

# Introduction

*“Anything that takes us out of our comfort zones for a while can act as a reminder that the past we are used to may not be our best future.”*

Charles Handy, author and professor

The insights industry is in trouble. It's not growing, despite an explosion of information, decreasing costs and an increase in the need for informed decision making. And it still does not have real influence in the boardroom.

It is too often focused on what happened, and not on where to go and what to do next. It is drowning in data while thirsting for wisdom. It focuses on methodology instead of decision making. Its methods are based on century-old approaches that ignore new understanding of how we think and act. And it is gathering its data from people it treats like chattel, which leads to the results being unreliable if not downright wrong.

It's time for an insights revolution.

Many of the things the industry does today need to stop. And there are a great number of things we need to start doing. That's what this book is about.

It is powered by interviews with over 30 thoughtful insights professionals, marketers and strategists from around the world. Their commitment to insights and their stories of successful transformation are inspiring, but their concerns about the future of the industry are palpable. In addition to the interviews, I draw on a wide-ranging body of literature, as well as original research on research.

My desire is that this book helps you think afresh about what we do today, and what we should do tomorrow. I hope it can help explain to stakeholders why the things we have done in the past will not work in the future. I want it to encourage the industry to treat the people we gather information from with respect, so that they continue to grace us with their feedback.

In the first chapter, we set the stage by looking at the changes that are to come, how we got to where we are, and what our future could look like. The imperative for the insights function to transform from being an order-taker to an integrated and agenda-setting part of the business is explored in chapter 2.

The value of looking beyond the myopia of surveys to the broader context of all information is covered in chapter 3. Chapter 4 explains how asking people “why?” is not just unhelpful, it is dangerously misleading. And chapter 5 speaks to the folly of the long survey and the value of an agile and iterative approach.

Citizens and consumers are the focus of the remaining chapters. The often tone-deaf way we try to connect with people is examined in chapter 6, and we consider ways we can develop a much more positive and sustainable relationship with them in chapter 7. Finally, we examine how the changing ways people communicate will require us to completely rethink the ways questions are asked.

When I started my career in 1987, I was a market researcher. I have also been called a pollster. A newspaper once called me an upholsterer, but I think that was a misunderstanding.

Today, I would identify as an insights professional. That’s because the world is changing. Surveys were once the primary, if not sole,

source of insights into what consumers and citizens thought, felt and did. Today, we are swimming in a sea of behavioral data, and we know that our emotions can often be better measured through observation and biometrics. The profession is no longer just about commissioning and executing surveys. It is about absorbing information of all types and translating it into action.

“Insights” is the transition point between data and a decision. The insight is not the end goal. The next step is what matters. The insight is what the market research/consumer insights/business intelligence/market analytics function currently delivers. We need to move past that to providing solutions to the question “What do we do next?”

# Chapter 1 – A Time of Transformation

*“If you dislike change, you're going to dislike irrelevance even more.”*

General Eric Ken Shinseki, United States Army, retired

The world of market research is at a tipping point. It can't continue as it is, and it is about to change dramatically. The critical question is will it evolve, or become extinct? Both are definite possibilities.

The old ways of conducting market research are increasingly ineffective, and a wide array of new information options is available.

For almost a century, survey research had a lock on insights. Want to know what people did? Do a survey. Wish to understand what people are thinking? Do a focus group to figure out what is going on, and then quantify it. There were few other reliable sources of specific information on people's choices. But the world has changed, drastically.

The speed at which decisions need to be made has also increased dramatically. “We'll have the results to you next quarter” just doesn't cut it anymore. Information must be managed dynamically. As Finn Raben, Director General of ESOMAR, told me: “We can no longer afford to be the grey mice that live in a cupboard and say, ‘Ah, but you know, it took six months, and it is perfect research.’ Too late, pal. The company's moved on.”

The world is awash with data on exactly what people do, when they do it, and whom they do it with. This flood of information is reshaping how we learn, what we can know, and the insights we can generate. The challenge now is piecing together the puzzle.

Nobody really knows exactly how much data there is, and how much data is being generated, because the volume is growing so fast. It's commonly suggested that about 90% of all the data in the world today has been created in the past few years. But let's just agree on this: we are drowning in data and desperately need people to transform the data into insights that shape decision making.

This need to tame and focus data is why market research professionals have an incredible opportunity. They are well positioned to harness this surge of information. But are they ready? Are they willing to make the changes necessary to move away from simply "doing surveys" to generating insights? I know that if we don't evolve we will be left behind.

