pressures and opportunities that shape the everyday world in which we live and work.



If branding is connection all the way down, data is the key to understanding, shaping, and profiting from those relationships. If you don't have a robust and active research practice to collect and analyze that data, you're fucked.



Data you should actually give a shit about



RESEARCH
IS ONLY AS
GOOD AS THE
QUALITY OF
ITS DATA.



This begins with the research design: the data you set out to collect has to be actually meaningful.

Meaningful data is that which helps you — or the reader, the buyer, the shareholder, etc. — make better sense of a situation, make better choices within that situation, and take the next best step. Meaningful data needs to be progressive; it needs to push our understanding further (even if that's uncomfortable).

If you are conducting research just to reiterate something you already know, you're wasting your time.

If someone is charging you to conduct research on a line of questioning you already know the answers to, they are robbing you.



Understanding the context in which you are conducting research is essential to finding data that will actually be meaningful to you and your stakeholders.

You need insight into conditions on the ground, the expertise to know what ground has already been covered by other research projects, and a feel for which lines of inquiry will reshape that ground. **Go bold or go home.**

Think about it this way. Let's say you hire an agency like ours to conduct a study for you. Every time you ask a question in a survey, it's roughly \$500 all in for design, collecting the data, analysis, and presenting the findings.

There aren't any stupid questions — that old adage from elementary school is true. However, there are questions we already know the answers to, or don't really need to know the answers to. If you are asking a question that has already been answered elsewhere, or a question that nobody is holding their breath waiting to have answered, you've just wasted \$500.

We worked with a client recently to design thought leadership based on a study they had commissioned from another agency. The client paid the other agency about \$35,000 for a 10-question survey sent to 1000 respondents. A little steep, but maybe they were high-impact questions that really turned new ground.

The top headline from the research? 78% of respondents feel worried about money.

Wow. I could have told you that for a cup of coffee. In fact, anyone who has ever had to pay a bill could tell you with a high degree of certainty that a majority of people worry about money. Needless to say, the client wasn't happy, and we had to scramble to salvage the other agency's mistake.

That people worry about money is a given. What specifically are they worried about would have been a better question.

Expertise, understanding the context, and being in the flow of the conversation help you ask the right questions to the right people at the right time. It's what enables a researcher to identify the stuff that people don't know but need to know and want to know, and to have the best chance of finding that stuff.

No study is perfect. I've never encountered a real research project that has gone off without a hitch, but I've also never had a study that ended without data that was new, surprising, and reshaped the conversation.

If you set out with the right plan, you will find meaningful data. And if you have meaningful data, you can communicate something worthwhile.





Planning meaningful research (without biasing the study like a hack)

Let's talk about creating research plans that lead to meaningful data.

Sometimes, clients ask if we can guarantee a specific research outcome — statistics that say this or testimonials that say that — in order to support some pre-planned campaign. Can we? Yes. Will we? Absolutely not.

Data is only as valuable as the trust placed in it. In order to be trustworthy, the data must be collected with integrity.

If a research vendor promises you specific results, run.



Meaningful data is not predetermined outcomes. **Meaningful data is data that adds meaningfully to the conversation**, which helps stakeholders confirm a suspicion, alleviate anxiety, or see something in a new light.



Meaningful data should help a stakeholder take the next best step.

If you engineer results, your data will not reflect reality on the ground, and you will have done nothing to mitigate risk. You'll also be an asshole. Here are four steps to get you to meaningful data. It begins with **meaningful research questions**.



A good research question is focused enough to be answerable but open enough to not be binary.

This is an example of a bad research question: "Do middle-class Americans worry about money?"

It's bad for two reasons: 1) you can answer the question with a yes or no (it's binary), and 2) it's already pretty obvious that the answer is yes, given what we know about life in general (it's not interesting).

This is how you wind up with a headline like "78% of respondents feel worried

about money." If you can imagine the response to your answer being "no shit," it's a bad research question.

Conversely, here is a good research question: "What are the major pain points middle-class Americans experience when trying to save money?"

This question assumes a problem — that a significant percentage of the population experiences difficulties with trying to save money. (A pretty safe bet!) The question digs deeper, exploring something we don't know: what creates these difficulties? We can probably make some assumptions — unexpected bills,

lack of financial education, etc. — and we can validate those assumptions, but we also leave ourselves open to find things we didn't expect. In short, we don't know what the answer will be.

As a rule of thumb, I recommend structuring any research study around three big research questions. Everything you do in the study — every article you read or survey question you ask — should contribute to answering one or more of those three questions. Three questions keeps the study focused, efficient, and — most importantly — feasible.



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Second, you need the right methodology to collect meaningful data.

There are lots of research methodologies out there, but not all are equally suited for addressing the questions you want to answer. It takes a lot of trial and error to find the right method, and experienced researchers generally have an extensive bag of tricks to get to the heart of the matter — and the know-how to get there.

