

5 Things I Learned by Listening for 35+ Years



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Offices in Wisconsin and Minnesota

A White Paper on What the Past Tells Us About the Future

April 6, 2020 - Since 1982, Leede Research has done **ONE THING** and that is to **LISTEN**. The foundation of marketing research is listening to people and gathering information to help our clients make better decisions for the future. Whether those are consumers or business decision makers the job is the same.

I am writing this after the first two weeks of Wisconsin's "Safer at Home" program closed all non-essential businesses or forced teams to work from home if they were to continue their efforts. It is a time where only one thing is certain, and that is uncertainty. Everyone is wondering how long social distancing and limited business programs are going to be in place? What will the end cost be to our society and economy? How will the future look when this is all over? 10 million people have already applied for unemployment and more are likely to follow. A Phase 1 Stimulus program was passed, and we have been riding the rollercoaster investment environment leaving many of us to wonder if we will ever retire. These are strange times in America and around the world.

Having spent my entire career in the marketing research field, I have seen many different environments across many different industry segments. We have been there through the entire evolution of healthcare since the 80's, with all the twists and turns it has and will continue to generate. We were there for 9-11, that changed the way we see our safety and security. We have helped clients work through the changes generated from the "Great Recession" of 2008/2009 and impact that economy had on almost every category of business. While we do not know what the end will look like, I think it is safe to say this will be the most significant change event in my lifetime and possibly in modern history. How will it change our future when it eventually comes to an end, hopefully later in the year?

Time in social distancing also means time to think. It makes us review our lives, our families and our work. In my case, the process led me to think about all I have done and learned in the work we have done across many industries and categories of business. I have a 37-year PhD that I will never get a degree for, working with some of the biggest companies and brands in the country, but also with small businesses and local organizations. I believe there are more common things in our work than unique. While situations and events change, being a consumer is comparable across environments. We are all consumers; it just depends what hat we wear when being one. How we consume changes based on our experiences. Current events **WILL** change the way we consume!

Right now, we are consumers in crisis. Fear and lack of experience means that we are making purchases to protect our futures and our families. We see hoarding of many commonly needed items from toilet paper to pasta and rice. We cannot find common cleaning products, hand soaps and sanitizers. Even those of us who believe we are better than this find it hard to pass up these products should we run into them in our shopping process.

My goal in the following pages is to share my perspective on what the future might bring, based on what the past has taught me by listening. I hope to generate thought and conversation and welcome your perspective in the discussion. Let me know how you see this brave new world!



Perception is Reality

This has been the mantra of marketing research since I first learned my craft. It has been a foundation of what we do in marketing research and something I can tell you I have confirmed thousands of times in my career. This event has been a great demonstration of this key point. We are not filling our closets with toilet paper, cleaning products and sanitizers because they are in short supply and will become unavailable. We are doing so because we perceive that could become the case in our new reality. National articles indicate this behavior has even happened within our healthcare system with some providers hoarding supplies while others go searching. We see real world examples every day of how perceptions shape our realities during the Coronavirus, and they will continue to do so.

These can be positive or negative. Some people perceive they could become infected and possibly be at risk of a serious outcome or expose others in their circles. They practice social distancing and even self-quarantining in response. This is a difficult and very personal decision. We saw large groups of college students and young people descend on some Florida beaches, believing they were invincible. Some of those have now been diagnosed with the virus and others unknowingly returned home with it. Heat mapping tracking cell phone migration shows how this may be spreading the virus across the country. Both examples demonstrate how we as human beings make decisions based on our perceptions every bit as much as the reality of the situation.

Large gaps between perceptions and reality can generate widely varying responses. Coronavirus is the classic example. We are trying to get a consistent message out about our current situation and what needs to happen to rectify it. The challenge is that getting this to the public is not as easy as it used to be. Had this been in the 70's, four TV networks would have covered 90% of the U.S. That is not today, when many no longer use network television, cable or satellite. There is also the challenge of TRUST and how that impacts the information in terms of both source and content. Today's media is partisan and messages are targeted to the views of their audiences. Study after study has shown the deterioration of trust in brands, businesses, information sources and even governments. These factors will impact the acceptance of the information and decisions made based on it.

Many of the problems we are currently experiencing will not improve until we can get better control of public perceptions and consistently get the right messages out from sources that different groups trust. That may come down to our circles of family and friends, which traditionally show the highest levels of trust in our information sources. This means that all of us can play a role in creating a stronger future that has the right information offered from the proper aperture. Social pressure, generated from close circles will likely be the best tool to increase compliance with social distancing, reduce travel and create realistic shopping and safety behaviors. We all need to work together to share realistic and accurate information that drives needed change.



Life is Change

Does this even need to be stated? All our lives are in constant change. Everything we do and everything that happens to us changes how we see our personal world. Some changes are small. We get older and we find we cannot eat big meals late like we did in our youth and thus we don't eat big meals late. Some changes are large. 9-11 changed the way we view our security, whether as an individual or a society. We now have significantly different travel experiences than we did before this event. This and other attacks on our society have led to a more secure environment but also changes in attitudes towards the military, first responders and more. The event brought us together to protect our country. It changed society and our role in it.

