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Lead up to the IIR TDMR: Interview with Greg Heist of Gongos Research

by Leonard Murphy

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For our latest interview with presenters at the upcoming [IIR Technology Driven Market Research event](#) the IIR and GreenBook bring you an interview with Greg Heist, Vice President of Research Innovation & Technology for [Gongos Research](#).

I had the opportunity to spend 2 days with Greg and the team at Gongos Research last month, and I have to say that he and the entire Gongos team are some of the smartest (and nicest!) folks I have ever met. Gongos is a great example of a company firmly rooted in the absolute best of traditional market research while also reaching towards the unlimited potential of the new research paradigm. I was impressed by the innovative thinking and creativity of Greg, the way the entire organization is embracing the ideas he is championing, and their commitment to transform their business. I expect the success Gongos has had to date is just the tip of the iceberg; this is a company that will help lead our industry in the years to come. This interview was conducted over several days via email. I think you'll find it interesting, enlightening, and maybe even inspiring. Without further ado (or gushing!) here is my interview with Greg:

LM: Gongos Research has been coming on strong with your roll-out of new products that are generating a lot of interest within the market research space. Why do you think that is?

GH: As an organization, there are three things that get us excited to come into the office everyday: the opportunity to work with our fellow employees, our desire to help our clients understand their customers in new ways by doing great research and our drive to leverage technology and innovation to create a new norm for marketing research. I'd like to think that the products we've been developing—and in particular the i°Communities mobile app we launched last September—are generating excitement for the same reasons we're so excited about them: because they tap into an exciting new frontier for our field. Devices like smartphones have untethered consumers from their computers, and products like i°Communities mobile are in sync with this cultural shift and truly create a real-time conversation with consumers wherever they are.

LM: What do you think are the major drivers of change in the market research space right now and how is Gongos Research planning to take advantage of those trends?

GH: Without question, the two major drivers of change in the research world are the rapid adoption of smartphones and tablet devices and the explosive growth of social media as the primary way we engage with one another online. It isn't an exaggeration to say that each of these is a revolution that has permanently changed our culture. From my perspective, the fact

that these two megatrends are happening simultaneously is sending shock waves throughout the historically "staid and steady" marketing research industry. It's an exciting time to be in research because it is challenging all of us to either modify how we approach traditional methods or else rapidly create entirely new approaches. It's personally fun to see all of this innovation going on and I'm constantly impressed by all of the great work various firms in our industry are doing. From a Gongos perspective, we have made the smartphone revolution a core part of our innovation strategy. To that end, as I mentioned, we've launched the i°Communities mobile app for iOS and our smartphone-based online survey platform (which works across all smartphone platforms). We're diligently at work on the development of i°Communities mobile for Android and plan to roll that out in the coming months. In the social media sphere, we've been providing MROCs for our clients for over 5 years, and continuing to make our communities more "social" is another core thrust for us in 2011. We have various initiatives going on in that regard right now and, as I meet with employees working on them, I'm amazed by the excitement and the number of powerful ideas that are being generated. I really look forward to seeing how they all take shape!

LM: I couldn't agree with you more, and it's great to hear of a leading established firm like Gongos embracing these new trends and actively working to leverage them, rather than fight them! Based on your current plans regarding integrating mobile, MROCs, and other social media elements into your research offerings, what do you see as the next major development that you'll be looking at? Gaming, text analytics, social media market mix analysis, or...?

GH: To be quite honest, we are either currently looking at or working on capabilities in all of these areas right now. There are a lot of interesting ideas kicking around amongst our team and we are working hard at prioritizing them based on our longer term innovation strategy. Personally, I'm really intrigued by the possibilities of applying gaming within an MR context. It's probably the area that has spawned some of the most innovative ideas and everyone is really energized about them!

LM: Gongos seems unusual in that you are more of a traditional Full Service supplier, yet seem to have an advanced in-house innovation and development team. Most of your competitors use 3rd party solutions. What drove you to go down the custom development path and where do you see the company headed in the future as a result?

GH: We started down the path of creating proprietary research platforms primarily because of some of the unique requirements our core clients had relative to data collection and analysis. When we looked out there for off-the-shelf solutions to meet these needs, we didn't find any so we committed to develop them ourselves. Over time, that has continued to be true and we have been able to tightly integrate our community, survey and mobile platforms to provide some really robust capabilities for our clients. We really like what we have created so far, but also see lots of areas where we can take these platforms individually and collectively.

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My team is focused on trying to both expand the capabilities of our existing technologies as well as developing new capabilities that will integrate with them. I certainly see us continuing to invest in this area since they really provide us with flexibility and unique capabilities that we wouldn't have if we were solely reliant on 3rd party solutions. Needless to say, our developers aren't lacking things to work on.

