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MRA staffers Jennifer McDonald and Howard Fienberg – pictured here on Capitol Hill at the U.S. Senate – work full time to represent MRA member interests in Washington and elsewhere.



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# The Academy and the Agency: Some Thoughts on the Integration of the Marketing Research Industry and the Academic Discipline

By Michael Francesco Alioto, Ph.D.

## The Problem

The marketing research industry has a lack of affiliation with its academic counterpart. There is not a clear, solid, or long-term working relationship between the two, as the marketing research industry draws much of its support and professionals from the social sciences, rather than the business discipline. Due to this situation, both the marketing research agencies and the academic disciplines have followed divergent, but parallel paths for the development and evolution of the industry. This lack of a liaison has resulted in a series of missed opportunities as both the marketing research industry and the academic business discipline tend not to communicate or possess a solid on-going platform for dialogue and engagement<sup>1</sup>.

But as the natural and social science disciplines have demonstrated, a solid link, mode of cooperation, as well as a venue for sharing and understanding is critical for both the growth of the industry and as strategic input for the radical<sup>2</sup> innovations required for a healthy future. Given the current nature of the discipline and the recent growth in post-graduate marketing research degrees, there is a unique opportunity for both the marketing research industry and academic discipline to form an alliance to further the development and define a

roadmap<sup>3</sup> for the industry. Each provides a complimentary set of characteristics to the other's set of attributes with very little functional overlap in both content and thinking.

If the marketing research industry is to survive and flourish into this century, a much more integrated approach is required where each group is dependent on the strengths and innovations that they provide for the entire discipline. Rather than two separate entities, the marketing research industry and its academic counterpart form a Yin/Yang structure which is similar in nature and philosophical construct to the original Chinese philosophy of Confucius<sup>4</sup>. We each have the opportunity to learn from the other, but much more importantly, an integrated approach from both the academy and agency<sup>5</sup> will provide a solid and much more strengthened foundation for our industry and its growth, development, innovation, and change.

What is required is a new framework for cooperation and sharing of ideas, concepts, standards, and approaches. Each side in this relationship provides innovative and unique aspects which are many times lacking in the other side's repertory. By using the philosophy of the Yin/Yang approach to life, one can

illustrate that the strengths of the agency enhances the weaknesses of the academy and vice-versa. Let us take a look at the current state of the relationship between the academy and agency within the marketing research industry. We will be able to illustrate the complimentary aspects of the two participants, illustrate their strengths and weaknesses, propose some general ideas for corporation, and finally, offer a rudimentary framework for a working relationship for our industry.

## The Current Model: A Divided Landscape

While there are a number of attributes<sup>6</sup> which are core to the marketing research industry, the critical elements can be condensed into two main categories based on structure and knowledge. Both the academy and agency provide key definitions, standards, and content for these areas. In general, each main category contains three critical dimensions. Table 1 highlights the main dimensions for each category.

Both the academy and agency identifies and defines these dimensions differently, but more importantly, each area within the industry has a critical advantage and disadvantage vs. its counterpart. The marketing research industry is a knowledge and insights discipline. What we produce is knowledge and insights based on our research designs, understanding critical study objectives, collecting respondent data/information and analyzing this information to discover key trends, tendencies and relationships. This type of work depends on advanced academic training, knowledge, experience, and learnings. The academy is in a key position to provide the tools and skills required for success in the industry from what is taught and researched at the universities. For the agencies, they work on "real-

<sup>1</sup> The issue includes both a restricted flow of marketing research professionals from the business schools and the lack of a solid working arrangement between the academic and professional marketing research worlds. This will continue to hinder the growth of the industry until a more firm and consistent relationship between the two elements is established.

<sup>2</sup> While change and future development can take one of two forms (linear evolutionary or non-linear revolutionary), it is the latter that is the most critical for both innovation and the marketing research industry. Disruptive innovation is almost solely dependent on radical change.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike many other disciplines in the business sector, marketing research lacks a clear "roadmap" for the future. This situation has greatly hindered both growth and creative innovation within the industry.

<sup>4</sup> When one observes the state of the relationship between the academic world and the industry, the Yin/Yang reference is clearly visible and this framework provides a good reference point for discussion and observation.