The Coronavirus WILL change our lives. It will change them personally, professionally and as a society. As 9-11 changed security, this event will change healthcare, public health and government. It will impact the future design of our healthcare systems. It will impact industries both in healthcare and beyond. It will impact the way we work based on the experience of work at home and remote teams for extended periods of time. It will impact the careers that our children will have. There have already been articles that call babies being born now and in the future as Generation C (Coronavirus). This denotes the next generational shift created by the event.

We have experienced thousands of changes that have impacted our lives and will experience thousands more. Each of these impacts us, some almost unnoticed, others significantly. Some individually, others society wide. This is the true nature of our lives as human beings and part of our growth both emotionally and practically. It is also our growth as a community, a nation and as a society. It is inevitable and unstoppable. All we can do is learn from it and adapt. How we respond to change will impact our future, whether personally or in business.



Me vs Us

The world has changed in ways that many people do not even recognize. It would be hard to argue that we have become a "me" society. We are much more focused on ourselves and our individual wants and needs than at any time in our history. This is a factor of our environment and changes in society driven by technology and more information than has ever been available in our history. More is known about us as individuals than we even

understand and all that information is being used to personalize the things we are exposed to in media, shopping and our daily lives. While this is positive for the individual, it may have changed key elements in society.

Big data has changed the world forever and in doing so it has changed the perspective from “us” to “me”. A byproduct of this process is that we strengthen the belief that we are all unique, all different. Social media has allowed us to leverage our uniqueness in ways that would not have occurred through personal interactions. Not all of these are good and our tolerance for views other than our own has been diminished. We wear our uniqueness as a badge of honor today and all of this sometimes makes us forget how much the same, we really are.

Making the changes we need to minimize the impact on society and our economy is going to require moving the needle back in the “us” direction. Tragedy can pull people together and may help create a stronger future. People need to understand that some things are bigger than we as individuals can address and it is only by working together that we will be successful. While there is clearly movement in that direction, we have a long way to go if we are going to achieve the needed goals in a timely manner. It may be the one positive of these coming days.



Information is Essential

All the changes discussed are a factor of INFORMATION! Information surrounds us and at times overwhelms us. More is known about us as individuals today than any other time in our history. Some find that promising, while others see it as a threat. However you feel about it, the information we are exposed to will continue. Information is the key to understanding the past and projecting the future. That has been the foundation of marketing research from the start and will continue to be in the future.

The events of today will change tomorrow. In recent weeks we have all seen a day that totally changed our lives. There were classes in schools one day and then at home the next, possibly never returning this school year. We watched our favorite sporting events one week and they were gone the next. All these events, individually and cumulatively, are changing the way we think today and will make decisions tomorrow. We may not even realize the impact for some time to come but my 35+ years of marketing research experience tells me we will all be changed. How we change will impact our decisions, our purchases and our habits for years to come.

When the dust settles on what will feel like an eternity of dealing with our current situation, people will settle back into what will be their “new normal”. That life will be part of what it was before, part what happened during the event and part what we perceive based on the new reality. We will recognize no one is immune to a pandemic. What we thought we knew about our businesses and customers is only partially true at best. What we don’t know is more significant than we realize, and it will be information that helps us understand and align with this new normal. Information will be the key to taking advantage of both short-term opportunities and long-term changes. Information will be the shield that protects us from future disaster on many levels.



No Time Like the Present

When do we start to understand the change that is swirling around us literally every day? The answer is simple, NOW! There is no such thing as too early to measure unprecedented change. Those that measure and understand it early are going to be in the strongest position to use that information to support and advance their businesses and positions. The reality is that this environment is fluid and it will be for some time to come. This is going to be true whether you measure early, or you measure late. While the goals of measurement may vary, the need is consistent. Gather information to make the right decisions in the uncharted new normal.

There may also be another advantage of measuring early. We as consumers are not always good at understanding and communicating what has changed in our lives and how it impacts the future. Understanding consumer emotions, positions and aspirations may offer incredible value later, when they return to what they believe is a normal life. It will provide a baseline that can be tracked in the future and related decisions tied to future intent. This is a time sensitive opportunity that comes along only once.

Regardless of what you do, there are advantages in understanding your surroundings and how current events might impact the future. Whether that process involves formal research or just your commitment to take in all you can and use it in the future, you will benefit from the exercise. Your work can begin today and continue throughout the process. Think about documenting your thoughts and make notes on your perspective on future change. It will yield benefits as we enter the new normal and continue our lives. Best wishes on this journey.

The New Normal is developing every day this event continues. The longer it goes the stronger the impact. The more personal it becomes to any of us, the stronger the impact and the greater the change that will be created. We cannot stop it. All we can do is understand it and react. We can use the change to chart a brighter future for our businesses and help the new consumers in the process. This is true for the public or business consumers. How will you respond?



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