



Access all areas

RESEARCH PROFESSIONALS NEED TO BE MINDFUL OF A GROWING MOVEMENT TOWARDS GREATER DATA-SHARING. BIG DATA WAS JUST THE BEGINNING. NOW WE'VE GOT OPEN DATA AND MIDATA TO CONTEND WITH. **LUCY FISHER** REPORTS



Much has been made of the exponential growth of data – the by-product of the way more and more of us live our lives on the world wide web. McKinsey calls it “digital exhaust”, but it’s more valuable than that implies. This exhaust doesn’t just drift off into the ether. It’s captured and analysed by businesses trying to understand consumer behaviour and sentiment. But why should companies have all the fun? Consumers increasingly want access to their data too.

While it may not seem an urgent matter to the research sector at this point in time, the UK government is pushing to give consumer more power to access the data companies hold on them. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has been running a consultation on the subject of ‘midata’ which, as part of a Consumer Empowerment Strategy, promises to allow people to view, access and use their personal and transaction data in a way that is portable and safe.

BIS announced on 19 November that the government would legislate if companies don’t voluntarily release consumers’ electronic data in an “electronic machine-readable format”. Its initial targets are current accounts and credit card providers, mobile phone and energy companies, but already we’re seeing signs that businesses are keeping one step ahead of legislation – particularly with recent moves by Tesco and O2.

WARNING SIGNS

“This has been on my radar for quite a while,” says George Pappachen, chief privacy officer at Kantar and WPP. “There are various initiatives under way at the moment which are focused on giving users access to their information. We’re looking at the evolution of it all and the skillsets that are needed. It’s incredibly important for the market research industry, but it’s about ripeness and timing, too.”

How much should be invested in preparing for a world in which data isn’t just big, but increasingly open? And how soon? BIS has stated that if the government does consider bringing forward secondary legislation, the power is estimated to come into force by spring 2014.

“The challenge is to move at pace with but not necessarily ahead of it,” says Pappachen, who believes that, for research agencies, the number one thing right now is awareness. “It may sound fluffy, but that is the first step towards having a workforce that’s prepared to deal with it,” he explains.

Both Tesco’s Clubcard Play, which was



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revealed in Marketing back in October and O2’s MyO2 app, planned for 2013, are “definitely a boon” for customer loyalty, according to Barry Ryan, director of the Market Research Society’s Policy Unit. Such schemes propose greater access to the data held about customers and make the everyday transaction of data-sharing more explicit. In Tesco’s case it has been reported that the aim is to make it not only simple and useful but “fun”.

With these pre-emptive moves Tesco and O2 are locking in the loyalty benefits, setting the standards and creating the playing field, says Ryan. If companies do this kind of thing voluntarily, it’s less likely to become mandatory. But while such moves appear to be relatively easy PR wins,

they also entail risks. There will no doubt be a period of experimentation in which mistakes will be made. Tesco and O2 will not want to jeopardise the very trust they are seeking to engender. Then there is also the murky legal issue about who owns a customer’s transaction history should he or she decide to switch supplier. “From the EU perspective, they’d like to make this type of data portable. They argue that you should be able to take it with you,” says Ryan.

Many argue that research agencies cannot be forced to open their archives, given that the relationship between a survey respondent and a research company is not a commercial one. Research involves voluntary participation as opposed to a transaction, says Ryan. But the jury is out; discussions are ongoing. A whitepaper review is pending, and within the context of disagreement about the potential ramifications for the research industry it is perhaps wrong to assume anything at all.

PERSONAL DATA BANKS

Colin Strong, managing director of the technology division at GfK UK, believes that research companies could well be in a position where they are expected to open up access to consumer data that they collect – within the confines of data protection rules, confidentiality agreements and commercial sensitivities. He envisages a situation in which consumers start to curate their own “personal data banks”. In this new era of enlightenment about personal data, Strong identifies a niche trend but a growing one which he describes as “the quantified self”.

“The ‘quantified self’ community includes the people who are interested in taking control,” he explains. “There is a community who are interested in personal measurements – this currently centres around health activities, sleep regimes and so on. There is an interest in linking together tools which track parts of your life.”

Strong says that there is work to be done in understanding the consumer’s desire to participate in these sorts of schemes. The challenge, he says, is for a brand to encourage the consumer to interrogate the data within its brand confines, for instance by providing tools so that a consumer can shop with the brand more effectively. But consumers may expect – indeed demand – a holistic view.

