



INSPIRED THROUGH SCIENCE, TRANSFORMED THROUGH EXPERIENCE

One Insights Manager vs an Entire Consumer Insights Team: What Does Your F&B Brand Really Need?

The future of consumer insights is not AI versus experts. It is AI powered by expertise.

Generative AI has changed the speed at which businesses can collect, organise and interpret information.

Customer reviews can be summarised in seconds. Thousands of comments can be grouped into themes. Research questions can be explored quickly, hypotheses can be generated, and large volumes of consumer information can be processed with a level of speed that would have been difficult to imagine only a few years ago.

For the food and beverage industry this creates an enormous opportunity.

But it also creates an important question:

If AI can analyse this much information so quickly, do businesses still need consumer insight experts?

The answer is yes. Recent research from *Harvard Business School and Stanford* helps explain why. The *GenAI Wall Effect* research found that generative AI can help people move into related areas of work, but its ability to close expertise gaps becomes weaker as the distance between a person's existing knowledge and the task increases. The research highlights an important distinction: AI can accelerate what people know how to do, but it does not automatically give them the depth of experience required to judge what the information actually means.

For consumer insights, particularly in F&B this distinction matters.

Understanding consumers is not simply about finding patterns. It is about understanding why those patterns exist, what they mean, and what a business should do about them.



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AI Can Find the Pattern. Experts Understand the Context.

Imagine an F&B brand analysing thousands of customer comments.

AI might quickly identify that:

- Price is frequently mentioned.
- Customers want healthier options.
- Packaging appears repeatedly in reviews.
- Certain flavours generate stronger engagement.
- Customers are discussing competitors more frequently.

All of these observations may be correct.

Observation is not the same as insight.

→ If consumers repeatedly say that a product is "too expensive", what does that actually mean?

→ Are they genuinely price-sensitive?

→ Do they believe the portion size is too small?

→ Do they feel the product does not deliver enough value?

→ Has a competitor changed the category's price expectations?

→ Is the product being compared with a different consumption occasion?

→ Or is "price" simply the easiest way for consumers to express a broader dissatisfaction with the product?

The answer changes the business decision.

An AI system can help identify the signal.

An experienced researcher knows how to investigate the signal.

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Why F&B Expertise Matters

Food and beverage is an unusually complex consumer category.

Consumers do not make food choices based on one variable.

Taste, price, convenience, health, habit, culture, social influence, packaging, occasion, identity and availability can all influence a single purchase.

The same product can also mean completely different things to different consumers.

A premium snack may be an everyday indulgence for one consumer and an occasional treat for another.

A "healthy" product may be perceived as genuinely nutritious by one group and simply expensive by another.

A new flavour may appeal to adventurous younger consumers while confusing existing loyal customers.

These nuances are difficult to capture through surface-level analysis alone.

They require people who understand consumer behaviour, research methodology and the F&B environment.

That is where specialist expertise becomes valuable.

From Published Research to Industry Expertise

At Neotrigen, expertise is not treated as something that can simply be generated by prompting an AI system.

Our approach combines published research, consumer-led evidence, F&B industry experience and educational expertise.

That means insight is grounded in what research subjects actually say and do, while also being interpreted through an understanding of the category in which those behaviours occur.

The result is not simply a report full of charts and themes.

It is a clearer understanding of the consumer and what that understanding means commercially.

AI can accelerate the process. Expertise determines how the process is designed, how evidence is challenged and how conclusions are reached. "This expertise is grounded through commercial experience, as well as many years within the software industry"- Sheena says.



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Why an Expert Partner Can Be More Valuable Than One Insight Hire

For many F&B businesses, building an internal consumer insights function can be difficult.

Hiring one experienced insights manager can provide valuable capability, but one person naturally has a finite set of skills, capacity and perspectives.

A specialist insight partner can provide something different: a multidisciplinary team that can be brought in according to the problem the business needs to solve.

A full team for the price of one hire

An insights manager is one person. A specialist agency can bring together researchers, data analysts, qualitative moderators and strategists across a single engagement.

Instead of depending on one person's skill set, businesses gain access to a broader bench of expertise for a predictable project cost.

This becomes particularly valuable when a research question requires multiple disciplines rather than a single skill.

Faster Time-to-Insight

Building an internal research capability takes time.

A new hire needs to understand the business, establish supplier relationships, learn internal processes, identify research partners and build the necessary workflows before they can operate at full capacity. An established insight partner already has those foundations in place.

With established methodologies, research relationships and access to relevant panels and tools, projects can move from question to actionable insight significantly faster.

For F&B businesses operating in fast-moving innovation cycles, speed matters.

A consumer question that takes months to answer may arrive after a product decision has already been made.

The goal is not simply to produce research faster.

It is to get the right insight to the decision-maker while the decision can still be influenced.

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A Fresh Perspective Outside the Business

One of the challenges of internal teams is proximity:

When people work with the same brands, products and assumptions every day, certain things can become invisible.

"This is how we've always done it."

"Consumers in this category don't behave that way."

"Our customers would never choose that."

"That competitor isn't relevant to us."

These assumptions may be correct.

But they may also be precisely what needs to be challenged.

An external insight partner brings a different perspective.

By looking at the business from outside its internal structures, an agency can question established assumptions, identify inconsistencies and investigate opportunities that internal teams may have stopped noticing.

Good research does not exist to confirm what a company already believes.

It exists to discover what the company may not know.

