

# Samra2017: From research industry to insights industry

By Leigh Andrews

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The 38th Southern African Marketing Research Association Annual Conference got underway on 17 May 2017 at the Protea Hotel by Marriott, Stellenbosch, with a strong focus on the value of marketing research and whether we should perhaps reframe it as an insights industry.

Sheila Akinnusi, senior manager of group market research at Nedbank and current Samra chair, calls the annual Samra conference an escape we desperately need from the stresses and disappointments of current news headlines. In addition, it's an opportunity to build valuable relationships for the long-term goal of building the industry, while also chartering new paths for ourselves as we guide the research industry into the future.



## #Samra2017: Future-proof your decision-making

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Akinnusi then introduced Leonie Vorster, Samra CEO and SA's Esomar representative, who spoke of the value of the research industry and introduced a podcast session with Esomar president Niels Schillewaert on the overall state of the insights industry.



Samra CEO Leonie Vorster opening the two-day annual Samra conference.

"The value of research is challenged, questioned, over-estimated and under-estimated at the same time, so we need to rethink the concept of value and how we do things as an industry," began Vorster. She added that research is there to provide independent, objective, fit-for-purpose guidance, so those involved in it need to rethink the purpose of what they do.

Elaborating on its impact, Vorster said the extended global research industry is estimated at \$70bn when you include advisory services, analytics and data. Zeroing in on Africa, it's a small player in the global picture but has experienced increasing interest over the years, with about half of all market research on the continent funded by international clients with the rest locally. Vorster says that this in itself has challenges. Looking specifically at SA then, the research industry was valued at R2.6bn, with growth measured in baby steps, "but at least we are growing, as that can't be said for Europe," clarified Vorster.

## **SA research industry needs more strategic skills**

Samra itself is turning 53 this August so that's proof of the long-standing nature of the industry, but Vorster says while we have a strong base of operational skills, we need more strategic skills and consulting. Also, because of technology, just by introducing something like machine learning, there's a chance that certain operational skills won't even exist in a few years' time. That's why the issue of moving from operational skills to strategic thinking and consulting is coming up more frequently. Vorster adds that we're evolving so fast and we're so caught up in our day-to-day routines that we just don't take the time to get inspired, to just sit and think of where we are and where we are going, especially in times of flux.

Vorster then played the following Dodge Caliber 'Anything but cute' commercial from 2006:

It illustrates how we tend to get so involved in what we're doing that we forget why it's being done, especially in the field of research.

Vorster elaborates: "One puzzle piece is useless, you can't see the big picture. You have to connect the pieces to get an idea of the overall big picture." So if you're working in a marketing context to future-proof decisions, Vorster says you can't just work with one puzzle piece – that's more true today than ever before, with so much information and data sources at our disposal. Instead of becoming clearer, things have become exceedingly more complex and confusing as we don't look beyond the puzzle we are currently working on.

## **We're data-rich yet insights-poor**

This was the ideal segue into Schillewaert's message via podcast. He mentioned that national associations like Samra are

extremely valuable and that it's extremely important for the industry to innovate and use technology to automate, doing things faster and cheaper and at a better quality level that simply was not possible before.

He says to keep in mind that technology doesn't solve problems, people do – technology itself can sometimes causes further problems. So we need to protect the core market research product of delivering insights and educating those big data users by showing them that correlation is not the same as causality. The focus should be on people first, as big data – while important – makes us data rich yet insights poor.

Schillewaert concluded that we need to keep our focus on understanding not only what people do, but why they do it. This, coupled with a fine balance of technology, trust and people will ensure the continued relevance of research.

## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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