

Finding the balance between data quality and technological advancements

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At TNS South Africa, data and more importantly quality data is at the heart of the business. Operations Director, Charmaine du Plessis's focus lies squarely on ensuring that the research company's long-standing reputation is upheld in this regard, by considering elements such as data collection and technology's role in the process.



*Charmaine du Plessis,
Operations Director, TNS
South Africa*

Du Plessis heads up the teams responsible for data collection and the processing and packaging of the data. At TNS, the majority of all data is collected electronically (via mobile interviews on the internet, telephonically or, in the case of face-to-face interviewing, on tablets). Once the data is collected it is converted from strings of unintelligible codes to a variety of different kinds of outputs. The range of output types is customised based on the requirements of the client and can be anything from raw numbers to interactive dashboards and online reporting consoles.

The move to electronic data collection and high tech reporting is a global trend and is simply a reflection of what is happening and possible in the world of technology. The aim of this is to ensure that the route from respondent to client is as straight, fast and immediate as possible.

However, while it is important for the research company to keep its finger on the pulse of technological developments, du Plessis believes the true differentiator between TNS and all other companies is the quality of data. She comments, "Almost anyone with some programming experience who understands numbers can put a survey together and then serve up a beautiful presentation. What makes us different is that we are quality obsessed and motivated by continuing to provide our clients with data that is based on sound research principles and independently audited interviews." She makes joking reference to the company belief that "a pig is a pig and no amount of lipstick will change that fact - and we are not in the pig business".

TNS is unique in that it has an independent quality control department built into it, whereas most other companies only have their field teams checking on each other. Although in-field checking also occurs, du Plessis explains that TNS believes that having an autonomous auditing procedure is the only real way to guarantee that clients get what they pay for. In addition to the audit and in-field checks, many other quality controls, both manual and automated, are enforced. For example, in order to reduce potentially biasing the results, a careful tally is kept to make certain that one interviewer does not complete more than a certain percentage of the questionnaires for one particular study. Another example is that TNS checks the results of all studies to ensure that there is no 'flat-lining' - this is where the responses follow a pattern, which is unlikely to happen by accident and could indicate sloppy interviewing.

With that being said, TNS is proud of the professionalism, dedication and standard of its fieldworkers, some of whom have been conducting interviews on behalf of the company for over 20 years. "We don't just keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best," says du Plessis. "We invest in the training and support of our team of around 1 000 interviewers, and know that they take their work very seriously."

Nevertheless, keeping in mind the various checks TNS has at every stage of its research process, du Plessis discusses the subsequent interplay with technology and the need to balance speed and technological prowess with quality of data. She explains that while technology literally enables clients to watch their data coming in live as each interview is completed, and to have immediate access to the data, TNS cannot neglect its comprehensive quality checks. Therefore, final data files are only released once the necessary verifications have been completed.

Du Plessis describes the quality obsession as something that exists within the DNA of the company and resides in each

person, at every level. "We are all committed to making best practice only the starting point. We are more interested in continually striving for better practice," she says.

There is no question that the quality of data TNS delivers provides a solid platform on which to build the rest of the company's offering. Du Plessis's focus going forward is to continue to operate at the forefront of ever-changing technology, but equally staying true to the TNS South Africa quality promise.

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