



## 9 habits of great marketing research vendors

| Joe Hopper

I don't know what possessed me but I happened upon one of those "inspiring" business articles about the nine habits of super-successful people and instead of rolling my eyes at empty platitudes, I found myself mentally translating it into a manifesto of what I wish market research vendors were like.

What a happy client I would be if all our vendors, not just one or two, would do the things I was starting to imagine! It brought to mind the sentiments of our corporate research clients who deal with many of the same frustrations we deal with. Here are a few client-side responses from last year's Corporate Research Report, produced by *Quirk's*, discussing discontent with vendors:

*"Difficult to find quality research vendors."*

*"Suppliers under-delivering... data quality and reporting are table stakes. We need our research partners to provide insights and meaning, not just deliver a 100-slide PowerPoint."*

*"Dealing with unresponsive research vendors."*

*"Finding reliable research suppliers who can live up to what they promote when selling their capabilities as related to the various research activities we engage in (i.e., providing useful insights, error-free data analysis and results-presentation materials)."*

*"Getting good quality work out of vendors. They tend to be less experienced now and frequently suggest approaches/designs that they are unable to explain or stand behind."*

After attending the MRA's Corporate Researchers Conference (CRC), where researchers and vendors at all levels of the research community mingled and learned, I decided it was time to share my translation-turned-manifesto with others.

I'm sharing it with our vendors to say: This is what we want, hope and expect from true partners – do these things and you will earn our loyalty and business.

And I'm sharing it with our clients to say: This is our commitment and promise to you – here is what you can and should expect.

**1. They focus on earning trust and business with each new project.** Our first project with a new vendor matters a lot. We expect their best thinking and service so every detail is 100 percent correct. But the second project matters a lot, too, and so does the third, the fourth and every project after that. Great vendors, once they're on

our “A-List,” never relax, return phone calls slowly or pass us on to new trainees. We want and expect every project to be approached with the zeal and commitment of the first, knowing that every project is how they earn or lose the next one.

**2. They don't brag about what they can do – they just do it.** Great vendors introduce themselves with just enough background and information to give us confidence. They don't remind us who else they've worked for or what other important projects are competing for time with our own. They don't assure me or answer challenges by telling me how many thousands of times they've done this or that they can do the work in their sleep. Instead, they show their experience and expertise implicitly, asking good questions, answering my questions with substance, providing solutions and offering options for what I need.

**3. They manage timelines to get things done.** That means not only delivering according to deadlines but often beating those deadlines because they're diligent about the work. They don't lay out two weeks for programming and then scramble to finish, with all of us in a panic because they waited a week just to start. They're focused on tasks and what needs to be done rather than juggling the boundaries and limits of when the work was promised. In turn, I trust these vendors when they ask for more time, knowing it's the quality of work (not poorly managed time) driving the need.

**4. They offer their best people to work with.** Earning trust and business with each new project means giving us truly skilled and committed people to work with on every single project. We have all had project managers who do nothing unless we ask or who sigh heavily when we need something more. One vendor assigned us a still-in-training programmer who broke our survey while it was in-field. It was the push we needed to bring the work back in-house. Now when we find good managers or technicians we ask for them by name and the great vendors put them on the project.

**5. They add value in unexpected ways.** Great vendors offer ideas, suggest strategies or implement clever protocols simply because somebody who is smart and dedicated saw it would make the work better. And they do it because it makes sense. If you're conducting a large employee survey, for example, and suddenly realize it would be valuable to extract a demographically-weighted group comparison from a public national dataset, why not do it?

**6. They accept responsibility for mistakes and fix them.** When great vendors slip up they say, “We made a mistake and here is what we're doing to fix it.” There are three essential components to that statement. First, they tell me about it, so I can quickly adjust and, if needed, inform my clients about how we are adjusting. Second, they accept responsibility rather than describing an error in passive language as if a mistake somehow just happened. Third, they offer a solution so that I don't have to wonder or worry about how it is going to affect the work.

**7. They focus on relationships rather than revenue.** Cost is important but what I really value is a fair-priced vendor I believe in and trust without having to bid out every need. In turn, a great vendor does not remind me of contracts or hit me with extra charges for every phone call or question. They know we pay them fairly and promptly and they make it clear, in action and in words, that building a relationship is what matters to them most. Bad vendors, in contrast, keep a hawk's eye on quarterly revenue targets and they make me feel like a revenue source rather than a client.

**8. They do what is asked.** One thing about great employees is that they offer lively, good ideas and advice but ultimately defer to the judgment to the project's owner and then execute on it wholeheartedly. So it is with

great vendors. They're not order-takers – their opinions and expertise hold sway – and they know how to move things along without being told. But great vendors also believe that the people who pay them always have the right to tell them what to do, their own expertise and advice notwithstanding.

**9. They don't care about job titles.** At the CRC conference, a speaker asked the audience, "How many of you are vendors?" to which someone yelled out, "We prefer the word partner." I wondered if the speaker found that comment as irritating as I did. The vast majority of vendors are not partners, and the ones who are partners don't get worked up about what we call them. Partner, vendor, supplier – who cares? Great vendors are too busy doing good work, adding value, building a relationship and earning our trust to protest so loudly.

In short, great vendors don't talk about job titles, contracts, revenue targets or themselves. They talk about projects, goals, methods and all of the smart ways they can help so that the process is easy, successful and ultimately impressive to clients.

*Editor's note: Joe Hopper is president of Chicago-based Versta Research.*

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