A point of view



Welcome to the

Age of Intelligence

Welcome to the Age of Intelligence | We Live Context

To be successful, businesses need to understand their customers and their market, and invest in research. But every industry evolves. So farewell market research. Welcome to the Age of Intelligence (AoI).

Summary

This paper is intended for decisions-makers in business, especially but not exclusively, marketers. It explains how reframing market research as intelligence opens our eyes to maximising the return on investment. It covers :-

01 Here's what... has really changed

02 So what.... are the implications?

03 Now what... do we do differently?

AoI = HI + AI

(human intelligence and all intelligence including artificial. NOTE: all 'research' is artificial).

Scope: Speed: Symbiosis

In the AoI we have a much wider range of intelligence to draw on – NOTE: data is any form of information not just numbers – and we can identify synergies and opportunity much faster.

AI is important but it is not definitive. It relies on other technologies and asking the right questions. Most importantly it needs human intelligence – only we can apply context, creativity and inspiration to act.

This can feel overwhelming but it's a fantastic opportunity to take intelligence to the heart of decision-making across the whole business – an opportunity to create the future.

What will it take to thrive in the Aol, what do you need to do differently?

01 Start with the issue (even hypotheses) but keep an open mind

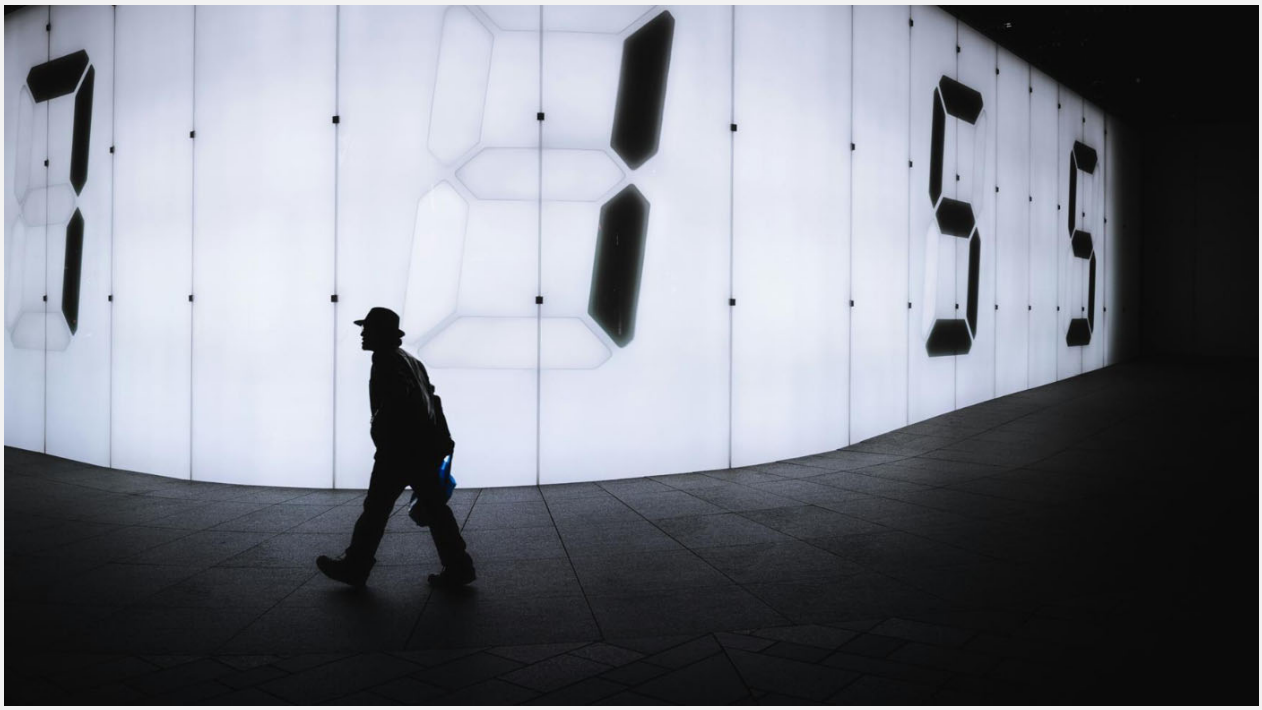
02 Begin with what you already know or can easily find out