<sup>5</sup> We are using the terms academy to refer to the academic element of our industry (much in the spirit of the ancient Greeks) and agency to refer to the private sector marketing research firms, client departments, and specialized professionals.

<sup>6</sup> The various elements of the industry are endless as it is a very complex discipline. We have intentionally chosen those elements which are critical for future innovation and development of the field.

world” problems and issues and have access to large quantities of data and consumer content. They need the skills and techniques to uncover true patterns and relationships, while continuously reducing the noise and error associated with measurement, technique, and environmental variation and error.

Structure	Knowledge
Research Subjects	Techniques/Methods
Data (Depth and Breath)	Staff Experience
Methods Standards	Knowledge Base

*Table 1: Critical Elements for a Marketing Research Academy/Agency Framework*

When one observes the advantages and disadvantages associated with an isolated academy or agency, the current dilemma and weakness of our industry become very apparent. Exhibit 1 illustrates the advantages and disadvantages each group possesses on the key attributes of our industry.

When observing the academy, their strategic strengths lie in the areas of method creativity, technique advantage, superior knowledge base, and staff (student) strength. This element of the discipline are the keepers of our skill sets, knowledge base, the utilization/ testing of experimental techniques, and the methods of the current paradigm<sup>7</sup>. As the agency confronts ever increasingly complex and sophisticated

study problems, the knowledge and approaches that the academy possesses will become invaluable for the success of the industry. The agency needs the knowledge and thinking of the academy to survive. It is critical for the agency to continuously interact with the academy and add “new blood” into our agencies through the recruiting and hiring of newly trained and invigorated young marketing research professionals. These youthful men and women are the key to our future and are critical leaders in our knowledge area with extensive skill sets and tool development comprehension. For this reason alone, every marketing research agency should have a working and permanent relationship with a set of university faculty and institutions. This relationship would provide an outlet for students entering the job market and provide a continuous level of cooperation and new method/technique development, focused on innovation and disruptive progression.

In turn, the agency has access and works with, critical research problems which are central for the development of new products, services, and solutions. These are “real-world” problems being researched for “real-world” clients to determined “real-world” outcomes. Complimentary to this situation is the collection and analysis of large amounts of data, comprised of almost every known customer transactional, attitudinal, behavioral, and ever increasingly, physiological attributes. The combined “real-world” problems and data should provide the critical inputs for academic testing of new and innovative methods and techniques. This is critical for the completion of the industry circle by which the academy provides key techniques/

methods to the agency, by way of rigorous testing of the research approaches for client-centric problems and data.

As illustrated in Exhibit 1, this is not currently being done on a regular basis, due to the lack of cooperation between the two areas. We are missing a major opportunity for development and progress as each group continues to remain isolated from the other. One exception of note is the acceptance of a standardized method for marketing research. For most of our history, the standard of choice was the scientific method. The importance of its rigor, approach, methods, etc. has long been accepted as a standard which is not questioned in the industry. However, driven by the continuous decline of response rates and the realization that younger generations may not be inclined to use surveys as a means to capture customer information, our discipline may be due for a paradigm shift equitable to the scientific revolution which occurred with the advancement of the European Enlightenment.

### The Ideal Model: A Yin/Yang View of the Discipline

If the strengths and weaknesses of the various marketing research attributes are complementary based on an integrative academy/agency relationship, then a joint cooperative effort would make the most sense, supporting the future of the industry. As was alluded to in the above section, the harmonizing nature of the various marketing research elements for the discipline are exemplified and illustrated by the Yin/Yang model associated with Chinese Confucian philosophy (see Exhibit 2 below). In this design, the strengths of the agency are supplemented by the strengths of

<sup>7</sup> See Kuhn (1970) for a complete illustration of paradigm and paradigm shift with classic examples from both the natural and social sciences.

