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## The A:I/R Interview: Christopher Piotrowski of MillerCoors

### Bringing branding and research together to understand consumers

Christopher Piotrowski is Director of Marketing and Business Insights at MillerCoors, having joined Miller Brewing Co. more than six years ago. An advocate for high-quality, insightful research, he focuses on innovation—new products and packaging—and the company’s “above premium” portfolio of imports, craft beers, and other specialties. Before joining MillerCoors, Chris worked in Brand Management at ConAgra Foods and was a Market Research Manager at Anheuser Busch for the Budweiser and Bud Light brands. An engaging and enthusiastic conversationalist, Chris talked to A:I/R recently about his commitment to bringing marketing and research together and what he looks for in a consumer information partner.



#### *How has the relationship between marketers and researchers evolved?*

Many years ago, decision-makers within the business would just pull the researcher out of the back room now and then to answer a couple of questions; today,

companies are winning by working together in teams. If you were to come into MillerCoors now, I bet you’d be hard pressed to understand who’s the researcher and who’s the marketer, because of the fluidity and understanding of the business and the way you talk about it. Everything is grounded in the strategic questions and issues that the business needs to answer. Our brand marketing and research teams are intermingled; I’m right with the innovation team and the craft/import team. You’re eating and breathing the very same issues that the brand team is experiencing on a daily basis.

#### *Given your goals and assignments, what are you looking for in a market research partner?*

Years ago, the relationships were more about tactical decision-making: “Is it a blue package versus a red package?” Today, I’m really looking for strategic thought leadership—suppliers like Knowledge Networks (KN) who are willing to question the status quo within the organization, and really push new thinking into the business. The MR firm needs to stand in the shoes of the CMO or CEO to anticipate how this information will be used.

*What percentage of research companies today offer that level of collaboration and insight?*

In my mind, it's 20% or less. I think there still are a lot of firms and a lot of revenue that are focused on producing "the numbers" and spitting them out. I think a lot of firms don't necessarily slow down or take the time to understand the strategic implications of what they're doing. Part of that blame sits on the manufacturer's side, as well—there's no question about that.

*How do you balance research quality versus other considerations in your own day-to-day decision making?*

Before we select a partner, we consider the risk or the reward of what we're looking to study; this helps us understand the precision that we need and the dollars that we're willing to invest. Some projects might not seem all that big; but when you think about the strategic implications and the margin of error you're willing to accept, it really causes you to reconsider who you're using and why. You've got to think about the future revenue stream that will be impacted by the decision that that piece of research is informing.

*How has your work with Knowledge Networks helped you assess new products or the "white space" that invites innovation?*

Knowledge Networks helps us on two fronts. First, they have helped us redefine the landscape that our industry occupies, with consumers, and the potential areas that the company could credibly operate in. Secondly, they have helped us more fully understand the degree to which competitors are fully satisfying

consumers' needs and open territories that are currently under-served by all entries in the market. This type of work has helped us uncover opportunities for renovation of our existing brands, incremental volume opportunities, and areas where we could potentially introduce disruptive innovation into the market and change the strategic landscape.

*How have you applied advanced analytics in your studies with KN?*

When you think about the fragmentation of the market from a product offering perspective—consumer trends proliferate and go through the marketplace in much more rapid cycles, making advanced analytics essential. It allows you to peel the onion back and, for instance, not only look at stated needs that consumers have, but also "derive" needs that they may not be able to articulate in a simple way. Perceptual mapping helps us understand how consumers view the world, and knowing where brands reside from an image perspective is absolutely essential.

With KN, we routinely use advanced analytics to develop that full strategic picture, instead of answering just the simple questions, like "Do we go down Path One or Path Two?"

*Can you talk a little about how you have seen beverage brands and their relationships to consumers change in the past five or 10 years?*

We definitely operate in what we call a "lifestyle brand" category; we are impacted by societal trends. Twenty-one-to 27-year-olds are a key demographic in terms of building and establishing brands; and when you think about how those consumers behave—what trends impact

them and where they go to get their information—it's significantly different versus years ago. Social networking and other digital media have had a profound impact upon our brands. When you think about when a 21- to 27-year-old is looking to go meet up with friends at a bar or club, on a weekend or after work, how that occurs from a social aspect is much, much different than it was years ago. So it's important for us to stay up on the technology and lifestyle fronts.



It's also key for us to understand how people socialize and interact with one another; it's much more sophisticated these days. You're no longer allowed to be the "Bud guy," who drinks Bud at every social occasion. Consumers are choosing their beverage type according to the occasion, the setting. It's a much more fragmented market, and consumers' repertoires of brands have absolutely exploded. When I'm at a high-end restaurant, I'm going to have a nice red wine; when I'm relaxing at home, I'm going to have a craft or an import. So our marketing, from a need state and occasion basis, has to be much more targeted.

### *How do you make sure you are addressing the right questions in your work with KN?*

The kickoff meeting with KN is more of a discussion about the business—what shape is it in? What are the trends? What are the current working hypotheses? That way, when we're setting up and designing a piece of research, you're able to take into account the sacred cows that our organization may have. You clearly understand what status quo looks like within the organization, and you're able to design a piece of research that's able to answer the strategic questions, as well as address the broader landscape. Working with KN pushes us to think very differently about what the options are within the marketplace, and sometimes we land in a very, very different place than where we may have originally thought that we were headed. It takes up-front collaboration to get those results from the back end.

### *When you look back at your experiences, are there some that have informed your work today in unexpected ways?*

I did a stint within brand management, as well as one on the supplier side, and both have helped me greatly. Since I've seen things from a supplier's perspective, I'm able to more easily guide them through the process of hypothesis generation, scoping of work, and addressing the important strategic landscape. Also, as an ex-brand manager, I understand that the information needs to be actionable and directly apply to the business issues at hand. It doesn't do the business any good to sit in an ivory tower researching impractical options and then asking, "Why didn't you implement it?" I have a good understanding of how business decisions are made and when you

can call it “good enough” or utilize the 80/20 rule on appropriate business issues.

*What do you see as the influence of online research on the marketplace?  
What are the pros and cons?*

In a lot of corporations, everything is faster, cheaper, faster, cheaper, as a mentality. The good news is that the online platform has given us an opportunity to become more “real time” in nature. However, you need to go back to the risk-reward model to determine if it is the right thing for the business. You don’t want to run the risk of making a bad decision based on the need for speed versus accuracy of what you are trying to measure. Therefore, you need to think twice about the platform and supplier that you are partnering with. There are some really questionable data sources floating out there that you don’t want to fall victim to due to validity issues.