## **Is the end near?**

In writing this book, I had the privilege of talking to dozens of researchers, strategists and marketers around the globe. There was overwhelming consensus that change is coming, and quickly. "I think it's going to be fascinating to see where things go, but I don't think it's going to continue the way it's going for another 10 years," said Shawn Henry of Camorra Research in New Zealand. Why? Because the traditional market research approach has lost its lock on knowledge.

"In the beginning we had almost a monopoly on insights," says Antony R. Barton, Director of Product Innovation and Marketing Insights at Intel, "and that put us in a very special position, because nobody else had access to data. We had to do this survey, or we had to do this discrete choice, or this set of focus groups, because nobody else could get the data. And then, all of a sudden, there is this explosion of data. There are lots of ways to get at insights. I think the industry has struggled with that. Who needs a survey that takes nine

weeks to complete? Or who needs focus groups where I will get back to you in six weeks?”

Elizabeth Moore, Director of Research, Insights and Analytics at Telstra in Australia, is one who has seen a big change. “I think the market research industry is really at a pivotal point,” she says. “Traditional models are being disrupted, and the way we buy insights is changing significantly. There’s a whole range of questions that, in the past, we would have gone to a market research house to help us answer, but we’re now actually using big data and analyzing our data.”

Shawn Henry foresees the need for an “Armageddon,” a “violent change, where somebody comes in and does something dramatically different that basically makes everybody else antiquated and wipes out a good majority of the existing research companies. I think there’s going to have to be a major disruption,” he says. “I just don’t see the industry being bright enough to change on their own. It’s that whole ‘if I’m not forced to change I’m probably not going to, especially if people are paying me money.’”

He is not the only one who sees the potential for an entirely different model that disrupts the status quo. Patrick Comer, Founder and CEO of Lucid—itself a disruptor in the sample world—recently told a cautionary tale at SampleCon, a sample industry conference. “The real threat is outside this room,” he said. “It has nothing to do with other companies that are not present here. It is things outside our industry.”

“I am reminded of the story of the New York Stock Exchange. I don’t know if you remember, but there were two exchanges: The New York and the American Stock Exchanges. They fought over every single public offering for 100 years. It was a brutal battle down on Wall Street, between these two big exchanges. Then the internet happened, and within 10 years, almost all their liquidity left to go to the electronic exchanges: NASDAQ, all the ECNs, and the rest. They [the New York and American Stock Exchanges] had to merge, and now they represent a minority of all exchange traffic in equities in the U.S.”

“That was an external technology threat, not a ‘did they add a new feature set, or win a new client, or take another company public.’ That’s a big lesson for us in the room. We can get caught up in the ins and outs of who is doing what in this room, and not on what is happening everywhere.”

At that same conference, Mark Menig, COO at PureSpectrum, went so far as to ponder whether there will even be a need for people’s opinions: “In 10 years’ time, will the human respondent even be a component of our data collection process? Or will we simply move in a direction of AI, machine algorithms, machine learning, probabilistic exercises, and Monte Carlo scenarios, which not only eliminate the human respondent from the data, but give you more accurate and more realistic outcomes for the insights you generate.”

While there is widespread agreement that the future will have multiple streams of data, most see an ongoing role for survey-based research. The question is, what kind of change is coming?

While there is an infinite number of possible futures for the world of market research, there are three scenarios that I think are instructive. The first is the example of dinosaurs: mass extinction, but with a thriving set of descendants that do not resemble the mighty T. Rex. Another is shoemakers: once the sole source of footwear, they have been displaced by mass production driven by a relatively small number of designers and engineers. The third analog is video: once produced by a select few, it is now available to everyone, and is consumed more than ever.

## **Dinosaurs today**

Dinosaurs are one of our society’s enduring fascinations—just ask any four-year-old. One reason they capture our imagination is that they are a powerful reminder that the world changes, sometimes in the blink of an eye. Dinosaurs grew to the size of jetliners and ruled the earth for more than 100 million years. Then everything changed. It’s generally assumed dinosaurs became extinct. But the chickadee chirping outside your window and the seagull trying to steal your

potato chips at the beach are reminders that, while T. Rex no longer rules the earth, the descendants of pterodactyls are everywhere.