<p><b>Yang (Academia)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research Subjects: Narrow (-)</li> <li>• Data: Limited (-)</li> <li>• Techniques/Methods: Leading-Edge (+)</li> <li>• Staff: Highly Educated (+)</li> <li>• Knowledge Base: Fresh (+)</li> <li>• Methods Standards: Scientific Method (?)</li> </ul> <p><b>Rating Key:</b></p> <p>+ = strategic advantage</p> <p>- = strategic disadvantage</p> <p>? = neither advantage or disadvantage or unknown</p>	<p><b>Yin (MR Industry)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research Subjects: Extensive (+)</li> <li>• Data: Extensive (+)</li> <li>• Methods/Techniques: Traditional (-)</li> <li>• Staff Capability: Varying (-)</li> <li>• Knowledge Base: Maturing (-)</li> <li>• Methods Standards: Diverse (-/?)</li> </ul>	
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*Figure 1: Current State of the Discipline (“Separated” Model)*

the academy, while the weaknesses of the both groups are diminished by the opposite's strengths<sup>8</sup>.

While the current "separated model" indicates a distinct split between the academy and agency, the ideal format for the marketing research industry specifies a complimentary integration of the two groups, each taking advantage of the other's strengths and reducing the weakness of its counterparts. The sharing of knowledge, experience, data, project objectives, etc. between the two groups can be utilized to the industry's advantage, further strengthening the marketing research discipline. The real success of this model can be found in the next stages of industry development. Our industry is being challenged by ever complex and sophisticated changes in the environment, respondent lifestyles, technology, and the continuing deepening of globalization, as well as major disruptive research changes manifested by younger generations of respondents. These challenges are resulting in increased data variation/error, limited response/cooperation rates, and a need to propel the marketing research industry into a future, where newer and radical technologies will result in change at a greater rate of speed. There is a distinct need for fresh ideas, new talent, and innovative techniques/methods. This is where the academy can shine and greatly influence the development and progression of our industry. However, the academy can only be as successful as the data and research problems available from the private sector. Since the agency is the entity which interacts with client objectives and respondent

<sup>8</sup> The philosophy associated with the teaching of Confucius has long been used by the Chinese to help govern their way of life and is extremely popular throughout Asia.

data, it is critical that these inputs be made available to the academy for testing and confirmation. Even the most contemplated and superior methods require testing and confirmation as they are only as good as their predicted and expected outcomes.

This state of cooperation is critical for current and future industry success. More than ever, the timeframe for the development and progression of the industry is growing shorter between key milestones. As the environment and respondents are changing ever more rapidly, the requirement for the industry to remain in close proximity to them is crucial. Only with a joint cooperative approach between the agency and the academy, will the marketing research discipline thrive and succeed.

### The Road to 2020: An Integrated Framework for the Marketing Research Discipline

It is apparent from our above discussion that a close and complimentary relationship between the academy and the agency is required. The real problem is how to evoke a sense of collaboration and urgency for the industry. Both groups are more focused on their particular short-term functions and objectives and are not seeing the "forest from the trees". The industry requires direction and someone to assume the initiative. There is one such organizational type that can take the lead and integrate the academy and agency; these organizations are the professional associations, such as the American Marketing Association (AMA), ESOMAR, Marketing Research Association (MRA), etc. They have both the foresight and resources to support this initiative. They are neutral and can assume the lead as they are respected and trusted within the industry. The facilitation for the sharing of resources,

methods, standards, and data between the academy and agency can be easily accomplished by these organizations as marketing research professionals, regardless of their origins, tend to use the services and resources of the professional associations for a whole host of endeavors. Adding the role of facilitator to the academy – agency relationship would be a natural for the various marketing research professional associations.

Figure 3 illustrates a potential framework for this cooperative partnership between the academy, agency, and professional association. Its format is generated by a modified<sup>9</sup> Yin/Yang model where each element of the association is providing an equal and accommodating set of services and contributions to the marketing research industry.

While the academy and the agency provide the key foundation for the partnership, the professional associations act as the balancing force helping to facilitate the sharing of key services, standards, and ideas. Concerning research subjects and large customer databases, the professional association should perform as a repository by sharing key resources with both the academy and agency. This would allow the academy to test new methods and techniques with "real-world" data and research objectives, allowing for the testing and validation of new ideas and methods before they are released to the general research community. By providing and participating in the testing and development phase of new method expansion, the agency would gain significantly as it would have a natural partner for the specification

<sup>9</sup> This approach, adding a third element to the Yin/Yang model, has been used successfully in a number of industries and disciplines.

