

Enhancing the customer experience

Neil Lilford is the managing director of Greenfields Research. Greenfields Research offers quantitative and qualitative market research intelligence that helps organisations in achieving their competitive edge within their selected markets. Leadership spoke to Lilford to uncover the secrets of his success.

What does Greenfields Research offer clients?

Our primary research allows an organisation to identify behaviour patterns about their customers. The more data we have about the customer the greater the ability to enhance the customer experience. Digitisation within organisations has become critical in achieving a positive customer experience and enhancing the brand in order to attain competitive advantage.

We survey the client's market and provide input on segmentation. In some instances, we can develop benchmarks for organisations, within specific industries and track their progress from a strategic perspective.

There are four key areas that we focus on in order to understand the customer:

1. **Internal customer data:** Secondary data which already exists that might sit on the organisation's database, such as demographics, geography etc.
2. **Behaviour usage data:** Various touch points from a customer experience perspective, including past complaints and reasons for dissatisfaction or terminations (e.g. medical aid members).
3. **Market research:** Going out into the marketplace to conduct quantitative surveys; exploring segmentation through focus groups; and
4. **Social data:** Data that comes from the client's social media.

Please talk to us about qualitative and quantitative research.

Quantitative data is any data that can be translated into numerical form. The researcher analyses the data and applies statistics to it, to attain a result that can be generalised to an

identified larger population. The data is obtained through sampling; and then a prediction is made about what is true for the full population.

Qualitative data inquires deeply into specific experiences, with the intention of describing and exploring meaning through text or narrative, visual-based data. Themes are developed, which are exclusive to a set of participants. Focus groups, interviews and conversations with consumers will be more on the qualitative side.

Do you work with a client across industry or do you target a specific market?

We look across industries. We have become experts in identifying the client's value proposition and whether their competitors are trying to erode their value proposition.

We have been involved in cross-environments, in the consumer sector as well as business to business.

Please provide an overview of traditional and behaviour economics.

In my opinion, we make cold, calculated decisions in traditional economics. We analyse the quantitative data available to us and try to translate these various economies from both a micro and a macro perspective. Cold, rational decision-making is not always the right



approach for making decisions about a market; often markets can be irrational.

Behaviour economics helps explain the need to better understand these markets, our customers and their decision-making, in an irrational way. Behaviour economics looks at social data and at the human and is prone to several biases. We are trying to understand buying behaviours, and why people choose one brand over another.

Traditional economics, the rational way of analysing, will produce different answers to behaviour economics. Both methods are exceptionally important. I certainly wouldn't favour one over the other, but I think what we need to do is to try and look at both in attaining key insights about our markets and the economy.

What differentiates you from your competition and why?

Individual attention is a key differentiation of ours. We go the extra mile in finding solutions for our client.

We provide clear recommendations on how our clients should move forward. We see ourselves as partners to their businesses. Other differentiations are our understanding and involvement in the development of business strategies for organisations. Here we get involved in strategy facilitation, and we utilise our systems to gather information. We have strategic conversations around the where to of the strategy process and give every person the opportunity to give input to that strategy.

I think what's important is that we ensure that our research work complements and adds value to the strategy implementation process. We like to better understand where our research fits into the organisation strategy and what they're trying to really accomplish from a strategic perspective. Most traditional research companies focus specifically on the research and they leave it up to the organisation to see what they want to do with it afterwards.

The strategic side and our personalised approach are important and obviously we have got the academic and international networks that add value.

Looking at the South African market, there is an upward trend in companies trying to gain a better understanding of their customer – as far as customer insights and market optimisation are concerned.

In South Africa we don't seem to want to share information and we get nervous about allowing people to analyse our data, rather than understanding that it could elevate the company by highlighting problems that can be integrated into strategy to get things right.

At Greenfields Data Solutions we have developed systems that can help with the implementation of our findings.

In terms of agile companies, how important is an annual strategy review?

Business strategy should be a living process. It's not a document that you review once a year. Strategic objectives and business imperatives are challenged all the time and tested on a continuous basis, and I think that's as a result of the rapidly evolving technologies now, which are providing disruptions in the marketplace.

These disruptions are coming about more and more, in a very short space of time, so that we need to continuously review our business strategy to ensure that it is relevant. These days things are happening at such a fast pace that you can get left behind very quickly. Having a five- or ten-year vision is obviously important, but you need to have a dynamic strategy in place where you can achieve this vision within the timeframes set.

Disruptions in the marketplace are going to increase at an alarming rate and we are also moving into an area of what I call the 'conscious capitalism world'. The world is changing. The way that we operate now is going to be very different to the past.

We have huge global trends happening and within them, we've got technological disruptions taking place. We must start thinking differently. Business strategy has got massive challenges and should be reviewed every few months.

Is that something you would advise your clients?

Yes. We are telling companies to broaden their strategy by, for instance, increasing their number of management teams that give input to the strategy. In this way, strategy does not just

come from the members of an executive board. People at middle managements are starting to pick up new trends that they can give input to.

From a systems perspective, we excel in providing technology and systems that do not require constant training, and that can keep feeding back to the strategy.

What is your philosophy on leadership? How do you lead?

As a starting point, I have always believed that by empowering people, you get the best out of them. I allow people to take responsibility for themselves, which has been key to my personal success with my staff. Transparency and strong communication bring through trust and commitment from people.

I believe in learning organisations and encouraging people in their personal development. I see the importance of learning. I do not believe in an autocratic style of management, although in certain industries it might be appropriate. Every employee plays an important role, regardless of their status, in contributing to the success of a company.

In our organisation we give people flexibility in where they want to work. We do not expect them to come to the office, if they feel they would be more productive working at home. If there are measurable outputs in place, I believe if I provide the right lifestyle for my staff, I can get more from them. One's work is a lifestyle and a person's true potential comes out when you give them more space and responsibility.

I give my staff the right lifestyle and the space to grow and to be empowered and responsible for themselves. It works phenomenally well. ▲

Neil Lilford recognised the value of integrated system architecture, early on his career, which began at Old Mutual. Later Lilford started his own business running leadership development programs for organisations. From 2001 to 2004, he was group director on the Adcorp Holdings main board.

In 2010, Lilford completed his PhD at Sweden's prestigious KTH Royal Institute of Technology University. During these incredible five years of his life, he learnt a lot about himself, as well as about people and diversity. He brought back these world-class global learnings from Sweden and applied them to his business, which gave him insight into where he should focus for the future, and so his passion for market research and data analytics grew.

Lilford has lectured at many business schools in the past, and currently is involved with GIBS and Stellenbosch Business School. He has authored many research papers, some of which he has presented in the USA. He has also written a book on contact centre management.