03 Watch/Listen/Ask/Experiment (forget qual/quant)

04 Insist that the use of AI is 100% transparent

05 Work with the best – creative, experienced and independent

06 Change the way you 'debrief'



Some questions that are answered: -

- Implications for structure and business model
- Right levels of investment
- Who will thrive in the AoI

Knowing your market, customers and potential opportunities provides competitive advantage, it is an investment with a cost.

The challenge is to maximize the return on that investment by taking advantage of the Age of Intelligence.

00

Introduction

"Boldly go into the Matrix"

In March 2009

In March 2009 I was asked to contribute to the 50th Anniversary edition of 'Market Leader' the journal of the UK Marketing Society. It was a huge honour to be featured alongside such names as Philip Kotler, David Aaker, Patrick Barwise, Kevin Lane Keller, Rita Clifton and Jeremy Bullmore to name just some of the people I looked up to and from whom I had learned. My brief was to make some predictions about where the digital age (how quaint that sounds now) was taking marketing. That edition of the journal with my article, "Boldly go into the Matrix", is still available on-line if anyone cares to read it. Of the eight predictions I made – with varying degrees of accuracy – there is one I felt fairly confident about.

> "Market research will cease to exist in its current form. There will be applied intelligence and experimentation.

If you can test what people actually do, why would you ask them what they think they do?

If the designer (or design team) can find out anything they need themselves, why do they need researchers? If consumer behaviour can be understood, measured and attributed to a cause much more effectively (not perfectly) then it becomes analytics and just a sub-set of applied intelligence. If you can experiment and test market prototypes, why would you research concepts? If you can test what people actually do, why would you ask them what they think they do?

Back in 2009

Back in 2009 very few people in business and marketing had really grasped the forthcoming impact of machine learning, AI and big data.

But we had the internet and search engines and it seemed very clear to me that the Market Research industry was going to evolve again. To keep it simple the first age of Market Research was all about testing, usage and attitude, quantitative and qualitative research. There were Market Research companies selling to Market Research Managers within the clients. In the late 1980's came the age of Consumer Insight, the search for actionable and inspirational findings that could be found not just in conventional market research but in many other places – history, trends, semiotics, product development, competition. Indeed the enlightened saw insight as the fusion, the collision, of different sources of insight that create the nucleus of an idea. Market Research Managers were rebranded as 'Head of Insight' and the range of 'consumer insight' tools and purveyors exploded.

'Intelligence' can rewire the way we see market research

Testing, mass observation, quantitative and qualitative methodology, primary and secondary research and insight all still have a role to play but the world has changed. Just as the word 'Insight' changed the way we saw market research, 'Intelligence' can rewire the way we see market research and consumer insight and open our eyes to the new possibilties and opportunities. Artificial Intelligence is the most talked about 'game-changer' and its potential is still in its infancy but AI can only perform within a growing eco-system of technology and data alongside many other sources of 'intel'. Until now we thought of data – which by the way means all forms of information not just numbers – as something to be collected from observation or empirical experimentation. We now have synthetic data (set to be a multi $ billion industry) which, as the name implies, is confected.

HI + AI = RoI

So, we should not be worried by artificial intelligence or synthetic data, nor any of the forms of data analysis whether that be big data, trends, motivations or culture. We have another kind of intelligence – human intelligence – and that can do something that artificial intelligence of any kind cannot do.

Humans have memories and ambitions, that gives us the ability to judge and inspire others. We have the ability to understand and apply context. AI can analyse quintillions of pieces of information in a second, its ability to process data and spot patterns is vastly superior to the human brain. But if you ask AI it will tell you the one thing it cannot do is see or apply context.

