

Researching the Tactical, Strategic and Foggy Roads

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It's, late, dark and very foggy. You are driving along a road you do not know, have never driven down before toward a destination you have never visited. What started out as a pleasant drive on a clear afternoon has become an increasingly difficult journey where simply keeping the car on the road has become a challenge. The combination of fog and fading light plays tricks, images are distorted, trees appear in the road, signposts are increasingly difficult to spot. Keeping moving, not crashing the car, becomes its own importance, achieving the destination becomes secondary. But help is at hand. Even on such a road there are landmarks, white lines that can just be followed, roadside verges that can just be picked out. Each whilst inconstant in its help is just able, by focussing all our attention, to keep us moving. Thus we progress. We are lucky we do not crash the car. Eventually the fog begins to lift only for us to find we have gone in the wrong direction, we will not reach the destination until too late, we've missed the party!

What has this story to do with research? It is a metaphor, it represents the core decision that each of us as commercial researchers will almost certainly have to take at some point in our careers. Stated simplistically, do we, when things get 'foggy', or rather trading and the economy gets difficult, allow our client (whether we are internal or external to the client) to simply keep the car on the road (and that can be difficult enough) or should we be interested in direction and destination? Is it good enough for us to say "things are tough here, our research needs to focus on the tactical, if we can't apply something directly to the business it just doesn't matter to us"? Most of us will have either said such things or been involved in such conversations. These are natural and in their own way very sensible thoughts. However what if 'missing the party' is even more damaging than a few scratches or modifications? If we silently allow our organisations to 'miss the party' are we complicit in this failure. Ought we not as research professionals to know better? Is this not central to our role? Should we not in some sense represent a continuum of direction lead thought even when the organisation reacts to immediate and local difficulties? These are difficult questions.

Of course at one level the answer lies in a more pragmatic approach, a dynamic movement between the strategic and the tactical. It requires a complex interplay of intelligence gathering, practical experience and strategic orientation. However this requires a clear notion of the role of the researcher. Yes, at one hand the role is to seek and present supporting evidence, to accumulate tactical knowledge capable of immediate application, put another way, following the white lines thus avoiding short term accidents and keeping the journey going. However probably more importantly is our role of organisational 'conscious', a continual reminder of why the journey is undertaken, a continual seeking for strategic direction, ensuring the organisation does not 'miss the party'. This may not always be a 'safe' place to be, it certainly requires determination and no small amount of courage. However if we follow this our importance to our organisations is expanded, the challenges, whilst greater bring rewards, research becomes central, to a significant extent we becomes guides through

the fog, to borrow from the famous quotation “Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide, In thy most need to go by thy side”.