

MY FIRST RECESSION: WHAT WAS THE FUSS ABOUT?

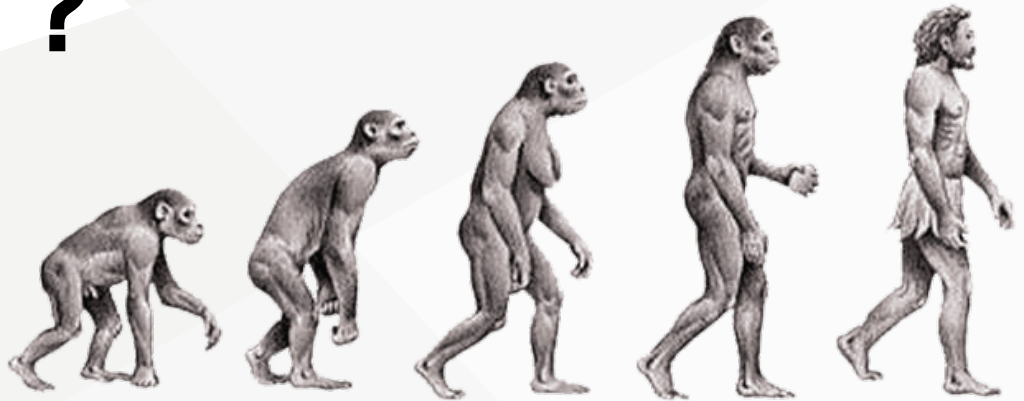
James Keeling

James Keeling, Client Manager, spoke at the BIG conference in March 2010 about the impact the recession has had on younger researchers in the industry and showed there have been many opportunities for those in the early stages of their careers.

In October 2008 during Prime Minister's question time, Gordon Brown announced for the first time that Britain was heading towards recession. As a young researcher and having never experienced a recession before, I looked to those around me to gauge what this meant. The outlook was not particularly positive and President Barack Obama confirmed most people's suspicions a few months later when in a White House speech he called the contraction of the US economy in the final quarter of 2008 a "continuing disaster". However, 2 years on, has the recession really been a disaster for the young researchers in the industry?

What started as a banking crisis affected almost every industry in the UK. Falling interest rates, employment levels and a fluctuating housing market have had far reaching effects on a large proportion of the UK population. However, whilst many people have experienced the negative effects of the recession, a small number of people including young researchers, have actually benefited from new opportunities.

The rush on Northern Rock kick started a process of change where businesses could no longer operate in the way they were accustomed to. That moment was perhaps to business what the asteroid was to the dinosaurs, the end of things as we knew them, but the beginning of an exciting and fast evolving future. 2009 also marked the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's book 'The Origin of Species'. Similar to Darwin's research which questioned traditional beliefs about the natural world, the recession has acted as a catalyst for an evolution in thinking in business.



Darwin's theory of evolution and in particular his argument for survival of the fittest, draws remarkable parallels with what has happened over the past 2 years. The market research industry has seen agencies evolve, die out and be consumed by larger organisations.

Beyond the market research industry our clients have faced a similar evolutionary shift. Some have cut back, some have prospered and some new clients have emerged from the dust as it begins to settle on a turbulent 2 years.

The emergence and decline of clients also appears to be matched by a shift in expectations. In 2009 the majority of clients had their budgets reduced. This change created new challenges for agencies who are expected to deliver more for less. Agencies must develop and tailor solutions to maximise the output of their research in the most cost effective manner. For younger researchers the increased importance of activities such as creative brainstorming sessions and the expectation that we can input fresh and innovative ideas is both a challenge and an exciting opportunity.

The reduction in client budgets also means more jobs/clients are needed to hit the same revenue targets as in previous years. This increased volume of small jobs coming through agencies means junior researchers become a more valuable resource, as they have a smaller impact on the indirect costs when working on a job. This combination is likely to give talented young researchers opportunities to work on projects which perhaps in the past would have had more senior involvement. Increased exposure and responsibility at this stage in a young researcher's career, means we will be in a good position in the future when growth leads to recruitment and promotions. This added sense of job security also

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means we can focus on the job in hand, which is delivering the best outputs to clients. At the start of a research career this is hugely beneficial as it means we can maximise our learning and development in a way that perhaps was not previously possible.

Not only have we seen a shift in the volume and size of projects, but there has also been a shift in the types of research clients are looking to conduct. Brand and reputation studies have risen up clients' agendas as they look to understand what impact the recession has had on their brand. This provides young researchers with the opportunity to work on an increased variety of projects, adding to our experience.

With change occurring throughout our clients' businesses there has also been a renewed openness to fresh ideas

and methodologies that perhaps were previously rejected. The increased need for efficiency and openness to change may pave the way for new technologies within the research industry. All of these factors combine to provide an exciting environment for young researchers to be a part of.

Recessions like wars, often pave the way for rapid development in industry and technology. GE, Microsoft and the iPod were all launched during periods of financial turbulence. If 2010 and beyond follow a similar pattern to previous recessions, we may see new companies emerge that will need support from market research agencies. The next few years are therefore going to be an exciting time to work in the market research industry.

So whilst the recession has had its negative implications. From a young researcher's perspective, the array of new opportunities, change and diversity can only be seen as a positive. The rapid increase in learning, experience and opportunities would not have arisen without the recession and is why I therefore find myself asking the question, what was all the fuss about?