The Age of Intelligence is not defined by AI, even recognising that almost any data at some level is artificial. The Age of Intelligence is the opportunity to combine human and artificial intelligence to create the future.

And context is everything.



All market research is artificial, always was and always will be

This might all sound scary but in one sense it is nothing new. All market research is artificial, always was and always will be. If you take two of the most conventional forms of market research, surveys and focus groups, people are being paid to remember what they think and do. They are answering questions prepared or moderated by a human who, however expert, cannot escape their own subjectivity. You can go to extreme lengths to recreate the actual situation relevant to the study, you can go full ethnographic and talk to people in the actual moment but you will never fully overcome the Hawthorne effect – participants change behaviour when observed – or avoid unconscious observer bias. When it comes to so-called 'quantitative research' we are aggregating and segmenting data sets where the commonly accepted statistical significance of a finding is 95%. That means one in twenty times the finding can be plum wrong.



As Peter Drucker says:-

The only way to predict the future is to create it.

So how does this make you feel?

As noted right up front this paper is written for people who run businesses and/or are responsible for important business decisions in any industry sector, especially strategic and marketing decisions, who believe knowing more about your market is a source of competitive advantage. Any of you reading this will fall somewhere on a spectrum of possible responses:-

Concerned	Confident
Panicked	Prepared
Wary	Can't wait
Intimidated	Inspired
Overwhelmed	Optimistic



I am going to assume that most of you will agree with me that the Age of Intelligence is a fantastic opportunity – or at the very least will hope it can be – and will aspire to be on the right side of the spectrum.

I will not assume (but would hope) that most of you see this as an opportunity to do much more for the same level of investment in what we used to call Market Research. But this will depend on the context for your particular business and you may see this as an opportunity to do the same for less and ideally more for less – faster, better, cheaper.

For some of the smaller and emerging businesses out there the Age of Intelligence levels the playing field with the bigger legacy businesses and that's exciting.

The engine of economic growth are the disruptors, the SME sector. Every $ trillion behemoth started small – Apple started in a garage. Think what more Steve Jobs could have achieved with his considerable HI+AI.

So, how do we get to the right side of the spectrum? By breaking it down into:-

01	Here's What	– what has really changed? Let's cut through all the noise and hype and identify what's different.
02	So What?	– what does that enable you to do? How will this show up in your business?
03	Now What?	– Specifically in regards to what we used to call market research or consumer insight, what do you need to do differently?

01

Here's what...

What has really changed? This can be summarised under three headings: Scope, Speed, Synergies and Symbiosis.

1.1

Scope

There are vast array of sources of intelligence. The list below is by no means exhaustive but it is wide enough to make the point. In no particular order:-

Surveys (On-line and face to face)	Tracking Studies
Depth Interviews	Customer Satisfaction/complaints
Front-line employee feedback	Mix testing and market modelling
Customer innovations workshops	Cultural and Semiotic studies
Multi-Variant Market Segmentation	Social listening (Social Media Scraping)
Senior management customer/market Safaris	On-line (e.g. Google analytics) SEO, GEO
Secondary Data and Published Data	Academic Research Studies and papers
Socio-demographic census data	Behavioural Studies
Brand ambassadors/Market Mavens	Mass asynchronous on-line interviews
Focus groups	Trend Analysis
A/B Testing	Usage and Attitude
AI Generated Personas	Synthetic data
Mass Observations	Customer diaries
Ethnographic	E-commerce Testing
Conjoint/Trade-off	Proposition Testing
UEx studies	Panel Data

Each have their strengths and weaknesses and, as will be explained, context will determine which are used and how. It would be an interesting exercise to tick the ones you do use and the value you think you get (and add any you think this list misses).

> But to be quite clear, if you still rely on surveys, focus groups and tracking studies you will find yourself on the wrong side of the spectrum.