Have you ever taken a survey that has an open-ended question in it? “Do you worry about money? Yes/No.” Followed by “If so, why? If not, why not?”

You sigh. Maybe you type out a sentence. Maybe you just bail on the survey (that’s what I would do).

This is a bad match between method and question. Open-ended questions generally are not suitable for surveys.

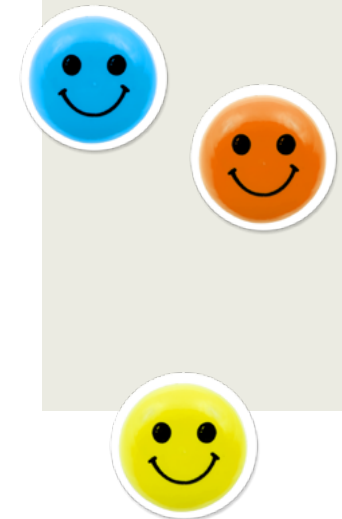
Surveys tend to be taken by people with a low threshold for bullshit.

Maybe they are in a hurry, taking the survey in ten minutes of downtime they have in-between meetings. Likely they are on a mobile device. Do they really want to type out a long answer to your question? No. No they don’t.

If you make the question mandatory, you’ll likely get a bunch of “okays” and other one-word answers that don’t really make sense but do fulfill the requirement for having some text in the box. If you don’t make it mandatory, the majority will just skip it. Either way, you’ll end up with little meaningful data.

But what if you don’t know what makes people worried about money? This is a great use case for an in-depth interview. Sit someone down and ask them. People are generally much more comfortable and willing to talk about their experience, rather than write about it.

Put both methods together. After you run three to five interviews, you’ll probably have enough pain points to populate a survey question. Now you can ask, “Which of these obstacles to saving money are the most significant to you? Pick your top three.” Now you have a well-rounded, meaningful answer to your original question.





Third, once you collect all of your data, you need to interpret it in a meaningful way.

Effective data analysis is all about patterns and levers.

Patterns are similar themes that appear across questions and lines of inquiry. Let's say you notice that survey respondents generally endorsed external obstacles — inflation, cost of living, compensation stagnation — to saving money as more significant than internal obstacles - self control, impulse buys, lack of education, etc.. You recall a similar tendency from the interviews you conducted prior to the survey.

Now you have an insight to report: respondents tend to feel external obstacles are more detrimental to saving money than internal obstacles.

Levers are respondent characteristics you can isolate, combine, and segment in the data in order to cross-examine patterns in some meaningful way. Robust segmentation is key to having good levers.

If you collect data on the age of respondents, for example, you may find that the overall trend between internal and external factors is more or less extreme for certain generations. You may find that younger generations have the complete opposite perspective. If you are planning an intervention, cross-examining patterns is critical to gathering meaningful insight.

A meaningful finding is one that makes you go, "huh, that's interesting." Analysis is scientific, but it's also subjective. It comes down to an understanding of your stakeholder audience and what will most shift their ways of thinking and impact their lives.

Meaningfulness is a matter of context.



4

Finally, you need to communicate your meaningful insights in a meaningful way.

I spent three years doing research to write a 300-page dissertation that now sits on a library server, basically untouched. If my intended audience was work tech leaders, a dissertation was not the right way to communicate the data I found.

At the end of the day, your data means little if it's not accessible to the people who need it. Once more, context matters: what formats do your stakeholders prefer? What is their background knowledge? What is their common language and will it seem like jargon to them? When do they typically have time to consume new information? How much time do they have to consume it?

As much as I like big data sets and complex graphs, I've found that the average client really just wants to get the point. My clients' stakeholders often have even less patience. Executive summaries and topline findings are the name of the game.

Sometimes you may want to — or have to — push your stakeholders outside of their comfort zone. That's fine (and exciting, I think). However, don't lose sight of accessibility. Ultimately, the whole point of you doing a study is to share what you learn.



Picking the right partner

Creating meaningful data can seem like a daunting task. It is. Research is a specialized skill set, and one that can't be easily replicated or replaced by an automated solution.

The best way to learn how to do effective research is to do it. Mess it up. Try again. Do it better. Mess up. Adjust. Improve. My expertise has been cultivated from a long history of fuck-ups.

But not everyone can spend over a decade trying to get it right. If you want to bypass the steep learning curve, your best bet is to hire an expert partner.

To that end, here are **five research questions** you can use to find the right partner for you.



W
Z
O

Tell me about a time when a research project went wrong, and what did you do?

Right off the bat, test your research partner-to-be. Every experienced researcher has horror stories of research projects that went off the rails or produced results that were not what anyone expected (and not in a good way).

A researcher who does not have an answer to this question either doesn't have a lot of experience, or is trying to bullshit you with a false sense of reliability. Either way, I would not recommend moving forward.

Things go wrong when you do research. That's what happens when you're exploring something new. The important thing is not the misfires in the process but how a professional responds to those misfires.

