QuestIC | The Harris Poll

The future of market research in 2026 and beyond

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INTRODUCTION:

The new era of insight

The future of research isn't being written by technology – it's being rewritten by expectation.

Executives no longer ask, *what did we learn?* They ask, *what should we do next?*

Across industries, research leaders face the same pressure: deliver clarity at the speed of change. AI reshapes workflows. Cultural trends move faster than annual plans. Yet credibility remains the currency that determines which voices the C-suite trusts.

The global insights industry grows to roughly **$142 billion in 2023** (ESOMAR, Sep 2024), but that growth hides fragmentation. Thousands of automation tools promise speed; few deliver the confidence leaders need to act. A Harris Poll pulse of senior insight executives finds that nearly three-quarters now feel responsible for strategic foresight, not just tactical data. Most say the biggest barrier to influence isn't analysis – it's activation.

As one research director puts it, *"We're not drowning in data – we're drowning in context."*

That tension between velocity and validity defines 2026. Boards expect storytelling, not slide decks. CMOs want foresight, not fieldwork. CEOs want conviction, not caveats.

"While at Walmart we saw that velocity-versus-validity trade-off daily," says Jen Acerra, Managing Partner, Customer + Strategy Lead at *Otter Collective*, Former *Walmart*.

"Our unlock came when we embedded data science directly into customer insights – suddenly we could link what shoppers *said* to what they actually *did*. That connection gave our findings credibility in the boardroom."

To meet that mandate, leading brands redesign their insight functions from the inside out. They connect verified communities to strategic decisions and replace project cycles with continuous learning loops.

After speaking with insight leaders across different verticals we've curated their experiences into a playbook for your future market researching efforts. Here are the trends, shifts, and patterns we're seeing across the board, as well as your next steps for 2026 and beyond.

Elizabeth Roberts,
Managing Director at The Harris Poll

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Meet the author

Elizabeth Roberts // QuestIC

Elizabeth Roberts is Managing Director at The Harris Poll and leads QuestIC, the company's agile insight community platform. She helps brands stay in tune with culture, connected to customers, and confident in their decisions.

Meet the experts

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Executive Director in Innovation, Specialty Projects & Global Community Management
Warner Brothers

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SVP, Head of Marketing
Sesame Workshop

Cindy Bean
Head of Insights,
Comcast Community

Andy Katz
Research Leader
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Holly Decker
VP Strategic Research Lead,
Large Financial Services Company

Craig Swaisgood
VP of Data & Analytics,
The New York Mets

Kasey Griesmer
Director of Global Consumer Insights,
New Balance

Jen Accera
Managing Partner,
Customer + Strategy Lead,
Otter Collective | Former Walmart

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CHAPTER 1:

The maturity model: Where is your team on the scale?

Every insight team wants influence – but not every team is equipped to earn it yet.

When we ask leaders to locate their organisations on the classic BCG maturity curve – from *traditional order-taking* to *strategic foresight* – most land squarely in the middle.

But it's the **movement**, not the marker, that defines momentum.

The four stages remain useful shorthand:

STAGE 1
Traditional:
Research reacts to briefs with limited visibility and tactical output.

STAGE 2
Business Contribution:
Insights begin to inform cross-functional priorities and win early executive sponsors.

STAGE 3
Strategic insight:
Data becomes synthesis; research moves upstream into planning and storytelling.

STAGE 4
Strategic foresight:
Insights shape the future, operating as a C-suite priority.

Most insights teams sit between business contribution and strategic insight – but they're moving. The common momentum signal is not headcount or tooling; it's how early they're invited into strategy decisions.

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From contribution to foresight: The momentum curve

Most insights teams today sit between business contribution and strategic insight – no longer order-takers, not yet shaping direction at the highest level. This is how each stage is looks in reality:

2

STAGE 2-3: FROM VALIDATION TO PARTNERSHIP

Teams at this stage are moving beyond project-based support. They're being pulled into cross-functional work earlier and starting to shape priorities rather than just respond to them. Insights are shared regularly with senior leaders, and the team is becoming known as an unbiased source of truth. The shift here is from "what did we learn?" to "what should we do next?"

3

STAGE 3-4: FROM PARTNERSHIP TO STRATEGIC INTEGRATION

Research becomes a connective tissue across the business. Insights leaders sit in on growth and planning discussions; their work directly influences how the company defines opportunities and evaluates risk. These teams translate consumer truth into business strategy and are often embedded within commercial, marketing, or product functions. Influence is measured not by volume of studies but by timing – how early insights shape direction.

4

STAGE 4+: FROM STRATEGIC INTEGRATION TO FORESIGHT CULTURE

Insights are no longer a function – they're a mindset embedded across the organization. The most advanced teams operate as internal consultancies, uniting data, culture, and foresight to guide decisions company-wide. Their success metric is adoption: when executives quote insights in their own decks, when business units adjust plans in real time, when foresight becomes part of how the business runs.

4+

Most insights teams sit somewhere between building influence and shaping direction. Maturity is measured by how early insights shape decisions, not by how many studies are delivered.

What are the metrics that really matter?

Even the most established brands are rethinking what they measure. The challenge is getting precise enough metrics to guide today's decisions. Leaders are moving toward more nuanced, fit-for-purpose measures that better reflect the realities of their brand, customers, and category.

