



**Kedar Sohoni, Co-Founder & Director, Cross-Tab Marketing Services**

**Technology would not just help reach out to most 'difficult to reach' consumer but can also help in reducing the inefficiencies of data collection, entry and analysis and help in saving time and costs.**

It's a common knowledge that number of marketing failures happens due to lack of market research. Even in cases where the research is done, the methodology and findings leaves a lot to be desired from the marketing angle. Perhaps, that's the reason why market research commands such a miniscule share in the overall marketing budget in India.

With such a backdrop, thinking of promoting and running a market research agency on the online platform might seem suicidal to anyone. But Kedar Sohoni, the co-founder and director of Cross-Tab Marketing Services, a pioneer online market research agency thought otherwise. An IIT-Bombay and IIM-Lucknow alumni, Sohoni worked with Nestle India leading brand marketing exercises on major brands such as Milo and Milkmaid before the entrepreneur bug hit him. He also had an extensive exposure in the industrial market research during his stint at Business Consulting Group (BCG) before. Currently he is working closely with many leading businesses such as Microsoft, Mudra, Rediff.com, Baazee.com, Citibank, ICICI Bank and others at Cross-Tab.

This week, as our guest columnist, Sohoni enlightens us on how a high profile mobile executive seemingly inaccessible in the conventional market research sense can be an excellent source of information if the right technology tools and methods are applied to reach him.

### **Market Research - Towards better reach and faster search!**

By Kedar Sohoni

Gautam hated early morning flights. After a 45-minute wait at the airport, he finally got on to the flight. At the end of the 2-hour flight, he hailed a cab to his destination about an hour from the airport. A beep signaled that he was now on roaming in the capital! He had a smooth day at work at the client's office. He managed to check his mail by plugging in his laptop at a business center.

After his meeting, Gautam was ready to head back to the airport. He checked his mail one last time after reaching home and hit the sack! Indeed a busy day for Gautam, you would not be wrong if you assumed he is inaccessible. Market research stripped of all its jargon would probably mean obtaining feedback from the right person in the right manner when he/she is in the right frame of mind. All these 3 criteria are becoming more and more difficult to meet. Working professionals, businessmen even youngsters are becoming increasingly inaccessible for market research. If we find the right person, the stimulus is probably not the best and if the stimulus is right then probably he/she is not in the right frame of mind to give feedback. The interviewer's skills are tested to the limit in such a case! Assume all these criteria are met; it may be too late for the marketer by the time the data reaches his PC.

Technology has revolutionized the way we communicate with each other, search for information and to some extent even purchase goods and services. Market Research is yet another field which is witnessing a makeover! Coming back to Gautam. Lets rewind his typical day and look at the opportunities where technology can help marketers reach out to him. During the 45-minute wait at the airport he strolled across the airport lobby and saw an interactive kiosk for a famous FMCG company. They wanted feedback on a new after-shave they had launched recently. A few clicks and Gautam was through with his comments.

During the 2-hour flight, the airhostess handed over a PDA and requested Gautam to punch in his remarks about the in-flight services. Gautam hadn't liked the breakfast at all and he was prompt enough to put that across using the smart interface!

He boarded a cab to his destination about an hour from the airport. A beep signaled that he was now roaming in the capital! And that was followed by a small message asking him whether he would like to answer a few questions related to the mobile service he received. Nothing better to do, Gautam agreed. 5 minutes of deft SMSing and his feedback was logged!

He had a smooth day at work at the client's office. He managed to check his mail by plugging in his laptop back at the business center. As he logged on to the website of his favourite news channel, he was greeted with a small pop-up asking him which programme on the TV channel was his favourite and why! He was glad that through this online survey he had made some difference somewhere.

Under normal circumstances people like Gautam are very relevant for most mid-to-top end products and services but are extremely difficult to reach for their views. But not any more, thanks to some smart technology at work. The story above is not as far fetched as it sounds. Touch screens, mobiles, Internet, PDAs, computers are today commonplace in urban centers. And the people who have access to these devices are the affluent, high spending; brand conscious lot and they probably are the most important consumers for a gamut of products. This brings us to the issues, which need to be examined while evaluating such methodologies.

Firstly, these methods may not be immediately relevant for mass products where obtaining relevant respondents is not such a critical issue. But then a better way to look at it would be to see what it could do rather than what it can't.

Some of the methods mentioned above may not fall under any strict sampling methodology, it may also be difficult to estimate the various statistical errors involved. But then a calculated risk needs to be taken keeping in mind the cost of using this type of sampling methodology vs. the benefit of probably reaching out to your most relevant consumer!

Creation of huge valid opt-in databases is another huge task, which would help target respondents accurately. Lack of organized databases has probably hindered technology intensive automated market research in India. Computer Aided Telephonic Interviewing, which is very commonplace in other countries, doesn't have that much acceptance not just due to consumer resistance to talk to strangers on the phone but also due to lack of accurate detailed telephonic databases. On the other hand, call centers set up by numerous companies like financial institutions for servicing their consumers could also be used for focused telephonic market research amongst current and potential customers.

Finally, both, the clients and the researchers need to stick their neck out, make commitments, not just monetary but also in terms of willingness to explore innovative options. Technology would not just help reach out to your most 'difficult to reach' consumer but can also help in reducing the inefficiencies of data collection, entry and analysis and help in saving time and costs. The initial high costs for setting up the infrastructure would then be offset by the recurring benefits that accrue.

A large validated online database, good quality online survey technology backed by strong market research skills, in my experience spanning over 40 online surveys in the last 15 months, has shown that this can indeed be a viable methodology even in a relatively low Internet penetration market like India.