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Big data challenge more cultural than technological for brands

by Jason Wincunas on Oct 30, 2013

HONG KONG - If big data is supposed to give companies so much insight, why do business people have so much trouble nailing down what it is and what it can do for them?

Part of the reason, as Dominic Powers, senior vice president / managing director international at Epsilon, pointed out on this morning's **SOPA Media Insiders** breakfast panel, the data has always been there and it's always been big, we just weren't aware of it.

Think of big data like radio waves in the Bronze Age. Without the technology to harness it, data is just static.

Ross O'Brien, director corporate network, Hong Kong at the Economist Intelligence Unit; Peter Dingle, consumer brand and marketing strategy at Intel Semiconductor; and Natalie Chew, marketing and communications executive IBM China / Hong Kong joined Powers on the panel. The panel was moderated by *Campaign Asia-Pacific's* insights editor, Emily Tan.



From left: Moderator Tan with panelists Chew, Dingle, O'Brien and Powers

The significant change for today, Powers emphasised, is the "channels" it comes in and our ability to capture it. Years ago, he suggested, you might have sent a fax and all the data was on that piece of paper. But then the data gets lost in a file cabinet or a waste bin. Today we use email and keep a digital copy, along with all its data, theoretically, forever. The content of each might be the same but who sent it and when, as well as the information it conveys, can now all be captured and utilised.

O'Brien took a similar view, saying we are in a period of "transcendence," to use a Buddhist term. He made the analogy that we are all just beginning to learn how we can use big data to "end our suffering." And he discussed deploying data in different ways to cut bottom-line costs as well as drive top-line revenue.

To that point Dingle added that sometimes it's not the data you have but what you ask of it. "What questions will uncover the opportunity?" He gave an example of an insurance firm in Japan that identified a high-risk group of consumers: namely men aged over 40 who used the ATM more than six times a week. Their behavior patterns matched a risk profile and the company sought to reduce marketing to that segment. To paraphrase him, the insight isn't always in the indicator; it's where that indicator leads you.

Chew then highlighted that the data might be big but that doesn't mean you have to spend big. You can start small. "How you collect the data is the key question." Having a flexible platform is also important she said. You need to be able to adjust to trends and to the information coming in.

Her point is one that starts to cut closer to the central issue the panel was seeking to answer. There are all kinds of technological solutions available for capturing, analysing and processing data but to take advantage of it all, there has to be a cultural shift. Too many business people, in marketing, publishing or any other industry have, as Powers said, "a view of data that is technological but it should be from a customer perspective."

Dingle expanded on that thought, pointing out that organisations have a tendency to "silo" information. "Different teams manage different data sets and they don't interact enough."

For marketers to get the most out of data they need to flip around the way they think about it. Rather than worry about how big data can overcome corporate challenges, brands should look at how they can use data to solve customers' problems.

Powers summed up, saying businesses need a "single source of truth, a C-level person who gets it and can communicate a common vision. All the technology in the world won't help if, internally, your organization lacks a coherent vision." See *Campaign Asia-Pacific's* September article about the convergence of CIOs and CMOs for more on the same line of thought.

Much of what the panel agreed on came down to an argument that gaining from big data is not a matter of technology; it's a matter of perspective and making a cultural shift. Powers stressed that ideally brands should think more about the customer and less about themselves as a product. "Focus on being relevant."

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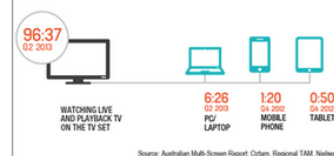
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