

What if we could reinvent the future?

Much of research is asking ‘why’ – asking the questions that will inform ‘what’ will happen next.

For the final *Impact* report, we’re asking instead: ‘What if?’. What if research could upend our current notions? What could thinking differently bring us?

Over the next few pages, we ask members of the industry to respond to a series of ‘what if’ questions. By asking ‘what if’, we can turn our attention to all sorts of potential futures. By reimagining the future, researchers can reinvent the path of the industry.





What if policy-makers and the media truly understood people?

Ben Page, global chief executive, Ipsos

One of the enduring challenges of the research industry is its own lack of confidence about what it does. We should worry much less about whether we ‘truly’ understand people. We already do – they are just complex! We should be much prouder of the ability to predict human behaviour with high degrees of accuracy in the near term – but also be thoughtful about the fact that no-one can predict the future long term.

Where research can make a difference is being a leader in the conversation about possible futures – along with other domain

‘experts’ – and get better not at ‘telling the time’, but at communicating key messages simply and succinctly for decision-makers: laying out the arguments and trade-offs. This is where much insight simply stops currently.

What if we stopped our clients from collecting vast amounts of data that they want – because it helps them feel secure – but can’t use properly? What if we got them to focus on a broader range of signals and encouraged them to move beyond short-term activities, to proper engagement with the long term, using a fraction of the resources they spend on the here and now?

“Attitudes and emotions around many products remain constant, evolving only slightly to meet the conditions of modern life”



What if research samples could be more representative?

Rebecca Cole, managing director, Cobalt Sky, chair, MRS Representation in Research steering group, and MRS main board member

In a future where research samples are more representative, our sector would be able to fulfil its potential of being at the forefront of making visible the experiences, needs and perspectives of groups that, historically, have been underheard.

Practitioners will have cultivated a more widely representative and inclusive respondent pool that is more engaged with research that they can relate to and see the benefits of. Market research will be seen as something that everyone respects, understands, and is keen to participate in.

The research being designed is better and more inclusive

from the start, and insights derived from it are more relevant and impactful. We will have been able to reduce the inevitable bias that can arise from non-representative studies, by reaching the people on whom current research projects are missing out.

Research buyers will be able to make better policy and brand decisions, and ensure that they are serving all their stakeholders, rather than just majority groups. We could ensure everyone has a voice and that that voice is represented authentically.

We’d see an end to the old adage of ‘hard to reach’ samples. People aren’t hard to reach – they are just not being asked.



What if we could learn from the past?

Phyllis Macfarlane, chair, Archive of Market and Social Research (AMSR) contents committee

Do we ever learn anything from history? This is hotly debated, but I believe that, as researchers, we must. If we think that only the present matters, we may be condemned to repeat ourselves, forever researching the same innovations in the hope of obtaining a different result.

Historical market research, as preserved in the Archive, has much to teach us. In polling research, the trends and repetitions are easily tracked through Mori and NOP collections – essential in election years, such as this, to help make sense of what swings and seat changes might mean for our democracy.

Attitudes and emotions around many products remain constant, evolving only slightly to meet the conditions of modern life. For example, 1970s’ qualitative research on sweets and chocolates has almost as much to tell us about how to innovate in the category as if it were conducted today.

What if, instead of wasting our research budgets on relearning things we already know, there were a vast, searchable, free resource, packed with gems from the past, that could inform, educate and astonish us with how much, and how little, has changed?

What if researchers could take on a new role in society?



Kenny Imafidon, co-founder, ClearView Research

Researchers should see ourselves much more as storytellers. We have to give more weight to the influence that we have and understand the importance of engaging with diverse groups. We should also understand that we have a role to play in helping people to see things in a more asset-based way, particularly when talking about communities. I feel that we can do much more to champion the assets in communities and not just see everything from a deficit mindset.

If people, every time they saw themselves as researchers, also saw themselves as storytellers – not storytelling as in creating fiction, but talking about reality – I think things would be totally different.

