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## Outsourcing research only makes sense when your “vendor” is really a partner

By Patricia Graham, CMO

This time, the downturn is different; doing the same things in the same ways poses too high a risk for clients—and this goes for how, where, and with whom you outsource. The current recession—which promises to deepen—coupled with changes in the marketing, media and sales environment since the '01-'02 recession, have altered the game. No client can afford to be wrong in this climate, as their buyer base is churning due to the socio-economics of the time; and that macro climate is volatile, leading to systemic instability in brand health and growth. Due to this volatility, basing marketing actions on old information is problematic, at best. In short, you can't simply spend more on your profitable customers, segments, or geographic markets, as they are in flux and may no longer be who you think they are. Your staff is also involuntarily leaving the building, so you have to do more with less. In fact, you can't get it all done in this downturn.

Yet there is an opportunity to continue to have healthy brands backed by effective marketing and media efforts if you reach out to a research organization that “gets” your business—an organization that doesn't have dogma about what they think they know from the past and has deep knowledge of your company, industry, and category. In fact, you likely need to outsource to a research firm to help you

quantify the changing consumer market and category/brand landscape—not just once a year, but pulsed several times—and identify the emerging segments of which you can avail yourself when targeting your brand spend.

Outsource to a firm that is nimble and wants to work, to identify anew those emerging profitable customers—who are they and where are they—so you, the client, can prioritize the most effective way to reach them. Do not treat the “outsourcers” as such; they need to be viewed as part of the firm, because such sharp economic uncertainty demands their constant attention to your business, and frequent reprioritization of their research efforts as they spot new opportunities. Their research has to be built to anticipate change to your category/consumer landscape.

Whom do you choose as an outsource partner to accomplish this? A company that

- Makes accurate data sources a priority, so that you do not make costly mistakes
- Can deliver analysis that defines/identifies clear recommendations and actions

- Has a point of view about your business and the marketing landscape generally

With the right partner, outsourcing is indeed a powerful way to accomplish things that might fall by the wayside; but developing wrong answers or pointing resources in unfruitful directions is something no one can afford in these times.

*Patricia Graham is Chief Marketing Officer and Executive Vice President of Knowledge Networks. Over the past 32 years she has evaluated the marketing plan performance, advertising and communication plan effectiveness of hundreds of new and established brands. In the six years prior to joining Knowledge Networks, Pat applied her expertise on the client-side as EVP/Operating Chairperson of INTERLINQ Software, and President & COO of R2R, Inc. She has also served as EVP, Consulting Services at ACNielsen, and SVP at IRI. She holds a Master's in political science from Rutgers University.*