Scalability When the Business Needs It

A brand may need limited research during a stable period and significantly more support during a product innovation cycle, category expansion or major launch. Hiring permanent employees creates a fixed cost structure around a variable need.

An external partner allows businesses to scale insight capability according to the project:

→ Need support for a single consumer study? Bring in the relevant expertise.

→ Launching a new product? Expand the research capability.

→ Entering a new category? Bring in additional research and strategic expertise. The resource can grow or contract with the business instead of remaining fixed regardless of demand.



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Access to Advanced Tools and Methodologies

High-quality consumer research requires more than a survey platform.

Depending on the business question, insight programmes may involve techniques such as:

- Sensory testing
- Ethnographic research
- Qualitative interviews
- Eye-tracking
- Conjoint analysis
- Consumer segmentation
- Social listening
- AI-assisted analysis
- Behavioural research
- Concept testing

For a single internal hire, maintaining expertise across all these methodologies can be difficult and expensive.

A specialist partner can provide access to a broader toolkit and determine which methodology is appropriate for the question.

Because the goal is not to use the most impressive research method.

It is to use the right method to answer the right question.

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Cross-Category Benchmarking

One of the biggest advantages of working across multiple F&B brands and categories is exposure to patterns that a single company cannot easily see.

A business may know what its own customers are doing.

A specialist partner can also understand how similar behaviours appear across categories, occasions and consumer groups.

A trend emerging in beverages may eventually influence snacks.

A shift in health perceptions may affect indulgence categories.

A change in convenience expectations may influence packaging, format and channel strategy.

Cross-category exposure allows researchers to identify these connections.

It turns individual research projects into a broader understanding of how consumer expectations are changing.

Objective Recommendations

Research becomes commercially valuable only when businesses are willing to act on what it reveals.

That sometimes means hearing something leadership does not want to hear.

A product may not have the appeal the team expected.

A campaign may be communicating the wrong benefit.

A consumer segment may be smaller than anticipated.

A competitor may be solving a customer problem more effectively.

An internal assumption may simply be wrong.

An external partner has an important responsibility here: to report what the evidence actually suggests rather than what stakeholders hope it will say.

The purpose of insight is not to make leadership feel right.

It is to help leadership make better decisions.

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AI Makes Expertise More Valuable, Not Less.

This is where the relationship between AI and consumer insight becomes particularly important.

AI can make an experienced researcher dramatically more efficient.

It can help process large datasets, organise transcripts, identify recurring themes, compare responses, generate hypotheses and accelerate early-stage analysis.

But the researcher still needs to ask:

- Is this pattern meaningful?
- What could be causing it?
- What evidence supports this interpretation?
- What evidence contradicts it?
- Does this apply to all consumers or only a specific segment?
- What does this mean commercially?
- What should the business do next?

Those questions require judgement.

And judgement is built through domain knowledge, research experience and exposure to real consumers and real business decisions.

The Harvard and Stanford research reinforces this distinction:

GenAI can help bridge expertise gaps, particularly when roles are relatively close, but its ability to substitute for expertise weakens as the knowledge distance increases.

For F&B businesses, this means AI should not be viewed as a replacement for insight expertise.

It should be viewed as an accelerator for it.

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Lower Risk, Greater Flexibility

Hiring an internal insights professional is a long-term commitment.

An agency engagement can be structured around specific projects, deliverables and business questions.

That creates flexibility.

Businesses can evaluate the value of the partnership project by project, without taking on the same fixed headcount commitment associated with hiring.

This is particularly useful for growing F&B businesses that need sophisticated insight capability but may not yet need a permanent internal research department.

Plug-and-Play With Existing Teams

External does not have to mean disconnected.

A good insight partner should be able to work alongside existing marketing, R&D, innovation, brand and commercial teams.

The objective is not to replace the people already inside the organisation.

It is to extend their capability.

The internal team brings knowledge of the business.

The external team brings research expertise, methodological capability and an outside perspective.

AI adds speed and analytical capacity.

Together, these capabilities create a much stronger insight system than any one component could provide alone.

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The Real Competitive Advantage

The future of consumer insights is unlikely to belong to organisations that simply use the most AI.

It will belong to organisations that know **how to use AI well**.

That requires people who understand consumers deeply enough to question the output, recognise its limitations and translate information into meaningful commercial action.

For F&B businesses, the opportunity is therefore not to choose between technology and human expertise.

It is to combine them.

- AI can process the information.
- Experts can understand the consumer.
- Together, they can improve the decision.

Conclusion

Generative AI has changed the economics and speed of research.

It can help insight teams analyse more information, explore more possibilities and move faster than ever before.

But faster analysis does not automatically create better understanding.

Consumer insight still depends on context, research discipline, category knowledge and human judgement.

That is why the most effective model is not AI replacing experts. It is AI accelerating experts.

For F&B brands, partnering with a specialist consumer insights team provides access to that expertise without requiring the business to build an entire function internally.

- You gain researchers, analysts, moderators and strategists.
- You gain established methodologies and research capabilities.
- You gain an outside perspective.
- You gain flexibility.

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Gain the ability to combine human expertise with AI-driven speed, as consumer insights and technology can accelerate the journey.

Expertise still determines the destination. AI determines the speed.

Learn more

Neotrigen helps F&B brands turn consumer reality into business growth combining research, industry expertise and modern insight capabilities to identify what consumers need and translate those findings into commercially useful decisions with a combination of scientific expertise, transferable skills from many years within the software industry combined with experience within the nutrition and health sector, and F&B industry.