

Cassandra: cursed prophetess

By [Barbara Cooke](#) & [Tim Bester](#)

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According to Homer's Illiad, Cassandra was a beautiful young woman, blessed with the gift of prophecy by Apollo, who was infatuated with her. Unfortunately, because she shunned Apollo, at the last minute he added a twist to her gift... Cassandra was doomed to tell the truth, but never to be believed.

Today we call someone a "Cassandra" when their true words are ignored. Cassandra's doom was to predict what others refused to believe.

And so it is with research. How often we find that monies spent on research are only thought to have been well spent if the findings accord with the pre-conceived ideas of the person commissioning the research! Anything different, and the research is suspect.

Research is the Cassandra in the marketing equation. If it reveals what is known, then the research investment is regarded as having been wasted - and this in spite of the fact that the truth has been confirmed. If it throws up some new insights, particularly if these do not accord with common wisdom, it is regarded as being a Cassandra - not believed in spite of it being the truth!

Research is so often the scapegoat, the way to delay the decision making process, the excuse for not making that final commitment. The brief is often couched in terms that define the outcome - "I want research to prove that...." - instead of being open-ended and honest.

Research processes are often set in stone - this is the way it has always been done and we are not changing this now because, if we do, all the trends will be useless. Vested interests will be challenged; contracts can't be broken; investments in hardware, software and expertise are seen as excuses for voting for the status quo.

The truth is that research is mostly anchored in the past, in perceptions that have been created out of past experiences with the brand; and commissioners of research often fail to remember that the results are actually needed to plan for the future of the brand. All you get from looking back is a crick in the neck!

Perhaps it is now the time to challenge the old wisdoms, the old ways of doing things, and to look for new and innovative ideas to shape the research initiatives going forward. Perhaps Cassandra should be forgiven for daring to challenge the Apollo's of the industry. Perhaps the twisted gift of a thwarted suitor should be seen for what it really was - the jealous action of a lover denied what he thought was his right.

Do not mock Cassandra for telling the truth, for offering a better solution, for suggesting that there may be new hills to climb and better ways of viewing the landscape. Instead, recognise that her gift of prophecy is intact, but that real curse of Apollo was to make deaf the ears of those who heard Cassandra's truths.

The South African marketing and advertising industry needs to move into a new era where globalisation and belonging to a global community are facts of life.

Where old ways of measuring markets, and the media that serve those markets, have to be reviewed and evaluated against new norms.

Where markets are built bottom up, defined by the brands that compete in arenas defined by the users of those brands and not by the manufacturers who make them.

Where product category definitions are relegated to the dustbin of yesterday thinking and, instead, the consumers define their own utility repertoires and brand loyalties and decide which brands best fulfill those needs.

Of course, the truth is sometimes painful to hear. And often it is resisted with a surprising amount of strength and much prejudice. Cassandra is doomed before she has spoken!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Cooke and Tim Bester run TGI Research.

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