



INSPIRED THROUGH SCIENCE, TRANSFORMED THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Why Generative AI Still Needs Human Experts in Consumer Insights

Executive Summary

Generative AI has quickly become part of the consumer insights toolkit. It can process large volumes of information, identify recurring themes and produce summaries in a fraction of the time previously required. For many organisations, these capabilities have created excitement about the possibility of faster and more efficient research.

Recent evidence suggests that the value of AI has limits. Research from Harvard Business School and Stanford indicates that while AI can improve performance on tasks that are close to a person's existing knowledge, it struggles to compensate for a lack of expertise. The researchers describe this as the "GenAI Wall Effect", a point at which productivity gains begin to fall because the technology cannot replace domain knowledge, experience or judgement.

This finding is particularly relevant to consumer insights. Understanding customers involves far more than organising information. It requires interpretation, context and the ability to distinguish between what consumers say, what they mean, and what they actually do. These are areas where experienced researchers continue to play a critical role.

The organisations likely to gain the greatest benefit from AI will not be those that attempt to replace expertise. They will be those that combine the speed of AI with the judgement of experienced insight professionals.

The Promise and Reality of AI in Consumer Insights

Over the past two years, generative AI has transformed the way many research teams work. Tasks that once required days of manual effort can now be completed in a matter of hours. Survey responses can be summarised almost instantly. Customer reviews can be organised into themes. Early hypotheses can be generated with minimal effort.

These developments have genuine value. They allow researchers to spend less time on administrative work and more time focusing on interpretation and decision-making.

Consumer research has never been solely about collecting information. The real value lies in understanding why people behave as they do. This often involves recognising contradictions,

NEOTRIGEN

INSPIRED THROUGH SCIENCE, TRANSFORMED THROUGH EXPERIENCE

identifying emotional drivers, and interpreting behaviour within a specific social, cultural, or commercial context.

These elements are rarely visible from the data alone. However, AI can identify patterns. But, it cannot reliably explain their significance.

Understanding the GenAI Wall Effect

The Harvard Business School and Stanford research offers a useful way of thinking about this challenge.

The study found that AI tends to be most effective when users already possess a strong understanding of the subject matter. Here, AI acts as an amplifier. It helps experts work more efficiently by accelerating tasks that would otherwise consume valuable time.

This situation changes when expertise is limited. AI may still generate answers, summaries, and recommendations, but users are often less able to recognise weaknesses, challenge assumptions or identify inaccuracies. As a result, improvements in performance begin to level off.

The implication is straightforward. AI does not eliminate the need for expertise but increases the importance of expertise because someone still needs to evaluate the quality of the output.

For consumer insights professionals, this observation will sound familiar. Research findings require interpretation by people who understand the category, the customer, the market, and the business context in which decisions will be made.

Why Consumer Insight Requires More Than Data Analysis

One of the most common misconceptions about consumer research is that it is primarily a data exercise but in reality, consumer insight is fundamentally about human understanding.

Consider a customer interview in which participants repeatedly mention price concerns. An AI system may correctly identify "price" as a dominant theme. Here, an experienced researcher will often look beyond the surface. Is price genuinely the issue, or is it a proxy for perceived value? Are customers concerned about affordability, or are they questioning whether the product justifies the cost? Does the same response mean something different across customer groups?

These distinctions matter because they lead to very different business decisions.

The same principle applies across almost every aspect of consumer research. People frequently express themselves indirectly. Their behaviour may contradict their stated

NEOTRIGEN

INSPIRED THROUGH SCIENCE, TRANSFORMED THROUGH EXPERIENCE

preferences. Cultural factors may influence how opinions are communicated. Market conditions may alter the significance of a finding.

Understanding these subtleties requires experience and judgement rather than computational power alone.

Where AI Adds Genuine Value

This does not diminish the contribution that AI can make.

In many areas of consumer insight work, AI provides substantial benefits. Large datasets can be reviewed more quickly than ever before. Themes can be identified across thousands of customer comments. Early-stage exploration can be completed with greater speed and breadth than traditional approaches allow.

For insight teams operating under increasing pressure to deliver faster results, these efficiencies are extremely valuable.

The key point is that AI is most effective when it supports expert thinking rather than attempting to replace it.

Many experienced researchers now use AI in much the same way that previous generations adopted statistical software or advanced analytics tools. The technology expands capability, but responsibility for interpretation remains with the professional.

The Risks of Over-Reliance on AI

Problems begin to emerge when organisations assume that AI-generated outputs are equivalent to expert conclusions.

Generative AI systems are designed to produce plausible responses. They are not designed to verify truth in the way a researcher would. As a result, outputs can appear highly convincing while still containing important inaccuracies, unsupported assumptions, or contextual misunderstandings.

In consumer insights, these weaknesses can have significant consequences. Decisions about product development, pricing, customer experience, and brand strategy often involve substantial investment. Poor interpretation can lead organisations towards opportunities that do not exist or away from opportunities that do.

The cost of a flawed insight is often much greater than the cost of the research itself.

NEOTRIGEN

INSPIRED THROUGH SCIENCE, TRANSFORMED THROUGH EXPERIENCE

For this reason, organisations should view AI-generated findings as inputs into a decision-making process rather than final answers.

The Future of Consumer Insights

The debate about whether AI will replace researchers may be asking the wrong question.

A more useful question is how researchers and AI can work together most effectively.

The evidence increasingly suggests that the strongest results come from combining AI's ability to process information at scale with the expertise of professionals who understand how to interpret and apply that information.

This combination creates a practical balance. AI improves efficiency and expands analytical capacity. Human experts provide context, challenge assumptions, and ensure that findings are relevant to real business decisions.

As the technology continues to evolve, this partnership is likely to become the standard model for high-quality consumer insight work.

Conclusion

Generative AI is already changing the way consumer insights are produced. It has made research processes faster, more scalable, and in many cases more accessible.

What it has not done is remove the need for expertise.

Understanding consumers remains a deeply human challenge. It requires judgement, contextual awareness, methodological rigour, and an appreciation of the complexities that shape human behaviour.

The organisations that succeed in the coming years are unlikely to be those that rely solely on AI. They will be those that use AI intelligently while continuing to invest in the people who know how to turn information into meaningful understanding.

In consumer insights, technology can accelerate the journey. Expertise still determines the destination.