As researchers, it's important to bring the interdisciplinary into what we're doing – for me, that is the future. Enough people land in research who didn't see it as a career. I don't think that's the issue, but I do think there's something we can do around getting more people from diverse backgrounds to enter.

I'd also like to see researchers asking better questions – not just asking people about things, but to reimagine things. It's also about understanding that knowledge is in communities, not just in some academic article, and about seeing participants much more as partners – that is a change in their status and how we engage with them.

In that future, our research would be much more intersectional, more nuanced, and we would be much more confident, because we're involving people who are experts by experience. By partnering and working with communities, we can get better at understanding what is useful.

Researchers can also expand clients' world views, and be much more intentional about that. Sometimes, the questions clients want to ask are not the right questions.



What if research can help to solve the climate crisis?



Lian Mico, delivery development director, Human8, and member, MRS Sustainability Council

weight as commerciality in our analysis, insights and client recommendations, and welcoming 'nature' onto our boards to achieve this.

A. It can...

I recently discovered that, if we can reduce the carbon footprint of Human8's top-five clients by just 0.5%, we'll cut emissions by 19.5 million tonnes per year. That's the equivalent of driving an SUV non-stop for 15,000 years.

Now, imagine that all research agencies take a similar pledge; the potential we possess to affect positive change is astronomical!

To achieve this, we need to first educate ourselves about how we can effect positive climate change, gaining a better understanding of greenhouse gases and the biggest carbon contributors of businesses in the research industry. We must then embrace the 'planet as a stakeholder' concept, giving climate the same

B. ...and it should.

If research doesn't help to solve the climate crisis – and soon – we can say hello to frequent wildfires, prolonged droughts and increased air pollution. We might choose to ignore this ecological impact, but we can't ignore the impact on our commercial endeavours.

From the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive mandate to stricter environmental, social and governance reporting worldwide, businesses and brands that ignore the climate crisis won't stay afloat for long.



What if research could attract more school leavers?

LaShanda Seaman, associate director, qualitative research and engagement centre, Ipsos UK, and MRS main board member

'I just fell into research' is a well-worn way of describing research career paths, but the privilege of access that many have benefited from is often overlooked. It's a space that can feel removed from, or inaccessible to, underrepresented groups, including school leavers – mostly because of awareness.

We do not have to look far for inspiration on the merits of diversifying our industry. The technology sector showcases how diversity and non-traditional pathways can enrich an industry, fostering innovation and growth and broadening the perspectives included. Similarly, in market research, widening the employment net could enable us to demonstrate: greater diversity of thought feeding into our research; more representative research being conducted and produced; that we are upholding our industry pledges; more societal impact from our outputs; and greater awareness of our industry.

Early career researchers are a core part of the future of our industry and we must recruit a broad mix of individuals to reflect the work we do. MRS offers high-quality training and an apprenticeship programme, which should be used to help individuals reach their full potential regardless of any previous qualifications. Our industry stands at a crossroads. This is not a call for a revolution, but for a commitment to walk the talk of inclusion and be open to being held accountable to each other on that journey.

“We must embrace the ‘planet as a stakeholder’ concept, giving climate the same weight as commerciality in our analysis, insights and client recommendations, and welcoming ‘nature’ onto our boards”



What if research could better draw on its collective knowledge?

Adam Phillips, chief executive, Archive of Market and Social Research (AMSR)

Last night, I dreamed that insights had become a recognised profession, with similar status to medical doctors, engineers or economists. Prestigious universities were offering degrees and PhDs in insights, and combined honours courses in history, economics and insights.

When I thought about it further, I decided that my dream was not as far-fetched as it appeared. Reliable, evidence-based insights are already essential for managing any commercial or governmental organisation. Consider the complaints, from the Bank of England and industry leaders, about problems with the reliability of the Labour Force Survey, making it difficult to decide whether to inflate or deflate the economy; or the enormous value added to our society by the entertainment, communication and advertising industries, all of which are big consumers of research and analytics.

