

Make market research your superpower

Successful leaders excel at strategic

thinking. They have a keen instinct honed through years of experience and a strong sense of what's likely to land well in the market.

But when it comes to B2B engagements, the smartest executives in the world still need to validate their intuition with evidence-based insights. The more detailed view companies have of their clients' drivers and challenges, the easier it is for them to meet prospects where they are and help solve their challenges in an innovative way.

That's why market research is an increasingly important source of insight and innovation for consulting firms globally. Competitive intelligence, pricing research and client satisfaction surveys can provide clear visibility of a company's market position. And by engaging domain, geographic and methodological specialists, they can go deep into a sector in a way that ultimately demonstrates to clients that they have the industry knowledge to help them meet their objectives.

Top tier consulting firms—many of which have in-house research teams—are already familiar with the benefits of market research. They have it embedded as part of their core offer, with highly specialized and dedicated teams, and they see it as a key differentiator.

That's not the case for all consulting firms, however. For some, the responsibility for research sits with the wider consulting teams, who might use market research for case work, or with the marketing team, who may use it for internal strategic projects such as brand or competitive intelligence.

► **By exploring the structural and operational dynamics at 20 of the world's largest consulting firms, we've built a picture of what sets these leaders apart from the rest.**

This report delves into the way the world's consulting leaders are harnessing the power of market research to not only stay ahead of the curve, but redefine it.

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Creating a center of excellence

Larger firms often have a Center of Excellence (CoE) dedicated to the market research function. For example, BCG's Center for Consumer Centricity specializes in understanding consumer behavior and preferences, differentiating through deep market insights. Bain's Advanced Analytics Group focuses on analytics to solve complex business problems, driving decisions with data. And EY's Knowledge Team offers expertise across industries, using research and insights to guide business strategy.

Creating and maintaining CoEs – which often have upwards of 500 staff – can be costly, and there is a risk that their intense focus makes it harder to adapt swiftly to market changes or a change of strategic direction.

And yet, the unique insights and capabilities within a CoE truly distinguish top firms from their competitors – bringing deep expertise to specific domains. The capability set includes not only market research specialists, but also technologists, data scientists, behavioral scientists and industry experts – providing insights into the latest trends, challenges, and opportunities faced by their clients and markets.

The presence of CoEs emerged as a core theme in our findings, showcasing how specialized teams within these firms are not just responding to market needs, but anticipating them – driving innovation and solidifying their position as thought leaders.

Key takeaway

Building a dedicated market research center or CoE can bring deep and focused insights to your engagements. Firms lacking the resources for a dedicated Center can identify internal talent with expertise in areas such as statistical analysis or behavioral science and bring them together as ad hoc teams on specific projects.

Understanding the landscape

More than half of the firms we spoke to see market research as a key competitive differentiator, and had access to annual budgets of over \$20 million for research activities that support strategic decision making. Seventy-five percent view market research as an engagement enabler that improves client and customer interactions.

And while the in-house market research teams at major consultancies spend most of their time on client work, engaging in internal research projects around innovative ideas creates additional value by supporting original thought leadership.

“It puts us in a position where we can publish new things, interesting things that are moving the industry,” said one respondent. “It demonstrates that we are thinking about it, and we are shaping the industry. We have

the latest knowledge and the latest insights into burning topics.”

As well as showcasing a firm's role as an industry vanguard, commissioning internal-facing research can highlight employee sentiment and allow firms to benchmark performance.

Key takeaway

Proprietary research creates a proprietary basis for thought leadership. If you don't have the resources to engage in full-scale research, then looking at innovative solutions in recent client case work is also valuable.



Validating beliefs

It might be that a CEO or department head has a strong view or opinion – say, on the economic outlook and how it may affect spending, or on how important sustainability is to their customers. But until it is validated by market research, it’s just an educated guess. Undertaking targeted research can create proof points for strategic propositions.