Smooth sailing or rough seas, there's always something interesting to comment on when you're doing real research. That's just what happens when you're exploring something new.



TWO

What do you know about our industry?

Your context matters. If you are going to attempt to learn something new about your industry, you need an expert partner who also understands that context.

No researcher is an expert on every industry or subject area. If you are in a super niche industry or deal in a super specialty product or service, it's unlikely you will find someone who knows your business as well as you do. However, you can find someone versed enough in the broader market in which you play to be an effective partner.

I don't generally do research in international non-profits, so I wouldn't be a good partner for UNICEF. However, I've worked long enough in the B2B Work Tech space — and keep up on the latest research and gossip — to know what I'm doing or get rapidly up to speed with a client.



THREE

Can I see an example report?

Ask your partner-to-be to show their homework. They should be able to provide an anonymized research report or topline slide deck from a previous client.

Look at the kinds of insights provided. Do they seem meaningful to you? Do you think the same depth of insight would be meaningful to your stakeholders?

If you look over a topline report and see just a bunch of big stats with no interpretation or application, that's usually a bad sign. Anyone can read a graph and parrot a big stat — 78% of respondents worry about money. If you are paying for a research service, you should be paying them to dig deeper than surface level.



FOUR

What is your design process for surveys, interview guides, etc.?

You should be looking for an answer that indicates the design process is collaborative. **Collaboration is necessary for two practical reasons:**

1. While your research partner should have expertise in your industry and market, they are probably not an expert on your specific business context. They need that context to create a meaningful research design and determine meaningful insights. If they aren't asking for that insight, you'll most likely run into trouble down the road.
2. Not to be alarmist, but if your research partner is willing to collaborate with you on a research design, that means you're getting an original project. If you are co-creating survey questions or suggesting prompts for an interview guide, you are far less likely to receive a pre-baked report or — worse — a recycled study from a previous client.



FIVE

Can you promise me specific results?

This is an ethics test and, if you've read the section above on planning meaningful research, you should already know the correct answer to this question: NO.

Research is unpredictable to a degree. The methods should be sound, but the results are unknown until after the study is concluded. That's the whole point of doing original research — finding out what you don't know.

A trustworthy research partner should be upfront about the risks and rewards of original research.

If a research partner guarantees a certain outcome, it's either because they plan to ask questions so basic that the outcome is already known (see example above), or because they plan to ask leading questions or otherwise engineer the results in your favor. Regardless, run.

(If, however, that's what you're looking for in a research partner, call someone else. We're not interested.)



Back to building relationships with data



**WITHOUT
CLAY, YOU
CAN'T BUILD
ANY BRICKS.**

In this analogy, data is the clay, and relationships are the bricks.

Teaching your stakeholders something new, whether that's validating their concerns, reshaping their perspective, or opening a whole new channel of thought, is valuable. It's a gift.

Offering meaningful data, faithfully collected, rigorously analyzed, and well-presented, creates lasting relationships between brands and their stakeholders, their customers, and their prospects. Meaningful data provokes thought, inspires innovation, communicates ideals, and builds affinity.

Those who communicate meaningful data become themselves meaningful and thus someone worth creating and maintaining a relationship with. The same is true for brands and consumers (and marketing teams and shareholders); a perspective that leads instead of follows, that understands the context and how to work with it, and that is, at the end of the day, interesting enough to pay attention to.





The Starr Conspiracy is an Experience Agency that creates defining moments across the CX spectrum, including brand, marketing, sales, product, and customer success. We are Work Tech industry experts, and when you work with us, you see the value faster as we co-create better experiences for employees, customers, and shareholders.

Strategy

- Brand strategy
- Positioning
- Brand & product naming
- Go-to-market strategy
- Growth strategy
- CX and EX strategies
- Integrated marketing strategy

Message

- Competitive evaluation
- Persona development
- Applied messaging
- Enablement
- Testing and validation

Brand

- Logo & visual identity
- Brand & style guidelines
- Brand & competitive audits
- Collateral development
- Event experience

Research

- Brand/buyer research
- Customer analysis
- CX and EX research
- Competitor analysis
- Conjoint pricing analysis
- Buyer journey mapping

Development

- Website design
- Wireframe development
- User interface (UI)
- User experience (UX)

Content

- Content strategy
- Editorial Calendar
- Thought leadership
- Content marketing
- Video storytelling
- Sales enablement
- Promotional copy

Design

- Campaign development
- Outdoor
- Broadcast & video
- Packaging
- Custom photography
- Custom illustration

Digital

- Media planning & strategy
- Reporting & analytics
- Media management
- Vendor relations
- SEO strategy & execution
- Comprehensive audits

Public Relations/Analyst Relations

- Pitching
- Product & company launches
- Speaker placements
- Awards and sponsorships
- Contributed articles
- Pitch deck development
- PR audits & strategy recos
- Media monitoring
- Media training
- Media list development
- Topic research

