

“Big Synthesis” – Definition, Importance, Barriers and Solutions

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Introduction

With all the focus today about “big data,” one of the biggest opportunities for Insights Departments is to deliver “Big Synthesis” by fully leveraging their existing information assets. Big Synthesis is the process of integrating insights into a meaningful storyline across customer research studies, syndicated data and secondary information to address a business need or issue. The process can be extended to other information assets as needed such as customer satisfaction, social media, consulting studies, etc.

Firms spend thousands to millions of dollars on research and consulting projects to better understand their customers and to boost business performance. Business leaders are looking to Insights Departments to provide direction as cost effectively as possible. The means to address these goals often lie in information that already resides internally. The purpose of this article is to

- Define “Big Synthesis”
- Highlight its importance
- Identify the barriers to implementation
- Offer implementation solutions

What Is Big Synthesis?

The following quote from a research leader during a 2012 Inside Research roundtable discussion provides an interesting perspective on Big Data and a definition of Big Synthesis.

“It’s great to hear everyone talk about Big Data, but the other side of the coin is Big Synthesis. The idea of analyzing Big Data is laughable as a goal in and of itself without some effort to connect all the learnings from it to other knowledge in the company. We might be drowning in data (big or otherwise), but at present, we are missing Big Synthesis and related Knowledge Management that would make such data efforts worth their while.”

The following illustration provides a fuller definition of Big Synthesis as well as the needs it serves and common applications. Synthesis allows an Insights Department to better align with management goals of being more customer driven, identifying opportunities, fostering innovation and achieving cost savings. Adopting Synthesis as a common practice allows you to save research dollars by uncovering new learning at no additional cost and preempting the need to commission new research.





Synthesis is also a process, requiring a series of steps to plan, organize, analyze and communicate results. The rigor, tools and specific approaches vary widely. For instance, a Synthesis can be organized by project, topical outline, predetermined business issues, business drivers or a model (e.g., customer journey). Thought must also be given to how to best generate insights, communicate results and promote action.

Why So Important?

Many researchers acknowledge the importance of doing Syntheses. In fact, the following two recent industry studies cite Synthesis as the #1 industry information gap and skill of the future based on opened-ended responses.

Open Ended Questions Asked	Reponses	Industry Study
Q: Identify one new or emerging skill necessary for the future?	24% – Data Synthesis	2015 GRIT Report
Q: Biggest information gap in the marketing research industry according to clients?	31% – Integrating information from different sources to tell a story	2016 Future of Insights Report – GfK & IIR

A number of research leaders view Big Synthesis as a competitive advantage as demonstrated by the following quote from the previously mentioned roundtable discussion.

“Insight Departments have an opportunity to take the lead on this and thereby expand their influence and impact on the business. The need for Synthesis will grow along with the dramatically increasing river of information available to companies, and will be a key source for competitive advantage.”

Building on the prior statement, Synthesis provides an Insight Department with an opportunity to provide leadership and direction based on fact-based customer knowledge. Possessing this knowledge provides a means of landing and maintaining a seat at management’s table by virtue of becoming a trusted advisor. There are numerous industry case studies where Big Synthesis has helped turn businesses around or identified new major opportunities. For large consulting companies, Synthesis is a commonly accepted “best practice.” I can also personally attest and provide actual cases where conducting

Syntheses has driven winning strategies and yielded dramatic market successes. One insight leader frames both the need to capitalize on this opportunity as well of the downside of not pursuing Big Synthesis below:

“Insight Departments have a unique opportunity to bring all these sources together and leverage that information to set the strategic agenda of the enterprise. Executives want this, marketers want this and if the Insight Departments don’t step up then someone else will, leaving marketing research as the survey step child.”

What Are the Barriers?

While Synthesis is often recognized as an important need, Insights Departments frequently fail to conduct them for several very real and understandable barriers such as:

- The synthesizing task, which requires locating and integrating all the different information sources, is typically manual and very time-consuming
- Staffs simply lack the time, skills, expertise and/or training to conduct a Synthesis
- There has been an historical absence of technology to enable researchers to quickly “mine” their survey studies
- Implementation requires leadership, vision, planning and energy—justifiably difficult under today’s environment of tight budgets and staffing constraints
- Turf battles can occur in some companies regarding who owns a particular data source (e.g., customer satisfaction, CRM, social media, market analytics/modeling, etc.)

