

The Five Shareholders,
L-R; Elaine Sloan, Luke
Reaper, Ian McShane, Neil
Douglas and Larry Ryan.

RESEARCHING THE NATION

Set up over 30 years ago, Behaviour & Attitudes has evolved into Ireland's largest independent market research company and as MD **LUKE REAPER** explains to JOHN MCGEE, it's a great time to be involved in market research.

“On the social research side, we have strong links with a number of universities and academic institutions and we work with TILDA (The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing) which is one of the largest studies in the Irish market with over 7,500 over the age of 50 interviewed and we follow them through their lives.”

LUKE REAPER, MANAGING DIRECTOR, BEHAVIOUR & ATTITUDES.

THE WHO'S WHO OF CORPORATE IRELAND

With this in mind, the aptly named Behaviour & Attitudes (B&A) was born in 1986 when it was founded by Des Byrne, Graham Wilkinson and Phelim O'Leary. Now owned by directors and shareholders Ian McShane, Elaine Sloan, Luke Reaper, Neil Douglas and Larry Ryan, B&A is Ireland's largest market research company with over 40 staff on-site in its Milltown-based offices in addition to over 200 interviewers who carry out nationwide research as well as access to around 40 people working in a call-centre.

Headed up by executive chairman Ian McShane and managing director Luke Reaper, B&A's client list reads like a Who's Who of corporate Ireland and it has built up an enviable reputation in both the commercial, public and social service end of the research industry, picking up numerous awards along the way, including the Grand Prix in the most recent Marketing Society's Research Excellence Awards.

To many outside the marketing and advertising industries, B&A is well known for the range of opinion polls it carries out for media outlets like RTÉ and the *Sunday Times* but this tells only part of the story.

"We're probably best known for our opinion polls which is actually a tiny proportion of our business," says Luke Reaper, managing director.

"But it's great as it gives us a profile in the industry and amongst survey respondents who know the name when they get a phone call or when we come knocking on the door. That's very, very important, particularly when it comes to people who mightn't normally take part in a survey or give up their free time," he adds.

"The lion's share of turnover, however, comes from both the private client side of the business as well as the public and social projects we work on for government agencies or departments. Government work has been quite buoyant for the past year and it is spending quite a bit in different areas. On the social research side, we have strong links with a number of universities and academic institutions and we work with TILDA (The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing) which is one of the largest studies in the Irish market with over 7,500 over the age of 50 interviewed and we follow them through their lives. This contributes and feeds into government policy at so many levels when it comes to things like medicines or even the sequencing of amber lights in traffic lights. In so many ways, it's a pioneering survey and now similar ones are being undertaken in other countries. We are also working on a European social survey which is a multi-country one and we are doing the Irish bit of it. What they have in common is that they all contribute towards society and a better understanding of the issues that people face and some of them can be quite large but they are also very interesting because, as researchers, it's our job to be curious," says Reaper.

"I recently read a piece by the marketing academic and commentator Mark Ritson who, in his usual style, asked that marketers not be 'seduced by the pornography of change'. We, as researchers, interact with people of all walks of life every day and while we can give them a myriad of exciting labels, they are still just people. Understanding what makes them and indeed society tick is what research is about," says Reaper.

"As researchers, we are fascinated by the world around us and curious about people, not simply as people and users of products and brands, but in how they interact within their broader cultural surroundings. Understanding the broader cultural context for people and brands is as true today as it was when B&A was set-up. In fact, even more so one could argue," he adds. ➤

It was David Ogilvy, the godfather of modern advertising, who famously said that "advertising people who ignore research are as dangerous as generals who ignore decodes of enemy signals." While Ogilvy only name-checked the advertising industry, he could just as easily have been talking about businesses in general and the impact that good research can have on strategy, particularly when it comes to understanding your customers, your competitors and the wider market place in which your business operates.

In a world where bubbling geo-political sensitivities are polarising society, where globalisation has given way to 'slowbalisation,' where businesses and their brands are being upended and constantly challenged by parvenu upstarts and technologies and where consumer behaviours are changing all the time, good market research has never been more important.

Yet, when it all boils down to it, there is still one inescapable fact: we are all human beings who are capable of making a multitude of both rational and irrational decisions on a daily basis. And understanding people's behaviours and their attitudes is paramount to unlocking key insights.



The Youth! L-R: Anita Mullan, Niall Brennan, Luke Reaper, Cathy Glennon and Rachael Joyce.

“B&A also strives to challenge research briefs and deliver a proposed approach that will deliver real insight. While methodologically we are agnostic, and we offer everything from qualitative and online to and CAPI (computer aided personal interviewing), we do firmly believe in understanding the why behind consumer decisions. As our name suggests understanding their behaviour and indeed their attitudes lies at the heart of what we do. As we challenge ourselves to deliver better and better insights, one of the things we should be thinking about is our methodological toolkit; expanding it, honing it, challenging our assumptions,” he says.

REAL UNDERSTANDING & DEPTH OF THOUGHT

In a market that is fond of forecasting and embracing the latest shiny new thing, it is easy for marketers to get carried away and be influenced and bamboozled by all manner of companies trying to pedal the next big thing.

“Nor do we get distracted by hollow predictions, rather it we try to uncover real insights and understand how they will apply across our client sectors. Given the pace of change in the current world it is crucial that real understanding and depth of thought is applied to trends,” he adds.