#### Yang (Academia)

- Research Subjects: Consistent with Private Sector
- Data: Big Data/Extensive
- Techniques/Methods: Leading-Edge
- Staff: Highly Educated/Experience from Private Sector
- Knowledge Base: Fresh/Timely
- Methods Standards: Standardized Method(s)

#### Yin (MR Industry)

- Research Subjects: Extensive /Diverse
- Data: Big Data
- Methods/Techniques: Mirrors Academia
- Staff Capability: Highly Trained/Experienced
- Knowledge Base: Fresh/Timely
- Methods Standards: Innovative/Consistent with Academia

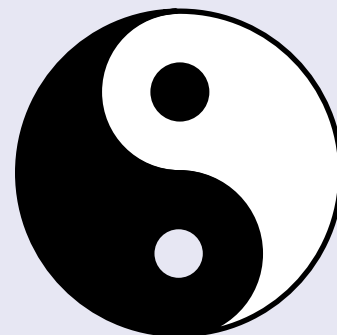


Exhibit 2: Ideal State of the Discipline Model



### Yang (Academia)

- Research Subjects: Consistent with Private Sector
- Data: Big Data/Extensive
- Techniques/Methods: Leading-Edge
- Staff: Highly Educated/Experience from Private Sector
- Knowledge Base: Fresh/Timely
- Methods Standards: Standardized Method

### Yin (MR Industry)

- Research Subjects: Extensive /Diverse
- Data: Big Data
- Methods/Techniques: Mirrors Academia
- Staff Capability: Highly Trained/Experienced
- Knowledge Base: Fresh/Timely
- Methods Standards: Innovative/Consistent with Academia

### Yin/Yang (Professional Societies)

- Research Subjects: Shared Repository
- Data: Big Data Repository
- Methods/Techniques: Conduit for Academia and Industry
- Staff Capability: Standards and Certification
- Knowledge Base: Shared Platform
- Methods Standards: Standards Keeper

### Exhibit 3: Proposed Future Marketing Research Framework Model (Modified Yin/Yang)

of new marketing research methods; one that would share both the costs and knowledge associated with new method experimentation and growth. Furthermore, the generation of cutting edge technologies and methods would be defined by industry standards allowing for continuous development within the parameters of a set marketing research criterion. This would further support the development and transition between paradigms, as the industry would be united as to when a paradigm shift is about to occur and when it has completed its cycle to the next accepted paradigm. Vagueness and generalities would be removed from the process while growth in the marketing research industry would evolve in a more systematic manner.

Another area where the professional association can support the industry's advancement would be in the realm of human/professional development. Standards and certification for professional development are sure signs of a mature and advanced discipline. As academic principles are applied to the private sector, there will a requirement for both milestones of attainment and measures for achievement. The professional association should work with both the academy and agency to identify, define, and enforce these standards. This is critical for a healthy industry which is plagued by respondent fatigue, dropping response rates, and abuses associated with marketing research imitators<sup>10</sup> and poorly enforced standards. Finally, the establishment and identification of a common marketing research Body of Knowledge (BOK) is critical for the industry and one that a united professional-academic alliance could

well contribute to in both the current and future forms of our discipline. As with any mature industry, tools, standards, best practices, training, and education are all based on a common BOK. This is at the heart of a discipline and must be nurtured and expanded as the industry itself grows. Without a shared vision and cooperation between the academic and professional areas, this growth will not happen, or be stunted at best. Either outcome would be a disaster for the marketing research industry leading to its future demise or irrelevance.

The marketing research industry is changing rapidly due to radical and disruptive change/innovation driven by technology, environmental evolution, new thinking, and holistic views about our consumers and their lifestyles. If the marketing research industry is to survive and flourish, close collaboration between the agency and the academy will be a must for the next generation of marketing researchers. We can no longer ignore each other and feel that we operate only within our own limited or small space. What is needed is joint cooperation and development on a grand scale. This is what is expected of our industry from all marketing researchers, both academic and practitioners, and this is what is required from our clients and the businesses which support us.

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<sup>10</sup> Many times the offenders are telemarketers who disguise their approach as true marketing research.