

# The Value of Deep Customer Listening

By Noah M. Pines

*Pharma Companies Need to Bring In-Person Marketing Research Back into the Mix*

## Introduction: This is for you, Steve

Steve Schlesinger, you're welcome. Because hopefully what I am writing should bring more biopharma company marketing teams back to your facilities, facilities that those of us who have been in the industry for a long time spent an outsize part of our early career when we were launching brands in the 1990's and 2000's.

We used to joke about the offbeat or ill-mannered respondents, long days when completing 8-10 interviews was the norm, and the omnipresent jars of M&Ms that kept the clients conscious and awake in the dark back rooms. At the same time, my nostalgia-lensed view is that this was a kind of golden era of health care marketing research. Being in a marketing research facility watching customer interviews or focus groups was a high-fidelity learning experience, a bonding event, but more importantly, it was a time when the team could truly focus – without much distraction – on the customer.

Things have changed in the past 10 or so years. Largely gone are the storied days when teams used to spend a week or two doing a “road show,” where you would be in and out of different cities (or countries), working out of marketing research facilities by day, dining in fine restaurants by night, and then groggily traveling through planes, trains and automobiles to the next destination the next day for more.

## The Upsides and Downsides of In-Facility Research

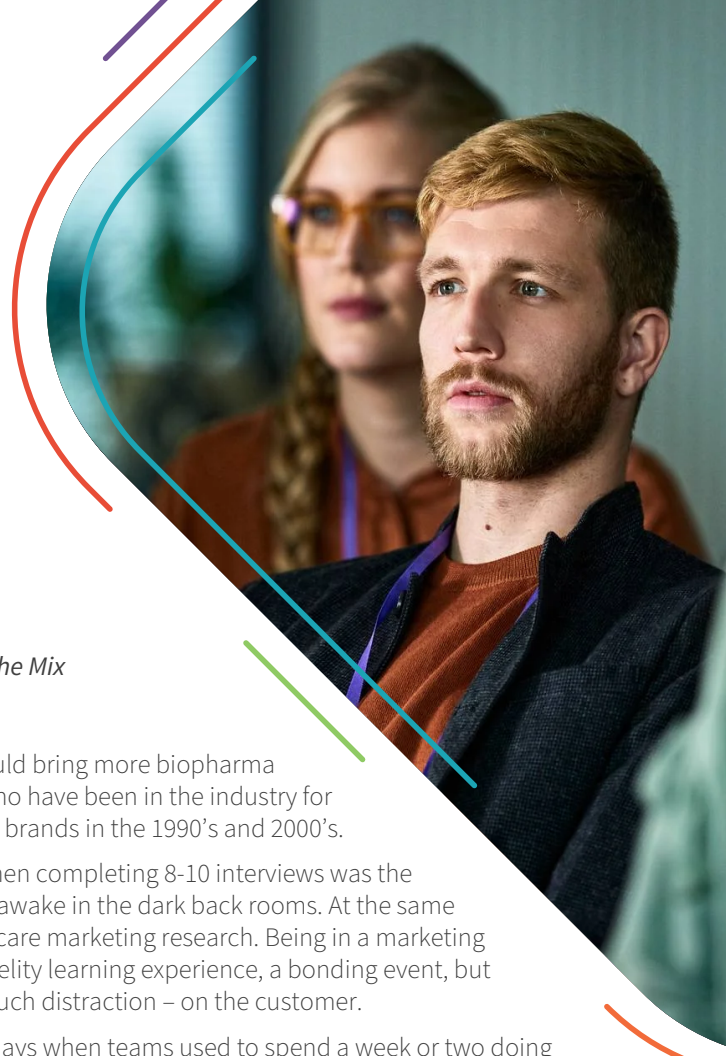
There were unambiguous upsides to this “old school” approach: marketers were able to develop highly robust, intuitive, gut-level feel for and narratives around customers' perceptions and behavior. There were customers with remarkable stories, physical appearances, or even obnoxious behaviors that left a strong impression in their minds. You could see respondents' facial expressions upon first seeing an ad concept, or their body language when they read over a TPP. Indeed, in Europe, doctors would empty the refrigerator of lager beer during an evening focus group, becoming increasingly truthful (and sometimes rowdy) as the conversation wore on.

I recall a doctor who initially appeared dressed as a homeless person, disheveled and with torn clothing, but who then turned out to be a brilliant cardiologist who was highly familiar with the product's data and mechanism of action. Or the patient who started the interview by breaking down in hysterical crying, explaining what it was like to get diagnosed with a certain condition – and the fact that she recently learned that her daughter has the same condition. Then there's my random experience at Schlesinger Iselin when one of Steve's eels escaped from the large aquarium and bit one of the women working the front desk. That is a true story.

Yes, there were downsides. As a moderator, you were on the road and away from family a lot. Your pets resented you. The long days are undoubtedly physically and intellectually arduous. There were respondents who were irascible and snooty, e.g., “I don't prescribe medications based upon an advertisement!” (but hey, doctor, guess you'd glad to pocket the honorarium nonetheless).

However, the dividend is that during the time when you were all in the facility, a lot of informal discussion was taking place where the direct observation of customers was getting blended with the marketers' and researchers' intuition and experience: and magic happened. I've personally witnessed – and many of you have too – transformative campaign ideas that were the result of profound customer insights that everyone on the team saw with their own eyes and was able to participate in first-hand.