“For this reason, B&A conducts its own Sign of the Times project every January to unlock how Irish consumers are thinking and we share this with clients to enhance their insight into what makes the people tick. We also tap into our independent partner network IRIS and conduct international trend pieces. Also, as we are independent, we can partner with all types of organisations, from economic consultants, to data specialists out of California, to real-time CX platforms from NZ, to ad agencies and other research groups. This approach is loved by our clients, making their lives easier and delivering enhanced and more actionable insight,” Reaper says.

“We think that one of the unique aspects of B&A is our understanding of the roots of insight. As an industry we have our roots in academic social research, and we take inspiration and approaches from this particularly rich resource. Here we find innovative, imaginative and rigorous approaches to uncovering new knowledge about people and their motivations. As such, we are strategically different to other agencies, in the sense that we are committed to both vitally important social research projects as well as commercial and strategic research for private clients. The recent Marketing Society Excellence in Research awards underline this strategy and we won the Product Innovation and New Product Development Research award for our work on mortgages for AIB, and also the Public Policy & Social Research award for our work with MSD and reversing the vaccination crisis, which also went on to win the Grand Prix,” says Reaper.

While keeping up with the latest changes in culture, consumer behaviour and, of course, technology and indeed anything else that provides valuable insights is important, Reaper adds that B&A has also sought to expand its methodological approaches to research.

“We’ve been challenging ourselves to expand our methodological approaches to uncover deeper insight. We’ve long been ‘borrowing’ from our roots such as psychology and sociology, and keeping up with the cutting edge thinking in these disciplines can also give us new ideas. Behavioural economics, for example, is the obvious one and it has given us

new ways of understanding and analysing people’s decision-making processes.

“But there’s huge amount of resources beyond this. For example, medicine gives us a variety of scales and models that we can use to assess states of mind. Anthropology shows us how to analyse people’s environments, like their homes, workplaces and hangouts, to understand their values and priorities. We’ve been inspired to update our approach to ethnography by the work of anthropologist Miles Lindstrom and his concept of ‘small’ data. His focus is on environments as much as people and how the small clues within those can uncover powerful insight. Visual arts like film studies and art history, also teaches us how to dissect and interpret imagery, which we can apply to brands, packaging, communication and in-store environments to understand how they’re communicating with consumers,” says Reaper.

While technology has had a major impact on the market research industry globally – particularly when it comes to the growth in the number of online self-service survey platforms, Reaper adds that the fundamentals of market research haven’t changed and the ability to interpret, analyse combined with the human curiosity to understand other often emotive and irrational humans are as important as ever.

“Like marketing, the fundamentals, haven’t really changed. While online and digital are indeed important, we have never been busier in our face-to-face service. The reality is that we use a number of different platforms and we know that some studies are simply not suitable to online and others are. It’s all about choosing the right approach for the right study. It’s very much horses for courses but at the end of the day, the fundamentals don’t really change,” he adds.

Digital, of course, has opened up new ways to carry out day-to-day work and the company has invested heavily in it in recent years.

“Our investment in digital continues with the expansion of our online panel, Acumenpanel.ie, the launch of a monthly online consumer omnibus survey and the roll-out of a latest suite of qualitative ethnographic apps. In fact, it was for the latter that we won the latest Innovation in Research Award from the Marketing Society for our work with AIB.”

INNOVATION IS KEY

Innovation has always played a key role in the company's growth, he says, and it has a dedicated research facility called the B&A Incubator which allows it experiment and develop new approaches and technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) that it hopes will benefit the business and its clients.

"Innovation in research is at the heart of B&A. So, a few years ago, during the recession, we set up the B&A Incubator to conduct our own R&D. Being independent makes us fleet-of-foot and we have the scale to do this. You could equally call it our trial kitchen. It's our commitment to trying new methods, putting investment behind our hunches, developing new and different ways of looking at and studying marketing, psychological or decision-based problems. We integrate ideas and technologies that we have come across internationally and indeed from different fields of research and development. In this way, our pioneering work on passive app tracking, for example, has led to a step-change in thinking about the way we use the mobile, and more fundamentally, about the things we

do and don't remember about what we do every day. So, we believe in experimentation and without it we wouldn't achieve breakthroughs that are important in this industry," he says.

"AI is also becoming more advanced and via, the B&A Incubator, we constantly trial the latest approaches from the USA. Our Incubator has also enabled us to trial and roll-out, often with our clients, other new approaches such as shopper pathways in-store, facial recognition for ad testing and things like online qual ethnography," he adds.

Like many other marketing-related sectors, including advertising, the market research sector took a hit during the last financial crisis as companies slashed all marketing-related activities including advertising and research but since then it has bounced back again, says Reaper.

"In the same way that people talk about the death of TV, they talk about the death of market research. The reality is that both are still in good health at the moment. One of the big things we have noticed is that good quality, intelligent work is back in vogue. People are looking for stronger partnerships and more meaningful relationships and that's good for the industry. While it didn't really go away during the downturn as such, the resources weren't there at the time. Some clients obviously maintained their relationship with us, and we were profitable during the recession, but like everyone we had to adapt and cut our cloth accordingly. But it also allowed us to reinvent, reinvest, reskill and evolve the B&A brand and that was a good thing," he says.

It has also helped the business ramp up the consultancy end of the business and get it into the boardrooms of clients, he says.

"While we have always had consultancy flavour to the brand, we feel that our pioneering work over the past number of years has also allowed us get into the boardroom and talk to the different senior teams at all levels and departments which is great for the company and it puts us in a strong position," he says.

But don't write off the market research industry any time soon, says Reaper.

"I think it's a good time to be a researcher, it's a challenging time but it's also an exciting time," he concludes. **IMJ**

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L-R: Larry Ryan, Ian McShane, Neil Douglas, Luke Reaper and Elaine Sloan.