1.2

Speed

Not in every case but in many instances the speed at which you can harvest intelligence, analyse and apply it has increased a lot and is accelerating. Some intelligence can be gathered in real time.

1.3

Synergies and Symbiosis

Advanced analytics and AI have made a huge difference to our ability to spot the patterns from different data sets. Data, remember, is any kind of information, it could be data from a few chats with customers, a co-creation session or expert opinion on trends and cultural context. As things stand at the moment, only experienced humans can create the synergies and spot the potential symbiosis from all kinds of data.



Take one example.

The growth of inner-city "experience" nights out driven by a shift from traditional clubbing toward curated, immersive, and social, rather than purely alcohol-focused, activities. Technology even with AI would not have seen that opportunity from various data sets. The 'data' was all there but it took some entrepreneurs in the night-time economy (driven by economic necessity and ambition) to see the opportunity.

02

So what...

...is the opportunity?

2.1

Take full advantage of all the tools and intelligence at our disposal.

Big data is a much used term and much misunderstood. ‘Big’ implies vast quantities of data meaning we have to rely on technology to help us make sense of it. (How often have you heard the complaint, “too much data, not enough information”?). But ‘volume of data is only one aspect of Big Data. The first of 5 ‘V’s’. The speed, or velocity, at which we get data is the second ‘V’.

The point has already been made that ‘data’ is any information, not just numbers. So Variety is the third ‘V’. Veracity refers to the accuracy and trustworthiness of data. The final ‘V ‘is the most important – Value. How actionable is the data, what business value does it create?

In the Age of Intelligence we can take full advantage of Big Data:-

V	V	V	V	V
Volume	Velocity	Variety	Veracity	Value

2.2

Take intelligence to the heart of decision-making.

Making better business decisions has always been the goal of market research, you see it on the websites of most of the research agencies, 'We help you make better choices'. In the Age of Intelligence with more Scope we are able to make even better informed decisions.

With the ability to see the Synergies we are able to identify better, fresher options. And most exciting of all, with Speed we can bring this to the heart of decision making.

2.3

Make Intelligence available across the business.

There is no reason why market research or 'consumer insight' is not available and of value across a business. So in this respect, the Age of Intelligence signals more of a change of mindset from "Marketing brief Market Research" to "the application of intelligence to connected business decision-making". As will be covered below, this relies on a different way to brief for intelligence, one that is more issue-led. Nonetheless, sourcing intelligence using Scope, Speed and Synergies makes it of more value to a wider range of business issues and functions.

