



Dashboards in MR

By Ken Brewster

“Traditional reporting methods cannot hope to match the dashboards advances in speed, empowerment and flexibility.”

The marketing research industry has been wedded to PowerPoint for more years than I care to remember. Now much like the way data collection has shifted to take advantage of technological innovations such as cellular phones, talk about the move to online reporting solutions is increasing.

Almost every request for proposal I've seen has a reporting section towards the end asking for some kind of deliverable in PowerPoint. The few that make mention of online delivery usually make reference to it as a mechanism for the delivery of static PowerPoint reports. Industry chatter about dynamic online reporting solutions, such as dashboards, may be getting louder, but talk is cheap and survey results suggest something is holding the marketing research industry back.

The 2010 Globalpark MR Software Survey by Meaning reported the most common research deliverable was still a PowerPoint document (53 percent). Excel, PDF and Word were next in the list, notably all offline solutions. Online dashboards have existed for many years, but they have been slow to infiltrate the marketing research world; in fact, in the aforementioned survey, they only registered in six percent of cases.

PowerPoint deliverables may have been the de facto standard in the past, but are they really what clients want today, or is it just what they have come to expect from marketing research suppliers? With the emergence of mobile marketing and Web2.0, fast answers and instant results have become the norm and these expectations are being transferred across to our professional lives. We live in an age where our lives are increasingly driven by a need for instant gratification so it's no longer acceptable for clients to wait days or weeks for results to be "processed." Clients want – and expect – instant access to the headline results whilst also being able to dig deeper into the results themselves, without having to learn new software. Similarly they want access to their results at any time, from wherever they happen to be, using their mobile device of choice.

Research providers are juggling a wide range of data information sources – all requiring consolidation, interpretation and reporting, with increasing pressure from clients for fast accurate results and shrinking marketing research budgets. The technology to ease these pressures exists, yet marketing research firms still seem to favor more traditional "failsafe" methods of marketing research reporting, despite the challenge to keep up.

Dashboards by definition are "high-impact data visualization tools" that help users make better, more informed decisions. They have a graphical

interface, which simplifies critical real-time information so that you can see what's happening at a glance. In short, dashboards are an ideal solution to these growing client demands.

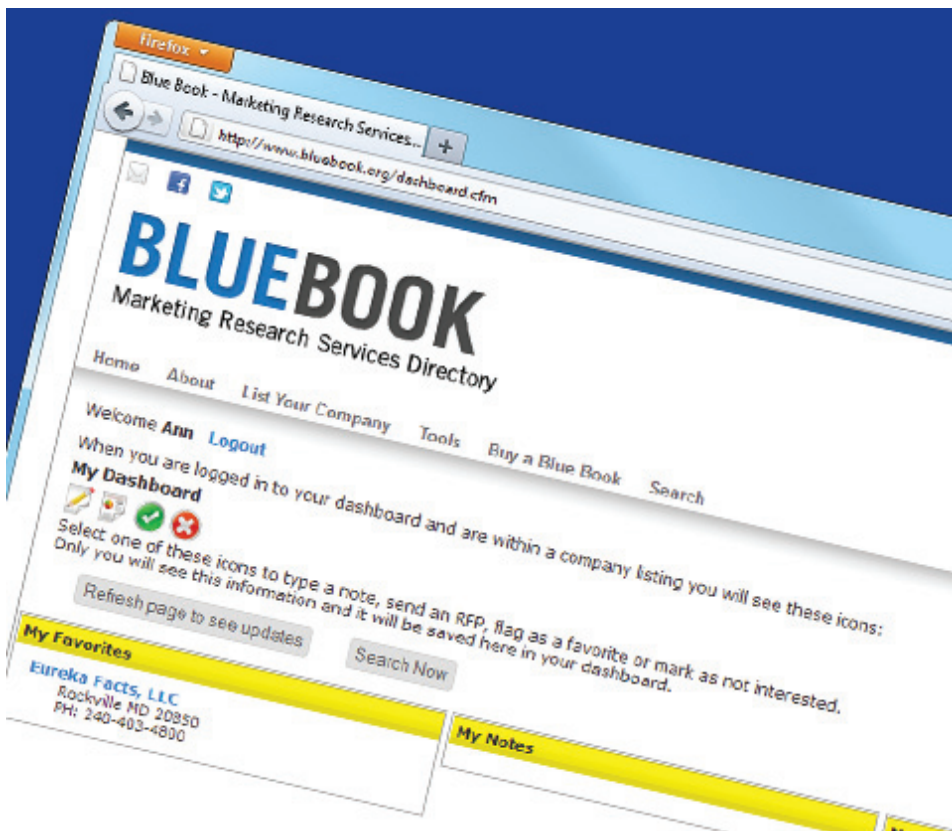
Senior management using dashboard technology have the option to focus on

so why have marketing research firms been reluctant to embrace dashboard technology? Recent research carried has revealed some of the more common misconceptions behind marketing research professionals' hesitance to invest in dashboard technology.