It can help to:

- ✓ Identify market opportunities
- ✓ Enhance branding and positioning
- ✓ Improve customer experience
- ✓ Elevate client confidence

“Combining executive intuition with a solid foundation of data-driven insights allows us to navigate complex decision-making scenarios, ensuring a balanced and informed approach to strategic challenges,” observed one researcher we spoke to.

It can also help to reduce risk by identifying any potential pitfalls before the full-scale implementation of a new strategy. This is why trusted market research teams are seen as having significant value by senior executives.

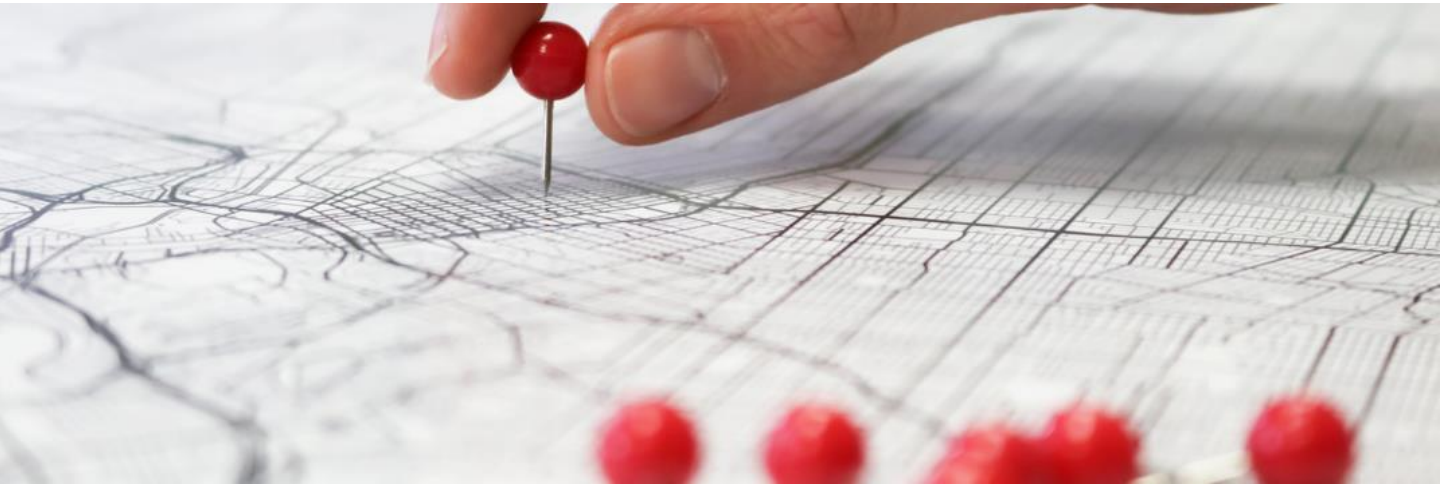
Beyond informing brand strategy, original research also generates its own competitive advantage through external opportunities, allowing leaders to present their findings at conferences and events as an example of innovative thinking.

Key takeaway

Invest in research activities that support strategic decision-making. Focusing on targeted, high-impact research projects will help maximize ROI.



Location, location, location



“Although 85% percent of the company understands English, 85% of our clients may not,” a researcher from the CoE at a major tech firm told us. “If it’s an international study, then you need to be able to speak the language of whoever’s responding.”

Market research teams often have capabilities not only in particular industries, but also in specific markets. China, for instance, is one of the world’s biggest markets, but only a small percentage of its population speaks conversational English.

There are even lower levels of English proficiency in another important Asian market, Japan – which also has unique

cultural norms for business. Researchers understand that it’s important not just to speak your audience’s language, but also to tap into cultural expertise.

Domain expertise is vital, too: “I would put it at the top,” said one researcher, “being able to not only conduct the research, but come back with recommendations ready to go.”

The many sub-sectors within different industries – within Finance alone, there is banking, fintech, asset management and insurance – make it difficult to segment your audiences without a detailed grasp of individual issues.

Key takeaway

Using local expertise can let you tap into hard-to-reach audiences. If you don’t have a dedicated research team, call on the cultural and domain expertise of your wider team to help you understand the best approach.

