WHITE PAPER · PAPER TWO OF THREE

THE INSIGHTS IMPERATIVE

What must change, what must not, and the case for insight alpha as the organizing principle of a modern insights function.

BRIGHT MOUNTAIN · A MARKETING INNOVATION COMPANY

BIG VILLAGE / DEEP FOCUS / BRIGHT STREAM

INTRODUCTION

WHAT TO KEEP, AND WHAT THE FUNCTION MUST BECOME

Market research has always occupied an interesting position: part science, part craft, part organizational politics. For decades, the industry built its identity around the mechanics of data collection — the survey, the focus group, the methodology brief, the polished deck. These became how the function defined its value.

That definition is no longer sufficient — not because the craft is wrong, but because the world insights teams serve has changed around them. Decision cycles are faster. Data sources are multiplying. Stakeholders expect answers in hours, not weeks. And the technologies now available to synthesize information are genuinely transformative in ways most of the industry has not yet absorbed.

At the center of every successful insights function sit three things: **credible foundational data, the discipline to ask the right questions of it, and the organizational will to act on what it reveals.** Those do not change. Everything built around them is available for reinvention.

> **The real value of an insights function is not the data it collects, but the outsized return it generates by knowing which data matters, how to interpret it, and how to connect it to decisions. That return is insight alpha.**

PART ONE

THE REPORTING PROBLEM

Reporting has never been a genuine strength of the insights industry — worth acknowledging plainly, because the industry has spent considerable energy dressing it up. Presentations grew more elaborate. Dashboards proliferated. And yet the fundamental challenge remained: insights organizations were producing outputs for stakeholders too busy to read them thoroughly and too removed from the methodology to know what to trust.

Dashboards compounded the issue. Built around structured, quantitative data, they have never handled qualitative information well — and qualitative information is often where the most important signals live. A dashboard can tell you satisfaction declined four points last quarter. It cannot tell you that consumers have quietly shifted their language around a category in ways that suggest the decline will accelerate.

The deeper problem is that presentations and dashboards are **supply-side** formats. Someone decides in advance what to surface, builds a view, and distributes it. There is no conversation, no follow-up question, no mechanism for the stakeholder to say "go deeper on that."

53%

OF MARKETING DECISIONS

are all that analytics actually influence — with **data inconsistency and difficulty of access** cited as the primary barriers. Intelligence is produced in one format and place; decisions are made in another. The reporting era produced this gap, and it cannot close it.

GARTNER, MARKETING ANALYTICS

PART TWO

A NO-REPORTING FUTURE

The shift happening now is toward **demand-side** delivery. Rather than producing fixed outputs stakeholders may or may not find useful, leading functions are building infrastructure that lets stakeholders ask questions directly and receive grounded, synthesized answers in return.

SUPPLY-SIDE REPORTING		DEMAND-SIDE INQUIRY
A scheduled report. Fixed views decided in advance and distributed. **Researcher as report author**	→	A live exchange. A conversational interface over a curated, continuously maintained body of knowledge. **Researcher as knowledge architect**

This is the practical meaning of an AI-powered insight stack. It is not about replacing researchers with language models — it is about a conversational interface sitting on top of a curated body of knowledge about customers and markets.

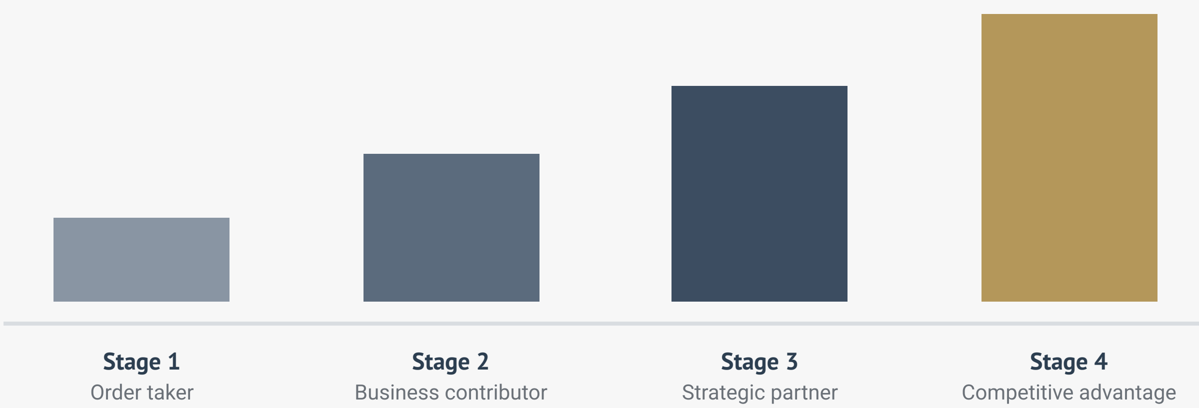
For this to work, the underlying data must be good. An AI interface built on stale or low-quality data does not produce better answers — it produces **more confident wrong answers**, which is considerably worse. The discipline of foundational data collection becomes more important in a no-reporting model, not less.