In my dream, our sector had invested much more heavily in promoting the profession of insights in schools and universities, supported by clients creating a senior career path on the client side.

Schools and universities were teaching the next generation of insighters using resources provided by the Archive of Market and Social Research, where much of the collective knowledge of two generations of researchers is being preserved and made freely available online.

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“I decided my dream was not as far-fetched as it appeared. Reliable, evidence-based insights are essential for managing any commercial or governmental organisation”
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What if data could reshape society responsibly?

Jake Steadman, global head of marketing research and data, Canva

Throughout history, data has constantly reshaped society, serving as a tool for connection and persuasion. The future will be no different in that sense.

What will be different is the scale and sophistication of data collection, analysis, and application, especially as artificial intelligence (AI) begins to really hit its stride.

I hold an optimistic view of the future. I see a world where data profoundly improves areas such as healthcare (just picture the possibilities for the NHS), our overall wellbeing, and even environmental challenges, such as combating climate change or cleaning up our seas. However, there's a cautionary aspect to consider.

Data's potential for misinterpretation, manipulation and exploitation worries me, especially when used by relatively new technologies, such as AI. This underscores the importance of regulating AI effectively and governing data usage.

The research industry could play a pivotal role in navigating this balance, embracing change and leveraging innovation for positive societal impact.

What if people treated their data like their DNA?

Emily Dickinson, head of Amsterdam, Opinium



What if people knew the value of their data? What if they viewed taking a survey, voicing their opinions, or revealing their viewing habits in the same way they would if they were asked to share a strand of their DNA? Would response rates fall? Definitely. Would the use of synthetic data increase? Most probably. But would that be a bad thing? I'd argue not.

As an industry, we need to ensure that people recognise the power of their data – what it can achieve, how it is used, and why it matters.

To be clear, I'm not advocating for an even longer consent form that is, at best, skimmed over and, at worst, ignored, but a deeper, more inclusive and accessible way of

involving participants in the end-to-end research process. One that makes people aware that, by giving consent, they are building, creating or improving the communities, businesses and services around them, but also one that allows them to continually question, challenge and input into the process.

This won't be easy to achieve, but ensuring participants have a greater awareness of the value of their contribution can only lead to greater engagement and, therefore, greater insight.

Isn't it time we started to value and reward the contribution of those on whom the market research industry is based?



What if the industry could be truly flexible?

Sinead Jefferies, senior vice-president, customer expertise, Zappi, chair of MRS People and Talent programme, and former chair of MRS main board

I've spent more than 10 years talking about, writing about and championing flexibility within this sector. If you'd told me back then how we'd be working now, I'd probably be delighted and say "we've made it happen"! I'm working a senior role, full-time, mostly from home, and spend a lot of time with my kids. But the more you get, the more you see what the bigger potential possibilities are, because not everyone has this flexibility. Not everyone has what I've got – and not everyone wants it, let's be honest; some people love being in the office several days a week.

That's the crux of it. True flexibility isn't about finding a middle ground; it's about what's right for the individual and for the role they are doing – and that's hard to deliver. If a company has

great people, however, feeling fulfilled and able to give their best, doing a brilliant job, then that hard problem is one worth trying to solve.

So, what more would it help us achieve?

- Significantly better inclusion for people of all backgrounds, ages and differing needs.
- Greater diversity of thought and creativity in the work we do.
- More thoughtful and considered approaches to problem solving and collaboration.
- Stronger retention – both within companies and within the sector overall.
- The ability for people to live well, somewhere they can afford, in surroundings that make them happy.



What if brands could truly understand people?

Amy Cashman, chief executive, UK insights division, Kantar

The commercial imperative for businesses in understanding people is clear. Brands to which people are strongly predisposed achieve a volume share nine times greater, increase their highest average selling price twice over, and are four times more likely to grow market share. Being able to build this predisposition relies on truly understanding consumers – how they see brands, and what they want and expect from them.