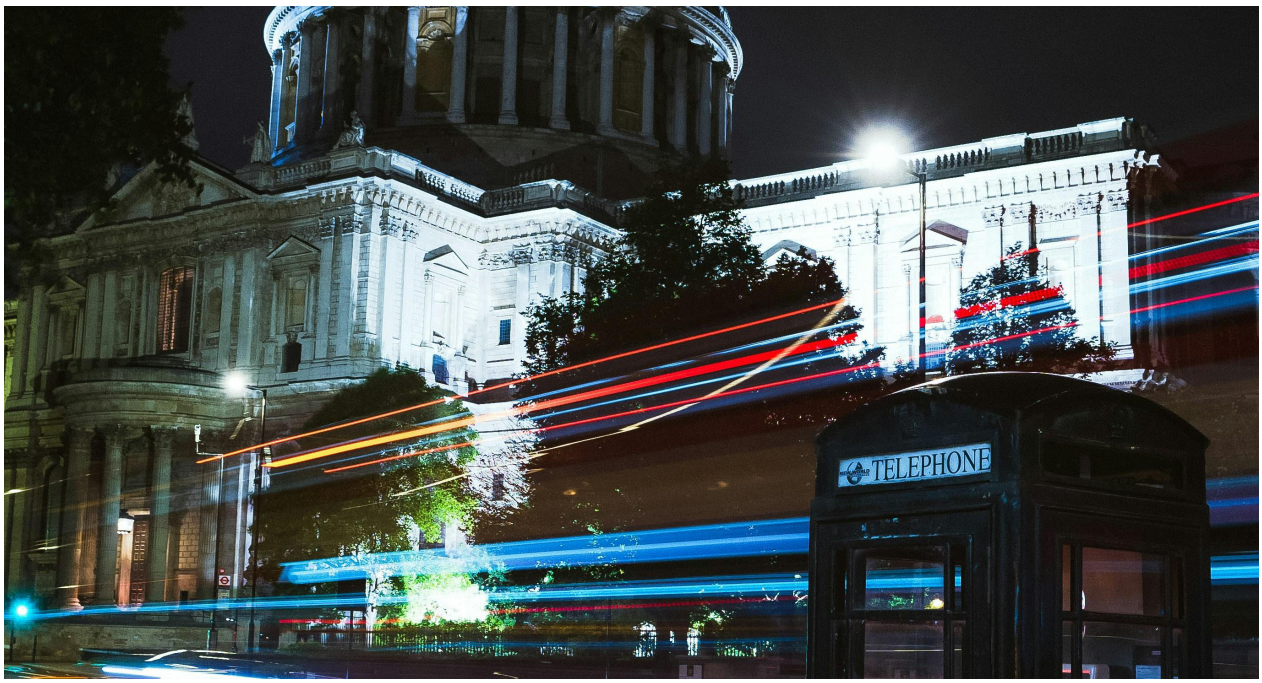
It has evolved from purely surveying what people think (for a timetable that suits marketing) to getting a return on the investment in intelligence that makes best use of a wider range of sources to address a wider range of connected business needs & opportunities, timeously.

2.4

Create the future.

In the Age of Intelligence we can save time and, yes, money. It can be seen as a world of ‘better, faster and cheaper’. Many businesses will, indeed are taking, this opportunity to work more efficiently and to lower costs. They fall into the ‘same for less’ group. Cost cutters survive and keep shareholders happy.

But those who see this as the opportunity to invest the time and money saved into creating the future with innovations that change the rules in their favour will more than survive, they will win and delight all stakeholders including shareholders.



03

Now what...

...do we do differently? What will it take to thrive, not just survive, in the Age of Intelligence?

3.1

Always start with the issue(s) and keep an open mind

The focus needs to be on the issue(s) – the opportunity or challenge – and the implications of the findings. What decisions depend on this not just in marketing but across the business? It may well be that you have a particular study or type of research in mind, for example a segmentation study or user experience deep dive, nothing wrong in that (see below). But the more everyone understands the issues the better able you will be to judge what to do, where to invest your money, what tools to deploy, in what order. In summary where best to harvest intelligence. It pays to keep an open mind and be receptive to new approaches.

(If you want to be really rigorous about this you can go through all possible sources of intel and rule them in or out according to the expected return on investment of time and money.)

3.2

It's OK to start with a hypothesis as long as you keep open mind

The pure scientific process starts with a Null Hypothesis, the assumption that there is no relationship between variables – or in plain English 'We don't know'. Then the scientist generates alternative, competing hypotheses and these are then used as the basis of experimentation. "Here is what we think". So it is helpful to have some working hypotheses (ideally more than one) because it helps in the design of the intelligence gathering and experimentation. The only caveat is that, like a good scientist, you have to let go of hypotheses in the face of fresh intelligence

3.3

Begin by using what you already know or can find out

Still on the same theme, like a scientist, start with what is already known or available in terms of data (all forms of data). These days you start by asking Chat GPT or whoever is your favourite AI tool. This is super-fast and free. AI will list sources and these can be looked into. On the basis of that you can then look for data that will not be available to AI or that it will not have considered. The point is that there is a lot that can be found out by using existing data in all its forms – this cannot be emphasised enough. People in the business, front line staff, the technical team are all sources of intelligence.



