

# interface

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# THE END OF MARKETING MIDDLEMEN?

» By Joe Hopper

In a provocative new book, *What Would Google Do?*, author Jeff Jarvis claims that "Middlemen Are Doomed" because the Internet has made information so easy, so accessible and so cheap. He argues that the Internet links buyers and sellers directly, allowing buyers to get information and access to sellers instantaneously, rendering middlemen obsolete.

Jarvis provides sobering food for thought for those of us in areas of marketing that operate as mediators between buyers and sellers: market researchers, advertising agencies, media companies, website and graphic designers, printers, prepress agencies and services, brokers of all types, and so on. He also provides a compelling way to understand the turmoil many of us witness in our industries: consolidation, commoditization, downward pressure on margins, and new competitors who want to sell directly to customers.

In my sector of this business -- market research -- Jarvis' cautionary tale looms large. Market researchers operate in the middle between businesses who need information about their customers and the people (their customers and prospects) being interviewed about needs, attitudes and behaviors. There is explosive growth among new companies selling the tools of our trade (survey software, access to respondents through online panels, etc.) directly to the businesses who need it and want it. If Jarvis is right, what is the future for market research and public opinion polling?

The answer, it seems, will depend on how and whether we add value beyond collecting and delivering data. If we focus on our business being research, we add a great deal of value, and while the tools of our trade may evolve, our essential work remains. Good

researchers are experts in the entire process of how to formulate, collect and analyze information to increase understanding. We analyze problems, help clients ask the right questions to solve problems, recommend and implement methods of data collection to produce information that will answer the right questions, use interpretive and statistical tools to untangle and interpret the data, and ultimately transform all of this into a story that clients can use. The Internet is not displacing the importance of these efforts. On the contrary, new technologies will make the work faster, better, and less expensive, further enhancing the value of what we do as researchers. We no longer have to spend 80 percent of our time tinkering with the tools of data collection. Now we can devote our time to bringing brainpower to market research, solving problems, answering questions, and turning data into stories.

Those in the market research industry who, over the last 30 years, have built successful businesses around data collection and delivery by making lots of phone calls, sending out lots of surveys, scanning barcodes, collecting data, tallying it up, and sending numbers and charts to clients will need to rethink how, whether, and where they add value. And their challenge is not just to retool, because the tools are now in the hands of their customers. Online technology links consumers

and businesses directly; it lets businesses ask survey questions; it tallies up the data, and puts the results directly into the hands of clients. No doubt Jarvis is right that this world of market research middlemen is at its end and those in the middle must evolve.

The same is likely true in other areas of marketing that operate as mediators, and so we are urged and enabled to add value and insight, because without doing so, we are not likely to survive. When it comes to market research, the goal is to deepen our understanding of the world. The Internet puts a world of data and information at anyone's doorstep; smart research helps clients make sense of it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Hopper, Ph.D., president of Versta Research, was formerly on the faculty at the University of Chicago and with the National



Opinion Research Center (NORC). As president, Joe helps clients turn data into stories. This means helping clients understand their customers, prospects, and competition by bringing expertise

and academic brainpower to rigorous market research, and then helping clients communicate research findings to managers, reporters, or the internal audiences they need to reach to make smart decisions.

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