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headline information while researchers can view and manipulate data from a multitude of sources digging into the detail without having to re-contact their software supplier for another cut of the data, or put in a request with their resident techie to run a few pivots just so they can get at the answers. Dashboards empower researchers and analysts to drill-down into their data and to answer their

Dashboards are perceived as "a tool of the business intelligence world" where they only have simple questions and are limited to working with additive data like sales or money. In marketing research context is everything so data tends to be aggregated, filtered, calculated and analyzed very differently. Percentages play an important role. A marketing research dashboard would need to have



own ad-hoc "what-if" scenarios.

Users have the flexibility to access their data from anywhere and the freedom to connect to their dashboards and share insights using almost any device without being tied to hardcopy reports or limited to a particular file format.

Traditional reporting methods cannot hope to match the dashboards advances in speed, empowerment and flexibility,

the intelligence to handle low base sizes and missing data, along with the functionality to perform and display significance testing, multi-level filtering, weighting, nets and filtered bases.

Until now setting up a dashboard facility has been a serious and costly undertaking requiring substantial investment in staff training, dashboard administration, hardware, software and

infrastructure including systems to ensure up time, data backup and data security. As a result it is believed that dashboards are only viable for large clients, that it is impossible to recover costs on one project alone and hence difficult to account for a dashboard in the RFP stage of a project.

The skills required for an organization to offer a dashboard facility are perceived to be very different to those in standard marketing research. It is not simply a matter of recreating the PowerPoint charts in an online environment and so will require the help of experts such as application programmers, database specialists, data presentation specialists, graphic designers, Web designers, Web programmers and project managers.

Much of this may have been true once, but not anymore. The gap between the technical demands of marketing research and functionality of dashboards has shrunk drastically. Underlying business intelligence technology can be manipulated to achieve marketing research behavior enabling it to cope with multiple response questions, weighting, filtering and other marketing research specific functions. If we look at the traditional uses for dashboards in the BI world (e.g. analyzing time-series data, comparing categories, detecting outliers, analyzing variances), many are equally applicable to the MR world.

The development of technology such as Cloud Computing has made dashboards viable for smaller companies. Using the infrastructure and security of established hosting specialists removes a huge overhead cost. So rather than having to make a large capital investment up front, costs can be spread and structured so these services can be paid for on a monthly basis or on a usage basis. This arrangement keeps costs very low during the start-up phase. Once clients are on board, fees can be set accordingly to recover your costs over time.

Dashboard software today is so well designed that there is no need for so many distinct roles. Yes, an understanding of database technology is essential but the remaining skills can be developed over time.

So technically, and logistically, there really isn't anything to prevent an organization from at least experimenting with dashboard technology.

A few, much-loved, MR software vendors have attempted to bridge the

gap between marketing research and business intelligence by enhancing their offering with limited online charting facilities and galleries of chart-types beyond those found in PowerPoint. They are building in traditional dashboard functionality while trying to stay true to their marketing research roots. At the same time, existing business intelligence dashboard vendors are seeking to embrace the marketing research world by offering some customised and streamlined versions of their solutions in an attempt to tackle the specific demands of marketing research.

In the last year or so the term data visualization has become increasingly popular. We no longer just talk about bar charts and pie-charts; word clouds, sparklines and geo-spatial analysis have entered the vocabulary and we are thinking more about the way this information is displayed with effective use of white space, chart "noise", etc. This all lends itself naturally to the dashboard environment. Data visualization is also infiltrating our everyday lives. Many news Web sites now use clever interactive graphics to display huge volumes of information in more impactful and appealing ways, and enable the user to

"play" with the charts to hone in on the information that is of most interest to them.

Finally, what about social networking I hear you cry? People are beginning to expect their professional online experience to mimic their social online experience. Dashboard vendors are already starting to address this by developing solutions that recreate the look and feel of social media and Web 2.0 interactions. Facebook, Twitter and others now play a vital role in society and organizations ignore them at their peril. Just think how valuable it would be for a brand manager to see, for example, a one screen summary of sales performance coupled with a range of social media metrics and live Twitter feeds.

In conclusion, the time is right for the MR industry to embrace dashboard technology. The software is out there, and there are services available that take away a significant proportion of the cost overheads. PowerPoint is by no means dead, but it is no longer the only way to deliver survey findings; dashboards are the present and the future.

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