Method in the methodology

Whether it's online quantitative surveys, brand tracking, or competitive intelligence, market research specialists are experienced at extracting high-quality data. Quality assurance is key, especially for quantitative research where there's a risk of poor interpretation from inexperienced practitioners.



32%

of respondents said they struggle to access the high-quality data and reliable sources needed for informed research.

“If you have people doing things who haven't done it before, or who haven't done it a ton of times before, they might have a different sensitivity to data quality and just run with whatever they have,” noted an experienced research lead. “If you look deeper, you find better-quality ratios.”

Rigorous data analysis and interpretation is critical to ensuring that findings are valid, reliable, and applicable to the wider context or problem being investigated.

However, truly reliable insights most importantly need to be based on high-quality research that asks the right questions and accurately qualifies respondents.

Key takeaway

Leveraging deep technical experience will ensure you are gaining maximum value from research initiatives. If this is not available in-house, partnering with external market research firms can help collect the quality of data needed to inform your strategy and content.

Leading with impact

“Informed decision making is the essence of why you do market research, but you don't do it just to be informed. You do it to have an impact.”

Market research helps you formulate actionable takeaways for clients on industry trends and challenges – and making an impact on client deliverables scored highly as a key benefit among the consultancies we spoke to.

“Informed decision making is the essence of why you do market research, but you don't do it just to be informed,” said one. “You do it to have an impact. The aim is always to leave something behind that people can actually act on. That can be across multiple dimensions. And that ultimately then leads to client satisfaction.”

Consultancies often partner with clients to investigate and move the needle on industry trends. In one recent example, a leading

consultant spoke with a car dealer in Germany about how they were reacting to the shift from a classic dealer model towards an agency model.

“There is a huge trend that OEMs are shifting their sales models,” he said, “and we were the first ones to go in and actually talk to them about what their barriers and drivers and views were on this move, which we published a paper about. So that's a use case on what we do and that comes from the automotive industry and automotive partner saying, ‘Hey, this is happening – so let's investigate.’”

Key takeaway

In the information and advice you share with clients, focus on actionable insights that will have practical usage to really make an impact.



Artificial Intelligence: The additive ingredient

Like every other field, market research stands to gain from the efficiencies of a more digital future, led by the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Of the consultancies we spoke to, 70% said they were actively experimenting with AI tools and methods, with 60% seeing it as critical to long-term success.

More than half envisaged increased reliance on AI and machine learning (ML) over the coming decade, while a third believed there would be greater emphasis on real-time data and analytics, enabling more sophisticated analysis and predictive capabilities.

“We’re definitely at an inflection point. There are so many different areas this is developing in.”

A key consideration is ensuring the alignment of AI capabilities with strategic business objectives, by training staff to use AI tools effectively, establishing partnerships with AI technology providers, and focusing on ethical considerations and data privacy.

“We’re definitely at an inflection point,” said one respondent. “I most certainly think research teams need to learn how to



of respondents cited the challenge of a limited budget allocation for research

appropriately utilize AI to formulate questions and drafts, or for numeric analysis. There are so many different areas that this is developing in.”

But while AI continues to develop, for now, the view is that it will serve as a helpful complement to traditional research methods. “AI won’t necessarily provide all the answers,” said one consultant, “but people see this as, ‘it can save me time, make me more efficient, potentially save some costs.’”

Key takeaway

Ensure that any AI capabilities you implement align with your strategic business objectives and prioritize the areas where it will be most effective in terms of time and cost savings.