Pterodactyls had the wingspan of an F-16 jet fighter. They were powerful, and terrifying. But they are long gone. So why did the dinosaurs that evolved into birds survive? Research suggests it was because they were smaller and nimbler.

What can we learn from dinosaurs? The nimble survive. And when behemoths fall, they fall hard.

This scenario suggests the demise of the market research industry as we know it. Large suppliers: gone. Big market research departments: so transformed as to be unrecognizable. But the insights function soars on, just in a radically different form.

## **The cobbler's children**

For most of human history, shoes were made by hand. Skilled workers practiced their craft to create individually crafted shoes—all very similar, but each one slightly different. The process was repetitive, but custom. Just like surveys today.

Then came the Napoleonic Wars, and the Industrial Revolution. The need for huge numbers of boots for the soldiers of the British Army was the impetus for an engineer named Marc Brunel to devise a system for automating shoemaking. Sir Richard Phillips visited Brunel's factory and was greatly impressed by the speed and precision with which the boots were made. He also noted how the process eliminated the need for skilled labor and greatly reduced the cost.

In 1817, in *Morning's Walk from London to Kew*, Phillips wrote, "In another building I was shown his manufactory of shoes, which, like the other, is full of ingenuity, and, in regard to subdivision of labour, brings this fabric on a level with the oft-admired manufactory of pins. Every step in it is effected by the most elegant and precise machinery; while, as each operation is performed by one hand, so each shoe passes through twenty-five hands, who complete from the hide, as

supplied by the currier, a hundred pairs of strong and well-finished shoes per day. All the details are performed by the ingenious application of the mechanic powers; and all the parts are characterised by precision, uniformity, and accuracy. As each man performs but one step in the process, which implies no knowledge of what is done by those who go before or follow him, so the persons employed are not shoemakers, but wounded soldiers, who are able to learn their respective duties in a few hours. The contract at which these shoes are delivered to Government is 6s. 6d. per pair, being at least 2s. less than what was paid previously for an unequal and cobbled article."

Under this model, the shoe market was revolutionized. Once a precious and singular possession, shoes are now designed by a handful of people, manufactured with little manual labor and sold for anything from a pittance to a pretty penny—depending upon the company's ability to add value.

How many shoes do you have? I would wager it is many more than your great, great, great grandparents had at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And while each shoe is manufactured in the multi-thousands, it is rare to find someone wearing the exact same shoes as you.

In this scenario, survey research enjoys a much larger market than it does today, and is automated. This enables variety and scale. There would be just a handful of researchers designing studies, but there would be many more jobs for people whose role it is to sell the results by making them attractive and applicable.

## **Video everywhere**

It is hard to imagine that not long ago video was rare and very expensive to produce. It is estimated that within the next few years, 80% of all internet traffic will be streaming video. As I take the subway to work, it seems half the people are gazing at their phones watching some form of video. The interesting thing is that most of them are watching completely different content. It is produced in great volume, but also in great variety. It wasn't always this way. I've been producing video, on and off, since high school. Back then, the only way I could get access to a video camera was to sweet-talk

my art teacher into kindly asking the school's audio-visual technician if I could use the one camera the school had. The picture was grainy, the camera needed a lot of light, and it was tethered to a very large, non-portable recorder. And there were no editing facilities, so everything needed to be shot in sequence.

After high school, I joined a local artists' association, where they had a couple of video cameras, including one that was "portable"—if you consider an enormous shoulder-mounted camera and a 20-pound recorder portable. That gear was worth about \$50,000 in today's money.

To get access to editing equipment, I had to either talk the university into letting me use the film school's very rudimentary two-machine set-up, or I had to produce material for the local cable station—which had a very simple analog mixer.

Today I carry in my pocket a video camera (some call it a phone) that is vastly superior to the artists' association's camera. And I can edit the results on my laptop with infinite flexibility. With so much video being produced, there has been an immense increase in the number of people who make their living producing an incredible diversity of content. Business and personal use of video is up dramatically.

In this scenario, market research becomes quick and easy to execute, and is much more widely used. But it remains a craft—the skill of the maker determines how valuable the content is.

## **The future is in our hands**

It's impossible to know which scenario will play out. It is quite probable that some combination of all these scenarios will transpire. But one thing these scenarios have in common is a radical change, creating new winners and losers. This change is not likely to be a single event. It is likely to be an ongoing process of continual, rapid evolution.

