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# JANE FROST

## CEO of the U.K.'s Market Research Society on How to Raise the Profile of Our Profession

For almost a decade, Jane Frost has led the Market Research Society (MRS), one of the world's oldest and largest professional organizations of market researchers. Jane and I spoke recently about her organization's key initiatives and the central role of qualitative research within the industry in the U.K.

**Kay:** Do you feel there are any differences in the way market research is carried out in the U.K. versus North America?

**Jane:** We have some quite distinct differences, particularly the ways in which we carry out qualitative research. As a non-American, my view is our qualitative is much more purist. We do

much less of what I would call “quantitative/qualitative.” We do a lot more one-to-ones, in-depths, and small groups. Face-to-face is a major part of the business over here and has been for a long time. We do a lot of work on behalf of the government, which likes randomized research, the purest of the pure. I am not sure how long that will last, because everyone is trying to save money.

**Kay:** What are some of the other methods that might be mixed in with qualitative?

**Jane:** People are looking more pragmatically at the way they blend methodologies and existing data. So, having had a conversation with our senior client counsel over here, they have had to make use of things they wouldn't have thought of making use of before. How they use existing in-house data, how they merge it with social listening and how they merge it with other qualitative and online methodologies is becoming much more experimental. And I do think there will be a surge in mobile usage. There has been a bit of resistance because people have been happy with the way they are doing things. But everything changes, and this has been a radical change to the status quo.

**Kay:** As we speak it is May 2020, how is the U.K. market research industry faring with COVID-19?

**Jane:** The face-to-face sector disappeared overnight. We have a lot of businesses in that area. Luckily, the U.K. government is helping a lot of those businesses with loans and furlough grants—that sort of thing. But it's too early to say whether we will get back to



where we were. I think it will be about 30 percent down. I would not be seeing a V-shaped recovery; I would be looking at the L-shaped recovery much more. We're going to have to hang in there for a while before confidence returns and the budgets start to come back a bit. Our help lines have gone through the roof with us helping people trying to navigate the government systems. It is going to be very trying surviving not just the crisis period, but the coming out of crisis period, because it will not restart as fast as it stopped.

**Kay:** So, the Market Research Association has a strong relationship with the government around defining professional standards.

**Jane:** The lovely thing is that we, with the Insights Association in the U.S. and the Australians, have been the pioneers of standards that the industry uses as a grounding for how to do things. We have been doing this for nearly seventy-five years, and we have been regulating the market for seventy-five years. In the U.K., we have a regulatory purpose. That helps the government to listen to us. They know that we are responsible. We have to be if



Photo features Jane Frost sharing a conversation with NAME at the EVENT.

they're going to trust us with regulations.

**Kay:** Which aspects of a researcher's practice are more regulated in your country?

**Jane:** MRS has a code of conduct, and we regulate all our accredited individuals and companies through that code of

conduct. For example, eighteen months ago a member of the House of Lords complained about the way a poll was being conducted and that went through our regulation process. And we would then be called, sometimes, as in this case, to justify ourselves in the House of Lords. Luckily, the MRS has a good reputation regulating our accredited members, so we have avoided expensive government-based regulations. But seventy-five years is a pretty long time to have been at this!

**Kay:** What do clients in the U.K. seem to care most about?

**Jane:** Our sector needs to stop being so obsessed with the methodology because the clients are not. Clients want the convenience of mixed methodologies. They do not want to be doing all the integration themselves. We have been rather slow to be more flexible in terms of the way we apply different methodologies. If we are to be the strong and vibrant and world-leading





Photo features Jane Frost and NAME at the EVENT.

sector that we have been up until now, there are three things we need to do.

First, we need to focus less on methodology and more on quality standards. I am not against (DIY) surveys, but surveys must be done with quality and with an understanding of how they fit into the wider basket of how you get response from customers.

But we see a lot of examples that get on to the radio and onto the BBC in which online surveys are being used badly.

Second, we need to join in a shared narrative that pulls methodologies together and is not methodology-specific. Traditionally, what you can measure are things with numbers—data. It's easy to say what data has done for you or what it hasn't, and it's much more difficult to say what a piece of qualitative work does for you to get an ROI on it. But if we can bring everything together—company data, ad hoc work, qualitative, quantitative, and the intelligence

with which they use it or the way in which they learn from what they're doing into something which is an asset that they can count on their balance sheet—that is what I call "Intelligence Capital." firm place in the research framework. People that have been uncomfortable with qualitative in the past will be more comfortable if it is part of something that they can count somewhere.

Companies are used to asset-based methods of measuring things from financial capital to human capital, but there is not anything in this Intelligence Capital space. That is the difference between a company that will win with customers and grow and one that is going to be chasing its tail in terms of its customer relationships in its future.

And third is creating an exciting sector that future talent wants to join and is inclusive. That, for me, is a passion agenda, not just an intellectual agenda. We need to see more women at the top. We need to see more ethnic minorities at the top. We need to get rid of the pay gap that exists for women and people from ethnic minorities. We need to see a greater appreciation of neurodiversity. I mean, our sector is about holding a window to the world. If we're not the world ourselves, how can we do that well? I would also love to see an end to some of the insidious stuff that is still

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happening and should not be happening: sexual harassment and lack of duty of care (ethical standards). In addition, there needs to be a greater appreciation for what people of LGBTQ and other orientations can offer. There is discrimination in that area as well. One of the things I'm proudest about recently is MRS Pride. MRS Pride is one of the most vibrant networks we have. They are lively, they are committed, and it feels great to have debate out in the open about sexual orientation and people's experiences internally and within the MRS and in our society.

**Kay:** I read about the "MRS Pledge" on your organization's website. Would you please describe what this is?

**Jane:** That is the backbone of what we do because it gets the leadership of an organization to think about these issues and to measure themselves against these issues. We deliberately have not said, "Follow government allocations." We do not expect you to have the ethnic minority representation in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland as we do in London, or Birmingham, or Lester, which are diverse populations. A lot of our companies are microbusinesses, and they need help putting some of these issues in place. If you only have four people in your business, it is difficult to follow government guidance on pay gap reporting. So, we said, "We don't expect you to do that. But we do expect you to be aware of what the gaps are and to move away from them. When we come and visit you and talk to you about what you have done after signing up, we'd like you to tell us what progress you've made." It is not a bean counting exercise; it is very much a lively exchange. And one of the things we have said is, "Do you want us to come and talk to your staff about what their

experience is of this?" I would love to get the U.S. and other places signed up to a version of the CEO Pledge, because we wrote it with that in mind.

**Kay:** I hope that the QRCA and the MRS can work together on the initiatives you described.

**Jane:** That would be wonderful because the QRCA has such a good reputation and a reach. Organizations

like QRCA and MRS that work and network together are stronger together. I would be delighted to work with QRCA on any of the things we have been talking about.

**Kay:** Thank you for telling us about your organization. I have learned a great deal from our conversation! ↩

*This interview was edited for brevity and clarity.*