LM: Gongos is one of the few MR firms that I know of that has a senior level role, plus the infrastructure to support them, dedicated to innovation. Why did the company choose to invest in innovation as a core strategy and why do you think the industry as a whole struggles with the concept of investing in innovation?

GH: The reason we continue to invest aggressively in innovation is actually pretty simple: we've seen it help us deliver new kinds of insights for our clients and be a catalyst for our company's growth. But, our experience also speaks to why it's a struggle: it's hard to create—and pay for—that infrastructure. Getting clients to embrace innovation requires extra work because we often need to educate them about what we have created and demonstrate why it results in good research. Finally, innovation requires constantly rethinking our assumptions about what marketing research is. It's tempting to “go with the flow” and be content with doing things the way they have been done. Internally, we are also focusing both on methodological innovation as well as technological innovation. There's a lot of work that needs to be done to make both happen, and so I'm fortunate enough to have the opportunity to help rally the organization around both areas and ensuring that—at the end of the day—we are delivering purposeful innovation to our clients rather than simply innovating just for the sake of innovating

LM: Based on your inclusion on the Honomichl list, it appears that you achieved the miraculous feat of growing during the Great Recession; how the heck did you pull that off?

GH: Well, first of all, we certainly feel fortunate to have gone through such an incredibly tumultuous time without experiencing a significant downturn in our business or laying off any of our employees. I think our company's focus on long-term strategy coupled with the great work our employees have done with our client partners successfully helped us navigate through that time. During this period of time we also began some new client partnerships that quickly grew beyond our initial expectations, so that clearly had a positive impact on our growth, as well. We were also really transparent with our staff about how we were responding to the crisis and I think that helped our employees understand what we were doing and why we were doing it.

LM: Thinking ahead 2-3 years, what do you think the Market Research industry will look like? What type of companies will be successful, what capabilities will be needed, and what new types of companies will be a part of what we think of as MR?

GH: I'm literally blown away by how rapidly things are changing in the research industry. There have been more disruptive innovations in the past 5 years than in the previous 15, without question. And, I don't see that changing anytime soon. So, looking ahead 2-3 years, I see social media and mobile research quickly becoming a mainstream part of how companies gain insights from consumers.

With that will come a continuing re-definition of what marketing research is and how it is used. I also see more and more technology companies entering the mix and offering specific research solutions and becoming even more formidable competitors for traditional research firms. Going forward, I think we are all going to be increasingly challenged to embrace change and create change in how we help our clients succeed and grow. If our industry wants to remain relevant and viable long-term, I think our very future depends on it. At the same time, I don't want to end on a doom-and-gloom message! This is—I think—an extremely exciting time. There is so much good work being done and an incredibly innovative spirit is flourishing throughout the industry. I'm really looking forward to seeing how it all unfolds and excited and proud of the fact that Gongos is a part of it.

LM: I agree; it's an exciting time and I'm actually really optimistic about where the industry is going, thanks in no small part to companies like Gongos! OK, last 2 questions: can you give me a “sneak peek” into your presentation at the TDMR? What are you covering and what do you hope for the audience to get from it?

GH: My colleague Joyce Salisbury (Senior Manager, Global Market Research –New Methods, General Motors) and I are discussing the topic, “The App is Where It's At: The Power of Untethering Online Communities”. In our session, we are going to be sharing our perspectives on how the powerful intersection of the smartphone revolution and online communities opens up an entirely new spectrum of ways to engage with and learn from consumers. We also will be talking about what we feel this means for the research industry from a generational perspective for Gen Y and beyond. We've learned a lot in the six months since the launch of i°Communities mobile, and we're looking forward to sharing our thoughts about where this rapidly emerging technology may lead us in the future.

LM: And finally, what's next for Gongos Research in 2011? What new tricks that we haven't covered do you have up your sleeves?

GH: Lenny, if I told you that it wouldn't be much of a trick then, would it??? Seriously, though, since this interview has been about TDMR and what Gongos has been working on in the technology innovation space, we haven't really talked about what we are doing on the methodology end of things to support the technology we've been developing. As researchers, we are really committed to helping our clients understand how they can best take advantage of these new technologies to produce great research. In light of that, we've got a “research on research” initiative right now using our mobile survey platform to conduct some very statistically rigorous comparisons of data collected online and via smartphones. Michael Alioto, Ph.D., our VP of Marketing Sciences, is leading this initiative and we feel as though it has the potential to strongly challenge some of the accepted “givens” about how mobile surveys and may help shape a new paradigm for them. We're really passionate about what we are doing here and are looking forward to sharing the results of this later this year. Great chatting with you, Lenny! And looking forward to seeing you at TDMR!!