Disney CEO Bob Iger wrote in *The Economist* about the transforming world of media. His words are equally applicable to the domain of

insights: “We once used the term ‘disruption’ to describe all of this [sweeping change], but the word now seems like a quaint relic of a bygone era, implying a paradigm shift with a beginning and an end, a before and after. What we are experiencing now is a state of perpetual permutation.” To understand how we need to continually change and adapt, it is important to think about how we got here.

We have processes, customs, and assumptions that history and tradition have bequeathed us. Some of these will be enduring qualities. And some will be anchors that could snare us and tether us in place just as the flood waters of change rise and drown us.

Let’s look at the forces that have shaped the insights industry today, so that we can be ready for tomorrow.

## **The roots of market research**

Surveys are so common (“On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend this book to a friend or a colleague?”) that it is hard to imagine a time when they did not exist. But, indeed, what we call the market research industry is less than 100 years old—a mere blip in humanity’s journey.

The direct antecedent of today’s survey research industry started in the 1920s, but it came to prominence when George Gallup used sampling theory to gather results that enabled him to correctly predict the 1936 presidential election. At the same time, *Literary Digest’s* “straw poll” got the election results spectacularly wrong (more on that in chapter 6). This made the importance of good sampling crystal clear.

This triumph of “scientific” surveying traces back to three earlier developments: social research, psychometrics, and sampling theory.

## **Social research**

Social research efforts emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Famous early studies included Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London*—an in-depth look at the social conditions of the poor—and the *Hull House Maps and Papers of 1895*—a study of poverty in a portion of Chicago. These studies were not the kind of very narrow survey research we do today. They were more sprawling, omnivorous investigations—the kind we talk more about in Chapter 3.

“In Booth's time, the survey did not specify or imply specific modes or instruments of data gathering, such as interviews or questionnaires,” writes Jean Converse in her excellent *Survey Research in the United States: Roots and Emergence 1890-1960*.

“Indeed, as we have seen, the early social surveys used a melange of techniques—the more the better—to gather data: questionnaire, interview, letter, direct observation, participant observation, systematic counts of observed behaviors, physical examination and measurement of houses and human beings; family budgets of income and expenditure; and aggregate data on population, migration, births and deaths, health and disease, wages, and prices.”

Booth's investigation inspired people because it revealed that which was ill-understood and painted a compelling and unsettling portrait of life in London. It did what research does best: expose the richness of reality.

## **Psychometrics and the measurement of attitudes**

Booth's enthusiastic investigations were deep and rich, but they did not embrace the kind of formal quantitative methods of asking questions that are so commonplace today. More focused and quantitative surveys sprang largely from the development of psychological testing.

The first modern intelligence test was developed in 1904 by Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon. They were commissioned by the French Ministry of Education to devise a test that would distinguish “mentally retarded” children from normally intelligent but lazy children. At the same time, others were developing psychological measures that aimed at providing a precise account of belief and behavior.

James McKeen Cattell, in his classic 1895 paper *Mental Tests and Measurements*, set the groundwork when he wrote, “Psychology cannot attain the certainty and exactness of the physical sciences, unless it rests on a foundation of experiment and measurement. A step in this direction could be made by applying a series of mental tests and measurements to a large number of individuals.”

The study of attitudes and their measurement began to flourish in academic social psychology in the early 1920s. If we want to reflect on why we use the measures we do, it is crucial to understand that the psychologists who developed these measures worked primarily with their university students. Their interest was in developing academic measures of complex issues, and students were ideal.

According to Converse, “First, one needed people with some talent for attitudes—literate, comprehending, articulate, and self-conscious to some extent about their intellectual, political, and moral positions; people, in sum, who were trained in having attitudes . . . . Students also did not pose problems of academic translation—that is, they did not require the simplified wordings, less abstract ideas, and concerns and situations that were closer to common experiences among the broad public. Second, one needed people with the time and tolerance, and students could be—gently—imposed upon.”

Does that sound like the person doing your survey, who was attracted by an ad offering to “put cash back into your wallet”? Do they have “time and tolerance”?

This has important implications for us, because many of the types of complex scales and measures we use trace back to the work of these psychologists. We inherited a template for how to ask questions that

has very little to do with the world we live in today. We discuss the impact of that, and the need for change, in Chapter 8.

## **Sampling theory**

There are not too many people who get excited about sampling. But representative and reliable sample is the backbone of survey research. Without it, the whole enterprise will fail. Bad sample means incorrect results, leading to wrong decisions. With bad sample, we imperil the reputation of the entire industry.