3.4

Watch/Listen/Ask/Experiment

Without knowing the issue it is impossible to be prescriptive as to exactly how to go about a piece of work or the kind of continuous intelligence a business may need. There is nevertheless a way of thinking about intelligence and as it happens it is literally the way Government Intelligence Agencies work (you've seen this in countless movies). Don't rely on any one form of 'research' – Watch and Listen and Ask and Experiment.

01	Watch	Using behavioural science and ethnographic techniques, watch what people do. Using semiotics and trend analysis look at this in a cultural context.
02	Listen	Using for example social media or customer complaints, listen to what they say
03	Ask	Anything from surveys, to interviews to advanced analytics allows us to ask questions and interrogate data
04	Experiment	Some of the best intelligence is gathered by testing ideas, asking people to make choices. We cannot always tell others exactly what we think or want, but we can always say what we prefer.

This is a very simplistic summary but it makes the point – use all the tools at your disposal (just like the CIA and MI5).

3.5

Insist that the use of AI is totally transparent

AI will continue to be used more and more in every aspect of society, this is inevitable – and it will continue to improve. But it will never be perfect because it lacks human intelligence with our memories, experiences, our understanding of context and creative desire. It is crucially important therefore to know when AI (and synthetic data) has been used. Either in the business or among external partners there must always be 100% transparency about this.

3.6

Work with the best, most experienced, creative and independent partners

The problem with the large legacy Market Research businesses is that they have a business model that relies on a certain limited set of tools (and shareholders to satisfy). In the Age of Intelligence you want experienced 'tradespeople', skilled artisans, who know all the tools and when/how best to use them. This requires a level of breadth and depth in their team which will always have some limitations so when needed, they need to be able to call on more specific expertise from their network of trusted partners.

Their thinking, when it comes to both initial design and final recommendations needs to be independent and creative. For creative you can read strategic, the ability to join the dots, the HI in the HI + AI equation.

> **As the saying goes,**
>
> "If your only tool is a hammer then every problem is a nail".

This also apples to what are effectively business ideologies to be found in the big consultancies. To take on one of the most prominent, Behavioural Science (BSc), no one way of seeing the world is ever 100% correct. BSc is a very useful approach especially when one considers that at the end of the day any business requires someone to DO something, not just think something.

The techniques of BSc are in effect a rebrand of well-known ethnographic disciplines and generally observational research. They underpin the 'Watch' part of watch/listen/ask/experiment holistic approach. The problem is that BSc has a fixed view of brand adoption – the Holy Grail of decoding why anyone buys anything. Unfortunately it is only one of many theories of brand adoption none of which are 100% right but all of which have 'data' to support the fact that they are not wrong either. This should be the subject of another discussion piece but suffice it to say that people with a fixed view of brand adoption are not helpful in the Age of intelligence unless they accept it is one of several competing hypotheses.

3.7

Do not insist on 'category experience' (but don't over-pay for external partners to learn)

In the Age of Intelligence category experience is not a pre-requisite for working with external partners. It is often better to work with people who don't know the category and can ask fresh, even naïve, questions. Better still if they can bring to bear experience from other categories – a lot of creative thinking and innovation comes from the intelligent use of insight from other brands or markets. Peroni, the first beer to appeal to both men and women, was inspired by Versace and Armani. Tesla cars were marketed like Apple computers in 'showrooms' that looked like Apple Stores.

That said, a client should not have to pay much for an external partner to get up to speed and given the availability of existing data and intel it is not that hard either.

3.8

Emphasise the importance of the debrief

Whether at the conclusion of a particular issue-led study or a review of continuous data there comes the moment to debrief the decision makers in a business. This will follow the usual 3 part format:-

01 Here's what – the findings

02 So What? – the implications

03 Now What? – the resultant actions

And there are 3 possible reactions:-

- That was interesting
- That was helpful
- Wow, let's go!

