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National Analysts Worldwide Celebrates a Century in Business

World's oldest business research unit is the birthplace of marketing research

Philadelphia, PA – June 21, 2011. National Analysts Worldwide is celebrating 100 years of continuous operation in Philadelphia and the role of both the firm and the city as a birthplace of modern marketing research. The firm is a leading research-based, boutique consultancy that serves both Fortune 100 companies and innovative start-ups by integrating expertise in research methodology with deep sector experience in industries like healthcare, information technology and communications, financial services, and business-to-business marketing.

The firm was formed in 1911 when The Curtis Publishing Company hired [Charles Coolidge Parlin](#) to create a business research unit that would help manufacturers understand their customers in the emerging consumer economy. The goal was to support the sale of advertising in Curtis publications like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Ladies Home Journal*. Both of those magazines would go on to help shape 20th century popular culture.

“The concept of conducting research about customers was really a novel one in 1911,” said Susan Schwartz McDonald, the firm’s CEO. “Marketing was still in its infancy but suddenly, we had this young, muscular industrial economy that was starting to pump out unprecedented quantities of mass-produced goods. Parlin preached the gospel that advertising could sell those hundreds of thousands of cars coming off the assembly line but that to advertise effectively, companies needed to understand consumers.”

Parlin’s inventive approach to marketing research was particularly notable due to the fact that there were no established principles of research a century ago. Some of Parlin’s earliest research literally involved rummaging through garbage cans on behalf of the Campbell Soup Company to discover the demographics of canned soup purchasers.

“We think of marketing and opinion research as something of a ‘scientific discipline,’ but pioneers like Charles Parlin were really improvising back then,” notes McDonald.

Even as late as the decade before WWII, many researchers preferred to ask people only about behavior, because they seriously doubted it was useful to hear ‘what people *think* they think.’

Today, it’s impossible to imagine companies making marketing decisions without directly asking customers for their opinions and purchase motivations – or increasingly, listening to people volunteer them in social media settings.

Parlin’s pioneering work led the American Marketing Association to dub him “the father of marketing research” and name the industry’s highest marketing award in his honor. Today, market research is an 18 billion dollar industry worldwide and most of the data once collected by people with clipboards is now collected through web surveys.

In 1941, the research unit created by Parlin became incorporated as National Analysts, the identity it has retained ever since, although ownership has changed several times. In 1970, it was acquired from private investors by management consulting firm, Booz.Allen & Hamilton. In 1992, McDonald, then a Vice President of Booz.Allen, purchased the company with one of her colleagues, John Berrigan. After Berrigan’s retirement in 2004, the company became a woman-owned ESOP (employee stock ownership plan). The name of the firm was changed in 2006 to National Analysts Worldwide, to reflect its global reach.

“It may sound like a contradiction in terms to juxtapose national with worldwide, but we had so much rich equity in that brand, we simply couldn’t risk changing the name.”

“The history of National Analysts Worldwide is, in many ways, the history of marketing research,” observes McDonald. “A number of major industry milestones and ‘inventions’ are part of our company legacy.” Standard techniques like probability sampling and now-familiar concepts like focus groups were either developed at National Analysts or saw some of their earliest applications here. “But we don’t rest on those laurels” notes McDonald. “We’re proud of our legacy, but we’re always looking to the future.”

McDonald joined the firm after receiving a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School in 1977. She soon found herself conducting focus groups on game-changing new products like lite beer, and pain-relievers like Motrin and Tylenol. She was summoned to Atlanta by the VP of Coca Cola to talk to distraught consumers about the replacement of original Coke with a new formula, and help determine whether the situation could be salvaged. (It could – but only by withdrawing New Coke and re-crowning the King as Coke Classic.) Since then, she has worked personally on game-changing prescription drugs like Vioxx, Lipitor, Viagra – including the early HIV drugs, whose launch she helped guide at a time when that disease was little known or understood. “What an amazing window on our culture this job has been.”

Today, National Analysts Worldwide continues to help companies develop important product innovations and forecast demand for new products – all based on the same kind of customer insight that Parlin attempted to achieve back in the early part of the 20th century.

“We’ve been involved in steering some of the best-known brands in the world from the credit cards in your wallet to major food products in your pantry to life-saving drugs in your medicine cabinet,” notes McDonald. “Market research is an engine of progress but it’s also an important lens through which we see ourselves. To understand us as a people, you need to understand us as customers. Market research is really an instrument of consumer democracy.”

Today, the web continues to produce rapid and dramatic changes in the way companies market their products as well as in the tools available to study consumers, raising challenging new questions about privacy. Less fully appreciated but equally important may be basic changes in the way consumers see themselves.

“Looking into the web is like looking into a mirror. The social media have turned consumers into self-conscious actors who are, in some sense, managers of their own personal “brand identities.” We can’t take stock fast enough to understand the implications of that sort of change.”

As National Analysts Worldwide prepares for the next 100 years, the firm continues to cherish its role as a medium-sized, boutique firm with a culture of innovation that continues to help clients reshape their markets, and the staying power to go toe-to-toe with much bigger firms.

About National Analysts Worldwide

National Analysts Worldwide is a leading research-based consultancy that serves both Fortune 100 companies and innovative start-ups by integrating expertise in research methodology with deep sector experience in industries like Healthcare, B2B markets, Information Technology, Media and communications, and Financial Services. Drawing on a century of industry leadership, the firm integrates market research with business consulting to address marketing challenges from opportunity assessment and launch strategy to brand health and lifecycle management.

National Analysts Worldwide is known for expertise in modeling, market segmentation, demand forecasting, and research that drives brand strategy, positioning, pricing, product innovation, and insight on customer experience. <http://www.nationalanalysts.com/>

Read our blog, “A Day in the Life Sciences” at <http://blog.nationalanalysts.com/>