The notion of sampling is also relatively young. Anders N. Kiaer, the director of the Norwegian Bureau of Statistics, first proposed sampling at a meeting of the International Statistical Institute (ISI) in 1895. Many people thought that the idea of not using a census to measure the population was heretical. Kiaer was able to show that his methods, as he refined them, produced results that matched the census. But it was 1906 before an Englishman named Sir Arthur L. Bowley introduced the idea of probability theory in sampling at an ISI conference. He was the first to suggest the error in a sample could be measured. And he was so bold as to suggest samples could replace a census.

Polish statistician Jerzy Neyman ushered in the modern era of sampling with his 1934 publication *On the Two Different Aspects of the Representative Method: The Method of Stratified Sampling and the Method of Purposive Selection*. “Sampling statisticians view the 1930–1940 period as the practical start of their profession,” writes Robert Groves, former Director of the U.S. Census Bureau. “Neyman’s article in 1934 convincingly presented evidence that probability sampling offered bias-free estimates and measurable sampling errors. The early founders of that field in the United States told of the excitement of young statisticians in Ames, Iowa, and Washington, DC, studying his paper, bringing Neyman over to visit, and teaching each other its implications. There is even an oft-repeated story of their using the meeting table in the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture’s office (then a department that was a hotbed of survey development) to meet after the workday to discuss new developments.” The work of Neyman and the U.S. government

researchers also shaped the efforts of market research pioneers Gallup, Starch and Roper.

The new scientific approach to sampling gave survey research the representativeness and reliability it needed to have widespread application. Now researchers knew they could ask a properly selected subset of the population a question and get the same answer twice. Without those advances, the business of market research would not exist today.

Good thing Neyman is not alive to see how most sampling is done these days. He would be appalled. Sadly, as an industry, we have largely abandoned what was learned about representative samples. This has been driven by three powerful forces: a decline in trust, a change in how people communicate and—most importantly—an insatiable desire to reduce the cost of doing research.

## **Sample is research's Achilles' heel**

What started as a slow, downward slide in sample quality is now a race to the bottom, at blistering speed. Unless we quickly course-correct, it is sure to end in a terrible, and potentially fatal, crash.

How did we get from Neyman's brilliant advances to sampling so sloppy it provides misleading results?

When George Gallup sent out his interviewers door to door, research was a novelty. Public trust was high and ordinary people were flattered to have someone ask their opinion. According to Groves, "With response rates often over 90 percent, there was more concern with contact rates than refusal rates." But people stopped wanting to give up their time, and they became less comfortable inviting strangers into their homes. Response rates declined, and so did representativeness. Besides, door-to-door surveying was slow and expensive.

At the same time face-to-face surveys were becoming less popular, telephones became so commonplace that almost everyone had one. Researchers started using telephone surveys, even though they did not

yield a fully representative sample because not everyone had a telephone. But their cost and convenience, and the speed with which you could do telephone surveys, were very seductive. And the method was still yielding good results and response rates were great—for a while. Then people stopped answering their phones, and then they stopped having landlines. Besides, everyone was using these newfangled computers, and this thing called the World Wide Web.

So, research followed the people online, for the most part. Researchers were not too troubled by the fact that not everyone had or used a computer—because they had gotten used to a lack of full representation with telephone sampling. Then the industry came up with new and clever ways to attract people to complete surveys. And the quality of that sampling (and sample sources) became wildly variable. We cover that in Chapter 6.

While most research migrated online, some organizations stayed with the telephone. Some, for cost reasons, continued to use interactive voice response (IVR). That’s the famous “Press one if your answer is ‘yes.’ Press 2 if your answer is ‘no.’” IVR has a very, very low response rate. Its representativeness and reliability are, therefore, highly questionable. However, because it is automated, it is very inexpensive to call tens of thousands of numbers—even if almost all of them ignore the call, or hang up.

The use of IVR is the source of an important cautionary tale about how bad sample can very publicly destroy the reputation of research and undermine our industry.

## **Conflicting results, insults and lawsuits**

Calgary, Alberta, Canada is a beautiful city of just over 1.2 million people. It is picturesquely situated at the confluence of two rivers in the foothills of the majestic Rockies. It is also a place where polling went horribly awry, in a very public way.

