

# Tailor-made for us

**Are agencies charging clients a premium price for poor service or can clients expect more? The debate is heated but solutions are closer than we think.** By Robert Heeg

**W**hat's the difference between a good agency and a bad one? At the recent WIN meeting in Paris, Mark Whiting, director of marketing intelligence services at Moët Hennessy, gave a couple of examples of outstanding service.

“Rather than sending the usual proposal document, an agency prepares a hand-made scrapbook illustrating their approach: all the way through the subsequent project, we have the impression that the research is tailor-made for us.

“A complex and highly political new product evaluation is conducted in three Asian countries. The report is only 25 PowerPoint pages long, but of such high quality and pertinence, not a single point of clarification is raised by the brand teams. It seems every word has been chosen with care. At the end, the brand team spontaneously applauds.”

He has examples of poor service too. For instance, an agency that comes to pitch for business: “They think Hennessy is a whisky and can only name one of our champagne brands – the one in our company name!” And this year, a ‘flipped’ code during recruitment for an online survey produced catastrophic post-test results. “The agency does not spot the mistake until we question the results. The fieldwork has to be redone. Would I recommend these agencies to fellow research buyers? Not in a million miles!”

## Shared responsibility

Elizabetta Osta, head of customer insights at Barclaycard, says agencies should at least get the basics right but warns that there is a growing knowledge gap at the junior level with research staff.

Silke Münster (director knowledge, insight & planning, Coca-Cola GmbH) says ISO will help but it won't solve all the quality issues: “I am aware of time and money pressures, but if we all keep reducing quality, we end up with no business at all. ISO is not enough.” Does this mean that clients can only trust qualitative research where they can actually see what's going on for themselves?

Vinay Ahuja, associate director consumer & market knowledge, Procter & Gamble International SA, says quality is a shared responsibility, but adds that it is important

to demarcate the areas of responsibility. He pleads for a common industry framework and a portfolio of content-dependent criteria.

The heated discussion that ensues makes it clear that this subject is critical. Education is regarded as inferior to the level of 20 years ago, with one research director at a major beverage company commenting that most issues with agencies are people-related and that turnover of people at research agencies is increasing with complete teams changing within a couple of years. Another client says he is particularly disappointed with the top players. “After all, we're paying a premium there, so they should at least get the basics right.”

## Can of worms

If agency quality is to be measured, what should be measured, how should it be measured and who should do it?

Working with some kind of points system could open up a can of worms regarding legal issues. Others simply ask for certification of researchers, just like in financial services. However, this doesn't always work in other professions. “Look at lawyers!” quips one researcher only half-jokingly. Others favour an online database to which all buyers can contribute.

Some initiatives are already in place, but often at an individual and voluntary level and many providers send out questionnaires to their clients to check satisfaction after each survey.

Laurent Etienne, market research lead at Syngenta Crop Protection, says the process must be managed by the client too, adding that his team always conducts appraisals informing agencies what they have done well and what needs to be improved.

## Know your clients

ESOMAR president Frits Spangenberg acknowledges the fact that trust and responsibility must be regained. “After all, this is about multi-million-euro decisions.” ISO does not prevent silly mistakes, but one thing is essential: “Use your brains, and know your clients.”



Mark Whiting



Silke Münster



Vinay Ahuja



Elisabetta Osta



Frits Spangenberg



Véronique Jeannin

Münster says that buyers sometimes do ask the impossible, adding, 'It's in all our interests that we evaluate standards together.'

What should be measured? On the agency side, innovation, creativity and technical skills as well as price competitiveness are seen as vital. On the client side, framing the business problem clearly, a good brief and management of the commission are key to quality. The choice of methodology and levels of data collection, process management, analysis and interpretation must also be evaluated.

### Next steps

ESOMAR will create a taskforce to take this initiative forward to collect, collate and analyse what's already happening in the industry and build a clear vision of what defines quality. There should be a two-way process to evaluate both agencies and clients on the value chain at the project level, as well as the overall relationship and the building blocks of projects. There will be a call for volunteers – agency, client and associations – possibly with a launch at the ESOMAR Congress in September. Participation will secure access to the information gathered.

Some fear that this could take several years but ESOMAR's director general Véronique Jeannin says it won't take as long if the industry views this as important: "Let's prepare a taskforce, and we will have results earlier." ■

## The WIN agenda

**Research leaders agree that raising quality, standards and methods are at the top of the industry's agenda.**

Senior representatives of the market research industry confirmed at the recent WIN (World Industry Network) meeting that they want ESOMAR to set up a process to evaluate and improve research quality. Industry leaders at the WIN meeting, held in Paris on 15 and 16 April, said quality is critical, and agreed that ESOMAR should organise a yearly survey to assess the performance of clients and providers.

At the meeting, attended by industry leaders from the client and supplier side as well as a selected list of association leaders representing the biggest research markets, participants also supported the strengthening of global standards including self-regulation and enforcement initiatives, especially where respondent and consumer protection are concerned. It was also agreed that the industry should have a process to comment on international surveys that come under media scrutiny because of questionable quality or methodology.

Another area for action is to expand the tracking of industry statistics to include the broader market information sector.

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