Ask venerable industry experts like Harris Kaplan or Jay Carter: the market research back room is our version of the R&D laboratory where brilliant ideas are hatched... and/or potentially disastrous mistakes averted. We've all seen campaigns that were destined to fail either shot down, sometimes by a single respondent who identified a critical fatal flaw; or, on the other hand, campaigns that were tweaked or evolved in between interviews by an energetic upstart creative director or copywriter. Novel research methods, like ThinkGen's Customer Driven Positioning, were hatched during back-room discussion and iterative trial and error while testing different positioning territories.



## Today's Approach

Primary research is conducted by pharmaceutical companies very differently these days. I've spoken with several clients over the past few weeks who have said that they haven't been in a marketing research facility in years – certainly since the pandemic. As the pandemic was certainly a major catalyst that largely removed facility research from drug companies' toolbox, there has been an increasing adoption of virtual research due to the availability of remote research platforms such as Civicom and Forsta. I've written in previous articles about the benefits of virtual research, such as being able to include a more nationally representative sample, and/or respondents who otherwise would not travel to a facility.

I ask clients how they feel that this has changed things in terms of the dynamic of how they develop insights for their marketing teams. The answer is typically that it is very difficult to bring their entire team together and to keep them focused, as a group, on the research; and moreso that it seems difficult to impossible to convince them (and insights leadership) not only to attend in-person research, but to expend their pocketbooks on facility costs, travel, food, etc. Like swimming upstream. On top of that, executive teams in pharma are placing greater emphasis on and investing more in cultivating customer insights from a variety of non-primary sources, most notably from secondary or synthetic data sources and analytic tools.

More and more, artificial intelligence is being applied to large data sets in an effort to better understand customer needs, and to build tactics and messages that appeal to them on a more individualized basis. At the same time, those who have worked for years in the human intelligence insights business know that these methods have their limitations, and certainly offer less value when it comes to helping a team learn a category, establish their own intuitions of customers' mindset or outlook, or coalesce around a unified direction.

## The Argument for Bringing Back In-Facility Research

I would argue that brand strategy should result from the thoughtful and thorough integration of data from multiple sources. We are in a world where effective data storytelling is more and more critical to achieve customer breakthrough and commercial success – yet more elusive due to the large amount and wide spectrum of information sources.

At the same time, I am of the belief that we would be remiss if we if we did not include in our market understanding and brand building efforts a include a focused, collaborative, observational experience to help our human brains coalesce a deep understanding of the customer. While we are still doing a lot of remote, virtual interviews – which remain extremely valuable – there is nothing like doing a day or two of in-person, in-facility interviews or focus groups, where the team is present and engaged, and able to focus and discuss what they are seeing. The moniker that is often used to describe in-facility research, at least as the first day of fielding, is 'immersion.'

As our time as industry professionals these days is scattered, like confetti, the value of being together in a facility is unmistakable, and we need to be not only advocates for – but to make room in budgets for, and our schedules for – this crucial experience.

There is new technology that has elevated the in-person research experience that many do not know about, or have not experienced. In certain research facilities, there are large scale digital interactive wall boards that are essentially like a super-sized iPad, and which allow for everything from the simultaneous examination of multiple visual concepts to respondents' choosing and moving around messages with their hands. Video screens are everywhere, allowing back-room attendees to observe what is happening in the room, on the table, much more clearly – as opposed to years ago when us moderators were calling out random codes so that everyone knew which concept or message we were looking at. Sometimes it sounded like we were playing Bingo.

What is the consequence of not doing in-facility research? Frankly, in the pharmaceuticals business, we have one shot to launch a product effectively. Millions of dollars already have been spent to harvest a rare viable commercial product from an ocean of candidates. Millions more dollars will be spent in an effort to transform our new launch products into successful brands, and in the process to advance medical care and ultimately the lives of patients. Frankly, as we have moved from in-person research to a mix of remote primary research heavily supplemented with analytics, AI, etc., I, for one, worry that we put ourselves at a higher risk of missing something. And, in the process, either making a mistake, wasting a lot of time or money, or missing obvious opportunities in the process.

Admittedly I confess, I don't have any quantitative evidence to bring to bear in my arguments. Indeed, it is often very difficult to quantify the value that marketing research brings to the table in the first place. Yes, we can argue that an ATU study helps keep track of critical performance indicators like customer awareness and perceptions of a brand, or that certain messages that were identified through a research process are attributed as the rationale for the prescribing of a medication. This isn't news to anyone.

But what I am describing in this article as the value of in-person, in-facility research, I'm sorry but I have not conducted a controlled, prospective head-to-head experiment that examined the differential efficacy of today's approach vs. how we used to do things. But hey, head-to-head studies are rarely conducted in the pharmaceutical industry lol.

I think we all do know, especially those of us who have been in the industry a long time, and who have spent a lot of time interviewing respondents and then identifying the key learnings and insights, that there is discernably more value from having a respondent in a facility (or even their own medical office!) so that you, as the marketer, can physically see them, watch them, and listen to them in an undistracted manner; and then sit down with others afterwards to discuss and debate what you saw, especially when there is a highly consequential decision that the research is informing.

I hope this essay give more ammunition to marketing researchers urging their internal clients to do (and fund!) in-person customer learning, and hope to see you in one of Steve's facilities soon!