

IN PURSUIT OF TRUTH

The consumer truth has been the Holy Grail for all Marketeers and the rapidly changing technology has kept the seekers of this truth on their toes.

The way we collect data has evolved. From interviewer administered instruments (Paper surveys, CATI, CAPI) to self-administered instruments (Web based, Mobile based) to Observations (Eye tracking, Bio-metric and Brain activity recording) and now to Digital foot printing. How has this evolution impacted our quest for the truth? Are we getting better at it or have we compromised it?

Everybody agrees that recall based answers tend to have gaps and hence capturing actual behavior is the way to go. But I have also heard arguments against (passive) behavior data collection – “it is not a random/representative sample”, “so what if you have large numbers you are not seeing the full picture”, “More than 25% (or whatever number) of on-line reviews are fake”, “consumers are aware of their digital footprint and are exercising their rights to erase it and even going out of their way to hide it” etc.

This reminds me of a dilemma I faced very early in my career – what is more important, 100% complete findings a few days after the deadline or 80% complete findings on time? We are in a similar situation today, the benefits of getting more accurate (passive) data that may not be 100% representative vs. a 100% representative data that may not be as accurate. While I am sure everybody has a point of view on that, it is usually horses for courses.

Recently (in the US) the Congressional hearings of Judge Kavanaugh and Michael Cohen was telecast live on prime-time TV. Like me, I am sure many other viewers were left wondering, what was the truth? Makes me think of Jack Nicholson in a Few Good Men and his outburst “you can’t handle the truth”. Is that happening to us? Are we desensitized to the truth? Is there a shift in the society? Who would have thought phrases like “Fake News”, “Alternate facts” or “The truth is not the truth” will become common parlance? Today we can no longer distinguish between a bot and human on the other end of the phone. Art – considered to be one’s inner most expression - can now be created by AI.

Given this shift, are not we better off focusing our energy and resources on how we apply (our version of) the truth to make a positive impact in the marketplace rather than chasing after the absolute truth? As an industry we have come a long way in data collection and analytics, but I do not see the same progress when it comes to the more value-added realm of insights to action. We need to start focusing more of our efforts on application of insights vs collection of insights. It is time to review the Holy Grail.