The incumbent mayor of Calgary, Naheed Nenshi, was running for a third term in late 2017. Mainstreet Research, headed by Quito Maggi, was doing polling for Postmedia, a company that owns two prominent

newspapers: the *Calgary Sun* and the *Calgary Herald*. Mainstreet and Postmedia released three polls in the weeks before the election, predicting Mayor Nenshi would lose to a relatively unknown challenger named Bill Smith. These results were at odds with other companies' surveys—which were only released later—as well as the mayor's personal polling.

Local political science professors expressed skepticism, and the Twittersphere blew up with statements like: “Would never trust this poll . . . it's Postmedia propaganda” and “Cons[ervatives] just trying to swing an election with rigged poles [sic]. . . we are not impressed.”

When a poll was publicly released that contradicted their numbers, Mainstreet's Quito Maggi tweeted, "If polling were poker, this is the part where I would go all in; I would bet \$10 million we're closer than that pseudo poll today."

When political scientist Duane Bratt tweeted, “Asking Canadians just released a poll on mayor's race that is pretty much the opposite of previously released polls by Mainstreet,” Maggi fired back with “Your credibility is getting stretched the more you comment, let's just see in 5 days.”

When the mayor's pollster Brian Singh publicly expressed his doubts, Mainstreet slapped him with a “cease and desist” letter threatening legal action for making libelous statements. The letter said that if the mayor's pollster continued to make “accusations or refuse[d] to retract [his] previous statements publicly,” Mainstreet would “be forced to take legal recourse for the damages inflicted.”

Mainstreet executive vice-president David Valentin also came out swinging, suggesting commentators were biased. "Certainly I've seen a lot of behaviour from political scientists that I would say is quite shocking in this election campaign, and some of it, quite frankly, is quite appalling," he told 660 News. Valentin also said that the company planned on "singling people out" for "what exactly it is they said and did" about the poll results. "I think anyone who comments to

the media should expect that their comments are going to receive scrutiny after the fact," he said. "I think that's fair."

The Friday before the election, Valentin tweeted, "Some people are going to have a very bad Monday, but not me."

Mainstreet predicted an 11-point lead for Smith. In the end, Naheed Nenshi was re-elected with an 8-point lead over his top competitor. Whoops.

## **We all get to share in the hangover**

On the Mainstreet website the next day Maggi wrote, "On Monday night, I watched with utter shock and embarrassment as results came in for municipal elections across Alberta and our final prediction in the Calgary municipal election was completely and totally wrong. Our final tally showed an 11-point win for challenger Bill Smith over incumbent Naheed Nenshi. The result was a 7-point win for Nenshi. Our final poll had underestimated the incumbent's vote by 12% and overestimated the challenger by 8% for a total deviation of over 20%."

Maggi admitted to CBC News that the second poll his company did, which had Smith ahead by 17 points, was based on a "wonky sample." "We knew that it wasn't a great sample, but it's the sample we get," he said.

Pollster Marc Henry of ThinkHQ Public Affairs, who conducted internal polling during the race, said his research showed that Nenshi had started with a 20-point lead among decided voters, and that the gap narrowed during a contest that got nasty. If that's the case, then Mainstreet could have been off by as much as 37% in the earlier stages of the race.

"We didn't put this number out there to be malicious, or interfere with democracy, or anything like what we've been accused of," Maggi told Global News. Mainstreet conducted a full investigation and promised to tweak their methodology.

## **Saskatchewan party leadership race**

A few months later, Mainstreet did polling in neighboring Saskatchewan. There, the very popular Saskatchewan Party was electing a new leader to replace Brad Wall who, for many years, was the most favored premier in Canada.

Mainstreet released numbers a few days before that election. Global News reported Ken “Cheveldayoff has 46.2 per cent support among decided and leaning Saskatchewan Party voters, with Scott Moe the second choice at 21.5 per cent. They are followed by Alanna Koch (19.5 per cent), Gordon Wyant (9.7 per cent) and Tina Beaudry-Mellor (3.1 per cent).”

In the end, Scott Moe received 54% of the vote, and Cheveldayoff came third. Whoops.

## **The impact on public perception**

Reg Downs is Senior Advisor to the Premier of Saskatchewan. He has also handled his party’s polling file for all of its provincial election campaigns. These kinds of bad polls cause him problems because they influence public opinion. We spoke after the leadership campaign. “The problem is,” he said, “media outlets do publish these things. People do tend to read them. I don't know to what extent they influence people, but I think they create an impression this party is winning, or this party is losing, and we have seen some terribly inaccurate stuff recently.”