These prior realities explain why Syntheses are left undone or are contracted to outside consultants when the need is great. Even if time is available, having the right staff trained and in place is often a critical issue. Individuals who excel at doing synthesis work typically possess a business analysis orientation. They truly enjoy reviewing numerous and diverse information sources to create a meaningful storyline for the issue at hand. They are good at organization, pattern recognition and triangulation of information. If not a requirement, a background in business and marketing strategy is a major plus. An added burden is that the researcher should have the ability to tailor the Synthesis to different internal audiences (e.g., marketing, strategy, management, sales, R&D, etc.). One research leader framed both the opportunity and staffing barriers eloquently:

“Information synthesis/data synthesis is an essential component of the effective future Insight Department. But the real issue isn’t centralizing a repository, but synthesizing the learning and producing briefs summarizing the insights. This requires a broad skill set that encompasses marketing research, market analytics, etc. It also requires the ability to pull multiple strands together. Neither of these are prevalent in Insight Departments today. The added problem is Insight Departments are structured and funded to carry out projects, not to review and synthesize information, and this task cannot be delegated to junior people.”

Another research leader perspective is the labor intensive nature of the work and historical absence of technology represent the most critical barriers.

“The barriers to synthesis are not skills, but time and technology. There are bits of technology that can synthesize, but connecting the dots all the way from attitudinal/organic data sources like ethnography all the way to behavioral and close the loop to insights ... is tough to do now. It is highly manual and personalized to the researcher, and not really scalable.”

Outside parties can provide the manpower and expertise to provide a stopgap solution. Costs range dramatically depending on whether a management consultant is hired versus a less expensive independent contractor. A frequent downside is the Insight Department can lose control of these

initiatives especially when granted to a major consulting firm. Unfortunately, in these cases, Insights Departments will rarely get much or any credit for the information or insights they provide.

Implementation Solutions

Not surprising, there is no “silver bullet” or “clear cut” set of solutions that will dramatically increase an Insights Department’s ability to produce Big Synthesis. The good news is a series of complimentary steps tailored to your organization can be incrementally adopted to increase capability such as:

- Build credibility by conducting 1-2 Syntheses on issues critical to management. Provide insights to all the different internal audiences/functions vested in addressing these issues. Creating success stories will help build the case for adding capacity.
- Acquire staff with the proven ability to conduct Syntheses or train targeted staff members with an aptitude and interest in doing this type of work. Possessing at least one individual on your staff familiar with the process will greatly increase the ability to produce and direct Synthesis work.
- Adopt a rigorous and credible process for conducting the Syntheses. This should include a planning process, means of organizing the information and reporting standards.
- Build an outside network of experts and suppliers capable of doing Synthesis work under departmental direction and control. This builds capacity without the burden of adding internal overhead.
- Adopt new search engine and data visualization technology designed for survey studies. Historically, industry software has not been available to allow effective and efficient “mining” of a department’s survey data at the respondent and individual question level. This is no longer the case.

The last point on technology warrants greater elaboration. “Sea changes” are rapidly advancing technological capabilities in our industry. Different software applications and dashboards are already well in play to more effectively manage continuous sources like brand/advertising trackers, customer satisfaction, CRM and syndicated data. A major historical roadblock has been the management and mining of customer research studies for insights. This is particularly acute for the more strategic studies such as segmentation, brand equity, A&Us, shopper studies, problem detection, etc.

Now firms such as KnowledgeHound offer software enabling an Insights Department to not only organize all their research reports, but search and graph information down to the question and respondent level for quantitative studies. This represents a quantum leap in terms of allowing an analyst to quickly synthesize information from their customer research studies. Advances of this nature will continue to enhance Synthesis capabilities over time.

Summary

To summarize, “Big Synthesis” is a powerful approach that can elevate an Insights Department’s contributions and stature within its organization. Insights functions are increasingly recognizing and seeking to capitalize on this opportunity which, when coupled with the new technology, signals greater industry adoption of Big Synthesis.



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