To maximize the return on intelligence, the time and money invested, you want the third reaction, a debrief that inspires action. In which case remember the words of Benjamin Franklin:-

> “Tell me and I forget
> Teach me and I remember
> Involve me and I learn”

A report is the worst way to debrief, an on-line video meeting is better but not great, a show and tell in person meeting is good but can be made better. The very best way to debrief is firstly to put some effort into how the findings are presented and then run a facilitated, interactive workshop. That is when you get people fully involved and leaning forward, working collectively to turn ‘so what’ into ‘now what’ with energy and enthusiasm.

In the Age of Intelligence data from a wide range of sources is being shared. Technology and AI can do some of the work to create connections and identify patterns but to get the full value of HI – human intelligence – and see all this in context deserves the best kind of debrief.

A bit of time investment is needed but really this is more about attitude of mind. If you are dialling up the use of the full scope of intelligence it is worth dialling up the full potential of HI.

04

Questions

This work has been shared with a select few experienced client-side people and some questions were raised which are answered here.

Q1

Is this the end of Quant and Qual?

Yes, it's an unhelpful way of thinking about 'market research'. A typical qualitative tool like depth interviews can be scaled using technology to give statistical significance and advanced analytics can find penetrating insights in large volumes of data. It is far better to think in terms of sources of intelligence and open your eyes to the full range of possibilities led by the issue in hand.

Q2

Does insight still have a role?

Yes of course. An 'insight' can be the springboard for recommendations and action but it helps to be clear what we mean by an insight. This check-list (used in various iterations by many of the big brand businesses is helpful:-

01 Is it relevant to the issue, opportunity, challenge?

02 Is it fresh?

03 Is it penetrating?

04 Does it fuse various forms of insight or does it get to the essence of behaviour, attitudes, choice?

05 Does it inspire action?

Q3

What is the right level of investment?

The question no-one likes to answer – how long is a piece of string? The answer will always vary depending on context but there are guidelines. We can answer the question, "What is the right level of investment in brand marketing'" It is 5-10% of revenues (a little less for B2B brands). Studies have been done on this and the aggregated answer can be found by asking AI.

Typically the 'market research' budget is a sub set of marketing, so you could say 5-10% of that budget (again AI will verify this). However, this is not the right way to think about investment in the Age of Intelligence. Economists talk about profit optimisation occurring where marginal cost meets marginal revenue. The same idea was used in the earlier approach to digital marketing and google key words – you spend until the additional cost outweighs the additional 'clicks' or revenue or whatever metric is being used. So you could keep investing in intelligence until you get diminishing returns. If it is an issue-led study, it the investment should reflect the size of the prize.

5-10%

of revenues

What also works is to set a budget and then ask what would change if the budget was reduced by 25% and what extra would be done if it were increased by 25%? This will very quickly show where savings on the investment can be made or where corners are being cut.

Q4

What is the role of external partners? Should this be an internal capability?

There are 3 justifications for bringing in external partners aka agencies and consultancies.

01 Fresh, unbiased perspective

02 Speed and avoidance of distraction

03 Expertise and capabilities that do not exist internally

Where there is going to be future and sustained need for a new capability it should be developed internally. Good confident agencies are normally happy to help with this, they do not need to develop a dependency relationship.

That said in the Age of Intelligence a business is never going to have all the expertise and capabilities it needs and there is great value in getting an experienced and fresh point of view when it comes to approach and execution of the issue-led work. As Mark Twain said, “If you do what you always did, you get what you always got”.

Having external partners allows the internal project team to be involved but also to be able to get on with ‘the day job’. The thing about agencies or consultancies is that the job gets done because they have zero distractions and maximum incentives

Q5

What implications does this have for how we are structured and our business model?

This is a frequently asked question about the implications of change generally on organizations. It is being asked urgently now as businesses come to terms with the potential for AI to replace middle management job affecting not just how they are structured but their actual business model. It is very challenging - if you are left with the best, brightest seniors and the high potential juniors how do juniors become seniors?