This puts Reg and the Party in a difficult position. “They put out some really inaccurate polls in Saskatchewan here,” said Downs, “and then you're questioning their accuracy and their methodology. When you do that as a political party, it's difficult because you can come across as whiney. ‘Oh, you are just saying that because you are losing.’ No, we are saying that because they're inaccurate and they have a history of being inaccurate. So you are always having this discussion: Do we just ignore it? Do we let it go? Do you try to counter it in some way?”

He also noted poor-quality polls undermine the reputation of research. “A few examples of bad polls can make people question the entire industry,” he said. “Even when you have what we consider to be an accurate pollster, people are sort of skeptical of the whole industry.”

I use these examples not to pick on IVR, because there are many other terrible ways to sample too, but because they dramatically demonstrate how bad methodology can bring the industry into public disrepute. In recent years, more poor-quality polls (combined with an over-enthusiastic media) have caused many to question the validity of survey research.

Following the erroneous predictions leading up to the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the *New York Times* reported, “It was a rough night for number crunchers. And for the faith that people in every field — business, politics, sports and academia — have increasingly placed in the power of data.”

Some very public polling misses in the U.K. provoked the House of Lords Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media to commission a report to consider the “effects of political polling and digital media on politics.” In its report, the committee stated, “Our central concern was that, if it is becoming less likely that polls can provide accurate estimates of the likely election outcomes, then there is a significant risk that future elections will be affected by misleading information, potentially distorting the democratic process.”

The report went on to say that the available data on longer-term polling performance trends suggest that “it would not be correct to say that we are witnessing a decline in the accuracy of polling” but that “although polling performance has not worsened in a statistically significant way, there is little doubt that confidence in polling has been shaken.”

This skepticism has implications far beyond political polling. CEOs, marketers and other stakeholders in the industry follow the news too. And so do the public we ask to answer our surveys. After the Calgary debacle, Canadian industry group Marketing Research Intelligence Association launched their own investigation. Their CEO said, “We

don't want the Canadian public to perceive that polling is a wasted exercise. Because it isn't, it is the voice of the people, but it has to be performed properly and it has to be reported properly."

Amen.

## **Moving forward, conscious of our past**

Jesse Ventura, professional wrestler, actor, author and former Governor of Minnesota, gave us his version of an oft-recycled pearl of wisdom: “Learn from history or you're doomed to repeat it.” In a time of evolution, repeating history is good, if what you are doing works. But repeating a dysfunctional approach is a sure road to extinction.

When we look back at our heritage, we can identify some ways in which we have moved away from our roots—much to our detriment. In other ways we have clung to the old ways—retaining methods that grind against the reality of today. We need to be aware of our heritage and think about whether it is helpful or hurtful.

The omnivorous approach of Charles Booth was very fruitful. He collected all sorts of information—including surveys. But it was his synthesis of all those sources that made his endeavors so impactful. We have too often been seduced by the easy answer of the survey. Context is critical. We should embrace many sources of information and let them all shape our perspective. We must return to our heritage.

Psychometricians were the kings of precision when survey research was a fledgling, attempting its first flights. But their influence imprinted on us too deeply. Methods that focused on precision in measuring the attitudes of 20<sup>th</sup> century university students in a laboratory are unhelpful when it comes to asking 21<sup>st</sup> century people on their mobile phone what they think about a new package of bacon. We need to rethink our assumptions about what’s a good question.

The early raging debates about the validity of thoughtful approaches to sampling have been tossed aside for savings in cost and an increase in speed. This is insanity. It undermines the very premise of providing information that is true. Without truth, there is no point to an insights industry. Let’s remember how good sampling gave wings to our fledgling endeavor.

We need to change.

## **Change is good**

In the following chapters, we look at some of our current practices and how they might benefit from change. Change is not a bad thing; it is healthy, even though it is often hard.

Let's leave the last words in this chapter to Robert Groves, of the U.S. Census Bureau: "Survey research is not dying; it is changing. The self-report sample survey provides insights into the thoughts, aspirations, and behaviors of large populations in ways that data tracking naturally occurring behaviors are unlikely ever to capture. The survey method has strengths and deficits that are reflections of the society that it measures; ... [it] is governed by norms that can and do change. Survey research has always and must always adapt to those changes."