Give yourself a competitive edge

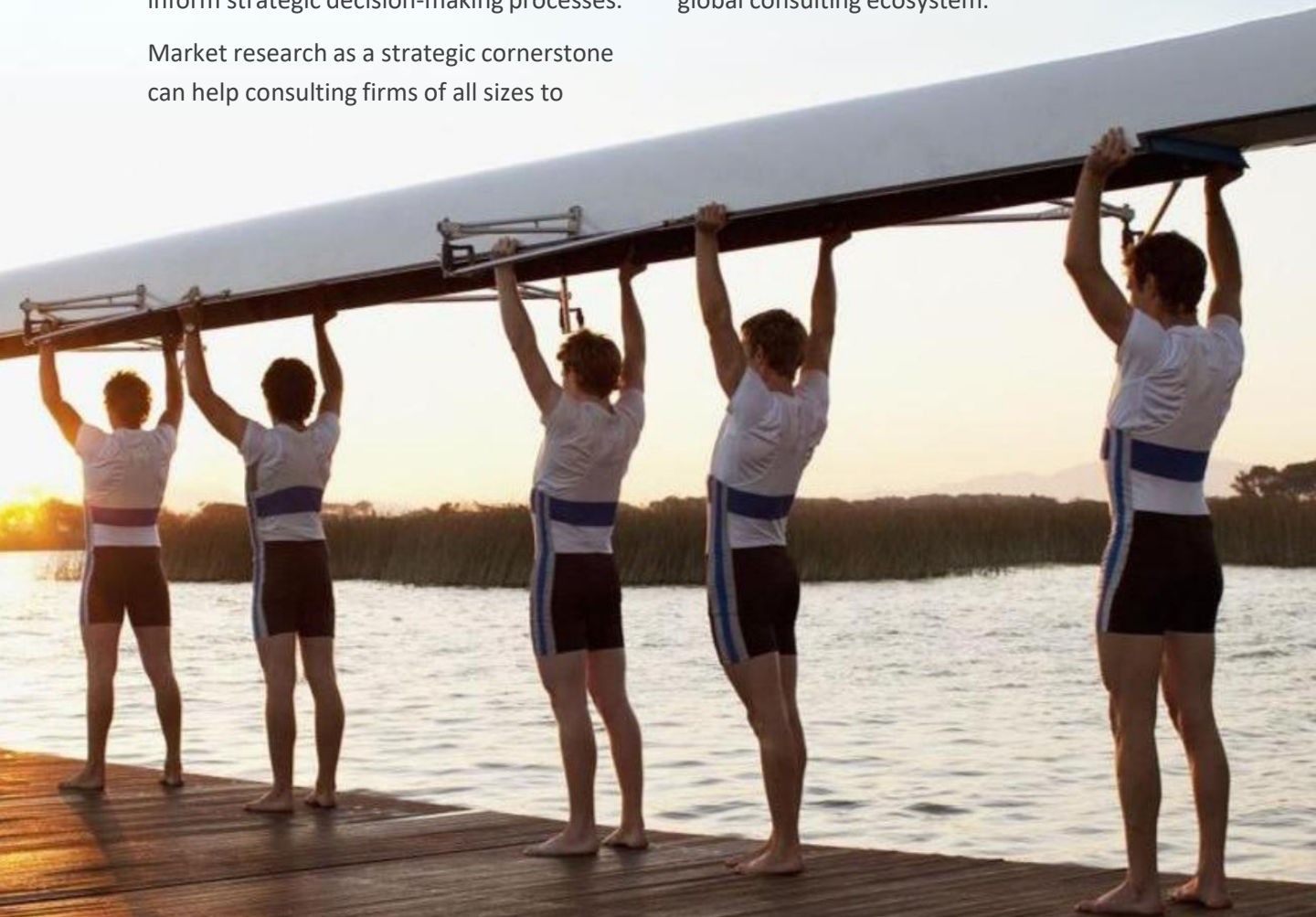
It's clear that leveraging market research is more than just a tactical exercise; it is a strategic necessity for gaining a competitive edge in today's complex business environment.

As we have seen, top-tier consulting firms have integrated robust market research functions as a core part of their strategy. They are leveraging insights to drive innovation, validate business intuitions, and inform strategic decision-making processes.

Market research as a strategic cornerstone can help consulting firms of all sizes to

position themselves as industry leaders. When using data-driven insights to predict market trends or inspire innovation, they are able to deliver exceptional value to their clients.

This report has demonstrated that firms leveraging market research to better understand markets, substantiate beliefs, and meticulously implement insights are set up not just to endure but to excel in the global consulting ecosystem.



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