And, if consumer awareness grows, we could see the idea of collecting or curating personal data becoming more mainstream. One motivation is the ability for an individual to understand his or her behaviour so that he or she can change it for the better – in patterns of food purchasing or consumption, for example.

“There is an interesting challenge for

research agencies in identifying where the consumer interest is here," says Strong. "Consumer expectations will shift. It's hard to predict exactly how, but if these developments gain traction – and there is legislation impending to make this happen – it will have a profound effect on how all companies share data."

THE HORSE HAS BOLTED

Alan Mitchell, strategy director at Control Shift, which has been acting as strategic adviser to BIS, believes that over time the data inside an individual's personal data store is likely to grow much richer and much more comprehensive than any data set collated by a third party. "The idea of individuals having information on themselves, allowing them to manage their lives better could potentially open up a completely new industry," he says.

Indeed, new businesses are already springing up in order to tap into this consumer desire for greater control. "Businesses are not where they need to be at the moment," warns Justin Basini, formerly Capital One marketing director and founder of Allow, a service that helps consumers gain control of their personal information. He believes that 10% of the population are very concerned about privacy and don't want their information held by anyone. But the vast majority, he says, are on some kind of continuum. "They say that the horse has bolted – so can you return some value to me?"

He believes that for this reason. O2's move to give its customers greater access to their mobile data is the right thing to do. "There are opportunities for incremental revenue. And by doing this, they're on the front foot," he says.

Basini has greater reservations about Tesco's stated approach to make data access "fun". "Everyone is talking about gamification, the creation of league tables that show, for instance, that you are the top shampoo buyer in Wandsworth," he says. "But I don't think gamification as a technique will succeed overall. You need to draw out interesting observations, meaningful and counterintuitive insights. Simply creating a leaderboard of you versus your friends so that we can shove more marketing your way is not a long term model." The most successful techniques, he says, will be focused on companies delivering new experiences and insights and surprising and delighting consumers.

Mark Broughton, planning director at Life Agency and ex-head of insight at Boots, is in agreement. "When it comes to talking about data, there is an in-built paranoia," he says. "It's about getting people to engage in an open-source way, to ensure communications

How will open data affect the research industry?

Government consultations on open data – as opposed to midata – are largely focused on the public sector at present, but will have a ripple effect on the private sector. "There is the question of reciprocation," says Stephan Shakespeare, chief executive of YouGov and chair of the government's Data Strategy Board.

"If public research can provide value to private research, what about the other way round? There is a basic principle at play in terms of public research given that it's paid for by the taxpayer. But commercially

held data could be useful to things that people or the government want to do, too."

Shakespeare is leading an independent review into the white paper. He suggests that companies which are adept at data analytics and at combining different datasets will stand to gain huge competitive advantage in this new era of big and open data. "The ability to link to actual behaviour, to what people actually spend their money on, will be very powerful," he explains. "We need to look beyond small, limited datasets and attach them to some of the giant sets

that are out there now."

Chris Roche, the UKI regional director for Greenplum, the 'big data' division of EMC, believes that predictive modelling techniques will come to the fore. He says the question for the research industry will be, "Can they deliver forward-looking reports, not just the rear-view mirror?"

Shakespeare says: "Anything that is about trying to understand motivation or make predictions and having the ability to spot discrepant behaviour will be in demand. We are investing in some of this potential to specialise."



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are built upon their needs, educating them. I think gamification is an interesting idea but not necessarily the right approach. It feels a bit like belittling a serious subject."

SHARING AND CARING

Clearly it is imperative that any organisation fostering a more open approach to its data remains mindful of the paranoia which Broughton refers to. In this world of big data, the mosaic effect, whereby individuals can be identified by overlaying a number of different data sources, is growing more potent. "People need to have confidence when giving data," says the MRS's Ryan. "We've got strong feelings about that, about the issue of anonymisation. It will have a big impact on the research industry, where information is collected confidentially. This move to open data is all about establishing the customer's primacy over the data."

The companies which benefit from this trend towards greater openness with data will be those which recognise the need to create genuine efficiencies as a result of changes to the way in which they handle data, ultimately driving a feeling of consumer empowerment – not those which set out to create a quick PR win. It's unlikely to be easy. New businesses will be created, established organisations will change the way they operate and strategic partnerships will be fostered. "It is likely to take longer than people think, and to be bigger than people think," suggests Control Shift's Mitchell.

Details of the midata programme are available at bit.ly/H3IJJw and examples of midata applications are at bit.ly/NkKOET