PART THREE

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE INSIGHTS LEAD

For most of its history, the insights lead was essentially a project manager with methodological expertise: receive a question, write a brief, vet suppliers, manage fieldwork, deliver a presentation. That model is slow, expensive per question, and positions insights as a reactive service rather than a strategic asset.

GRBN BUSINESS MATURITY MODEL — FOUR STAGES



48% → 35%

Stage-1 functions fell from 48% (2015) as 35% reached Stages 3–4 by 2023.

0 AT STAGE 4

63% perceived themselves as strategic partners — yet none scored Stage 4 on actual behavior.

The study identified **proof of value** as the factor most separating strategic partners from the rest. The role is shifting toward portfolio management — maintaining proprietary tracking, syndicated sources, behavioral data, and qualitative work as one durable picture. The goal of that portfolio is insight alpha.

PART FOUR

INSIGHT ALPHA

The term borrows from investment management. **Alpha** is the return generated above what the underlying assets would produce on their own — the value added through judgment, selection, timing, and interpretation. Two organizations can hold identical data infrastructure and produce dramatically different strategic value from it. The difference is not the data.

93%	34%
ROI SATISFACTION WHEN INSIGHTS IS A STRATEGIC PARTNER	ROI SATISFACTION WHEN IT IS A SERVICE FUNCTION

The same category of investment — **nearly three times the perceived return**, depending entirely on how the function is positioned and used. That gap is insight alpha: not a data or technology difference, but the difference between producing deliverables and generating durable competitive advantage.

$150B+
Global insights industry spend in 2024.
ESOMAR

86%
say insights advantages their company, up from 74% in 2015.
GRBN

80%
say it puts them on a faster growth trajectory, up from 71%.
GRBN

PART FIVE

THE THREE FOUNDATIONS THAT DO NOT CHANGE

Through all of this transformation, three things remain non-negotiable. Each is under pressure in different ways, and each is essential to generating insight alpha rather than just producing data.

01

Credible foundational data

Good synthesis requires good inputs. Representativeness, sample design, and panel quality are not methodological footnotes — they determine whether the output can be trusted. In a no-reporting model that surfaces answers quickly and confidently, the cost of degraded data compounds rather than stays constant.

02

The right questions

Technology made it easier to get answers; it has not made it easier to ask the right questions. Knowing which questions matter and recognizing genuine surprise versus confirmation bias are judgment skills built over years. They cannot be prompted away — and they are the primary source of insight alpha.

03

Actionability

Research that does not change decisions is a cost, not an asset. It requires structuring research around decisions from the start — and enough organizational trust that findings are taken seriously when they conflict with existing assumptions. Proof of value and executive championship are what carry a function to strategic-partner status.

PART SIX

WHAT BRIGHT MOUNTAIN IS BUILT TO DELIVER

The transition from project delivery to portfolio management, from reporting to continuous inquiry, from data production to insight alpha, requires both the right methodology and the right infrastructure. Bright Mountain connects the capabilities this transition requires across its operating companies.

100,000 surveyed US adults — media habits, values, motivations, and behaviors, verified against behavioral and purchase signals and modeled to national scale. The primary data foundation on which insight alpha depends.

BIG VILLAGE

The foundational audience-intelligence layer and full-range primary research, designed around decisions rather than deliverables.

DEEP FOCUS

Strategy and communications intelligence that translates audience understanding into positioning, messaging, and market action.

BRIGHT STREAM

Activation that keeps the audience built in research as the same intelligence informing media targeting and measurement.

INTELLIGENCE BUILT CAREFULLY, MAINTAINED CONTINUOUSLY, AND CONNECTED TO DECISIONS IS INTELLIGENCE THAT COMPOUNDS OVER TIME.

CLOSING

GET THE FUNDAMENTALS RIGHT

The insights industry is in genuine transition, and some of the change is overdue. But transformation for its own sake is not a strategy. The organizations that build durable advantage from their insights functions are the ones that treat this moment as an opportunity to get the fundamentals right — not just to adopt new technology formats.

That means investing in data quality as the infrastructure grows more sophisticated. It means developing the organizational relationships that let insights influence decisions rather than merely inform them. And it means asking harder questions about whether the intelligence being generated actually connects to what the business needs to know.

The goal is not better research. The goal is **insight alpha** — the sustained informational advantage that enables better decisions than competitors are making, built on foundations that compound over time rather than reset with each planning cycle.

> **THE TOOLS AND DELIVERY FORMATS WILL CONTINUE TO EVOLVE. THE STANDARD THEY SERVE SHOULD NOT.**

BRIGHT MOUNTAIN

A MARKETING INNOVATION COMPANY

The second paper in a series of three. The first, The Audience Imperative, makes the case for audience as the strategic organizing principle of a business. The third, The Connected Intelligence Imperative, examines how the marketing workflow breaks down and what connected intelligence produces in its place.

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