So much will depend on context – ambition of the business, industry sector, competitive landscape, route to market etc etc. But there are some things we can say with certainty:

- Organizational structure and business models will continue to evolve as they always have.
- So don't let the best be the enemy of the good – no-one knows what best is – just do what seems right, right now.
- There is expertise and jobs that exist now that were neither needed or existed 20 years ago, even 10 years ago.
- So do your best and be prepared to evolve.

> And remember, were you and a competitor to meet a lion in the jungle, you don't have to outrun the lion, you just need to outrun your competitor.

Q6

Who is thriving in the Age of Intelligence? Who will?

This is a question you can ask AI knowing that you will get an answer that will be helpful, interesting even, but will not be definitive nor penetrating. It will be the fusion of lots of sources of data but it will not inspire action.

In other words it will not be insightful because AI does not do context. The answer you will get includes all the usual suspects – amazon, Netflix, Tesla, Google, Meta and Spotify.

From personal experience there are some other names that can be added to the list:-

- Unilever
- P&G
- Diageo
- Walmart/Tesco and several other big retailers

What do they have in common?

01 They are customer centric

02 They have been doing this for years – fusing multiple sources of intelligence, embracing new tools and techniques, working with the best external partners as and when they need to

03 They believe in marketing, brands and reputation

04 They have purpose and are competitive by nature

05 They have shown they can evolve

One simple example of this is Unilever. Recognising that in some major markets upwards of 25% of their sales would be through on-line retail they invested in a start-up called Clavis who had developed technology to give insight/intelligence about the success factors in e-tailing. Clavis went on to achieve a successful exit by which time they were working with all the top FMCG businesses, in all the big markets, covering all the major retailers.

It's not always about tech.

P&G had a reputation for being formulaic in their marketing, the famous Procter Fact books that spelt out how to do every aspect of marketing based on their R&D led investment to continually bring performance benefits to the market. P&G believed in rational, demonstrable, intrinsic benefits not fluffy customer empathy and image. Then there was Pampers whose market was mothers, often young, first time mothers. Was it this that persuaded P&G to be the first major business to use semiotics, a tool that originated in the academia of literature studies, to decode cultural symbols? Pampers has been a global success (as was Dove for Unilever) based not just on differentiated product performance but on the superior use of 'technology' in its broadest sense to connect with people.

> When digital marketing broke on to the scene the then global CMO of Diageo said that they were going to spend 10% of their budget on it,
>
> "Not because we know how it works but because we want to know".

Tesco were not the first to offer store loyalty cards, in fact studies by McKinsey had shown that offering discounts via loyalty points worked only if your competitors did not react. If they did it was a zero sum game. Competitive advantage lay in the use of the data. Working with their partners Dunnhumby they used data science to extract the maximum return on their investment in intelligence.

These were not businesses that AI identified but hopefully offer some inspiration on how to thrive in the Age of Intelligence.

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About the Author

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Mark Sherrington learned his marketing working for Unilever competing against P&G. He progressed through brand management to marketing director level before becoming a global product category lead. In 1988, with a fellow Unilever colleague, he founded The Added Value Group. When WPP acquired the business he went back to the client side as CMO SABMiller.

While at Added Value, working with his highly talented team and blue chip clients, Mark developed tools for brand strategy and market segmentation many of which are still used by major brand businesses.

Mark is a fellow of the UK Marketing Society and was on the editorial board of Market Leader. He has written many articles on marketing and a best-selling book, “Added Value: the alchemy of brand-led growth”.

As an early stage investor Mark has been involved in several marketing technology businesses and was on the advisory committee for Unilever Ventures.

He is the Chief Strategist at We Live Context, a team of marketing and ‘research’ experts who focus on giving clients the maximum return on Intelligence.



We Live Context are a team of marketing and research experts who help clients maximise their return on intelligence.

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