On the basis of that deep human understanding, brands can also identify which growth levers to pull – whether, for example, it's developing new products or services, moving into adjacent categories, or shifting channel strategies. Ultimately, deep human understanding leads to breakthrough growth for brands.



What if market researchers treat AI as a useful assistant, not a threat?

Phil Sutcliffe, managing partner, Nexxt Intelligence

If you are a market researcher who treats AI as a threat, let me tell you a few of the things you are missing out on.

First, productivity gains at every stage of the research process – so much faster and cheaper. Second, and more importantly, better research – for example, much better insights from survey open-ends by using AI to probe for more detail and then to summarise and theme them verbatim.

Third, as a consequence of the first two points, you will be

empowered to be a better adviser to the businesses with which you work, with less time spent on process and more time thinking how to design great research projects and analyse the findings.

And, you are really important, because you can do what AI can't – you have the human empathy to understand research participants' motivations, and the communication skills to bring insights to life for your stakeholders and craft compelling narratives that inspire them to take action.



What if research and society could be fully inclusive of neurodiversity?

Tom Richer, founder, The Bridge Between, inclusive researcher at Open Inclusion and co-chair, MRS Unlimited

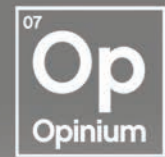
The question made me think: what are we working towards?

I shared some thoughts at the MRS annual conference about disability inclusion being a progressive space to be in right now. It feels like we are all becoming more open-minded to disability and it's not such a taboo subject any more. The disability community is getting more opportunities to talk and make a change, in and out of research, than we have ever had before, which is quite something – but we still face barriers to accessing life like everybody else.

It's lived experiences – and people contributing to make the change, such as MRS Unlimited and other organisations – that will help drive the change we need in society to have the same opportunities as everyone else.

On a personal level, I have the goal of making my hometown, Southampton, more accessible for myself and my autistic brother Jack, which is why I set up The Bridge Between.

With us all contributing, in big or small ways, we are making progress, which is difficult to quantify or even imagine – but I would say we will have reached neuro-inclusivity when we don't need to shout about it any more.



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What if all procurement teams and budget holders could understand how priceless research is?



James Endersby, chief executive, Opinium, and chair of MRS main board

As researchers, we know that great research is (metaphorically) priceless: there is no limit to how valuable market research and insights can be to a business. The trouble is, that research isn't literally priceless – every project has a cost – and procurement teams and budget holders often don't want to pay the price that agencies are asking, and that insights teams have assessed as fair.

Yes, budgets are squeezed at the moment, but in the same way that brands know to double down on advertising spend in hard times, what if they knew to double down on research spend, too?

So, why don't procurement teams and budget holders value research as much as we want them to?

Partly because it's often hard to link the impact of research to specific outcomes – and even when it is possible, those outcomes may not be easily quantifiable, or they may happen a long time after the research has taken place.

If an ad campaign is launched in a specific region for a specific time and sales rise, we attribute the rise to the campaign. But how do we attribute the contribution of the innovation and customer-needs research that helped develop the product, the creative development research that guided the campaign, and the media research that helped place the ads?

If procurement teams and budget holders aren't making that link, we need to make it for them and stop being pushed into dropping our prices, compromising our methodologies, or both. You can buy online respondents by the pound, but great research isn't a commodity. Successful activation of research comes from researchers – client and agency side – building relationships and using their expertise to support decision-making.

In a world where budget holders understand the value of research, we

would be able to ensure that participants are always rewarded appropriately for their valuable contributions; that we collectively push up our sector salaries fairly, towards the rest of the marcoms and professional services worlds; and that we're able to pour more resources into research tech, methodological innovation, and developing our sector, to produce even deeper insights for our clients and the customers they serve.

We know that the management consultants, PR firms and ad agencies don't waste any time worrying about whether procurement teams understand the value of what they do – it's taken as read. So, perhaps I'm not asking the right question. Perhaps the question should be: 'What if researchers had the confidence and conviction to defend and demonstrate the value of research?'

Let's work on building that confidence and conviction, together as an industry. That really would be priceless.



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