At Sesame Workshop, the shift is from visibility to value. As Aaron Bisman, Senior Vice President of Marketing at Sesame Workshop, notes, "With 99% awareness, the question isn't, 'Do people know us?' but 'Are they interacting, learning, and engaging?'" Their next frontier is a custom, integrated metric that captures relevance, interaction, and educational impact, not just brand warmth.

For service-driven brands like Comcast, the essential drivers look different. Reliability, transparency, and trust form the backbone of what leaders monitor. Traditional tools like NPS are being interrogated and simplified so they reflect what customers actually feel, not just what's easy to score.

For the New York Mets, emotion is the variable. Their metric system blends market research with behavioral signals to understand how committed fans really feel. A balanced scorecard helps them see the full picture: loyalty, intention to attend, sentiment, and cultural resonance.

Across the board, the pattern is clear: the strongest brands are tracking relevance, reliability, and real engagement. These are the metrics that show whether a brand is earning attention, building trust, and staying essential.

CHAPTER 2:

The 5 shifts defining future-ready insight teams

Across sectors, the same structural evolution plays out. Five shifts define how modern insight teams now operate.

Shift 1: From reporting to influencing

Traditional teams measure success by delivery; modern teams measure by decisions made. At Comcast, Cindy Bean reframes her mission: “Our job isn’t to deliver charts – it’s to deliver confidence.”

At New Balance, every output is a decision brief – one page that summarizes evidence, trade-offs and recommendations. Each exists to move a decision forward, not to close a project.

Shift 2: From reactive to future-focused

Speed matters, but foresight wins. Griesmer’s team tracks cultural shifts among runners and youth consumers, turning weak signals into product direction. The Mets’ analytics unit does the same for fans. “We ask fewer, smarter questions because we already know who our fans are,” Swaisgood says. “That lets us test what’s changing, not just measure what happened.”

“Our foresight process isn’t a presentation; it’s a catalyst,” says a VP at a Fortune 500 financial services company. “Every quarterly share-out sparks new research plans or product initiatives. That’s when you know insight is driving change.”

Shift 3: From projects to ecosystems

At the Mets, technology and routine work hand in hand. Dashboards refresh continuously, and monthly cross-functional meetings ensure everyone interprets results together.

Shift 4: From silos to systems

The next step for modern teams is building the infrastructure that keeps these shifts in motion – a connected insight ecosystem. Warner Bros Discovery blurs the line between research and sales, co-building narratives for clients. “If insights aren’t packaged to support how partners sell, they won’t be used,” Gomez Garcia says.

Griesmer adds: “The strongest work happens when marketing, product and insights plan together – not in sequence.”

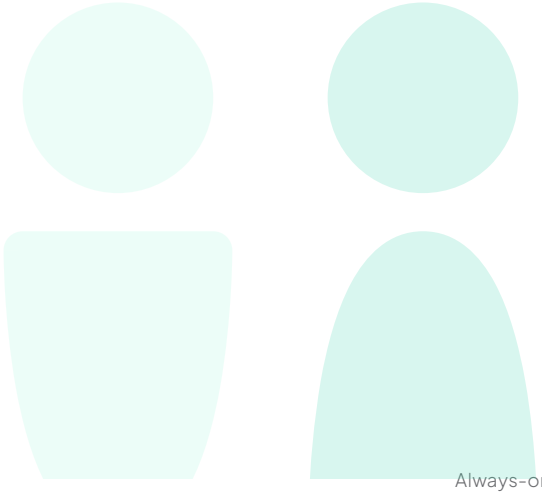
> “The strongest work happens when marketing, product and insights plan together – not in sequence.”
>
> – Kasey Griesmer, New Balance

Shift 5: From data to decisions

Ultimately, maturity shows up in influence, not infrastructure. “We have so much data,” says Decker. “But what’s important is to connect the dots with the other researchers so you develop a stronger story.”

And as Bean puts it simply: “All ships rise with the tide – our job is to make sure insights lift every decision, not just marketing’s.”

But for all the leaders we spoke with, one thing was clear – the insight teams shaping the future aren’t just reporting what happened; they’re designing what happens next.



CHAPTER 3:

What top teams are doing differently

Across Insights Leadership, one truth stands out: progress depends on behaviour, not budget. The most future-ready insight teams share their habits that keep them aligned with decision-makers and ahead of change.

Embedding research in business strategy

Influence begins long before a survey launches. As part of his work, Katz measures success by when his team joins a conversation. “If we’re asked questions before a strategy is set, that’s when we know we’re driving the discussion,” he says.

At Comcast, Bean formalises that early involvement. Her team hosts monthly meetings with the COO, Chief Growth Officer and other senior leads. Each session ties insights to the company’s business pillars – product differentiation, price value and simple CX. “Those sessions turn research into a shared language,” she says. “We’re not validating; we’re aligning.”

Decker’s insights team brings the brief by spotting white-space opportunities, validating with research, and socializing a clear point of view with leaders across the organization. They stay engaged with teams throughout solution development, guiding decisions with evidence.

Creating foresight loops

For Griesmer at New Balance, foresight means connecting dots already in the data. “We realise foresight isn’t about collecting more,” she says. “It’s about synthesising what we have to anticipate what our running consumer will want next season.”

At Warner Bros Discovery, Gomez Garcia applies the same principle to content sales. Her team transforms behavioural data into forward-looking narratives for commercial partners. “Our job is to package information as a forecast, not a recap,” she says.

Balancing AI with human intelligence

Automation expands reach but never replaces expertise. Swaisgood's Mets team uses AI to summarise open-ended fan feedback in minutes but insists interpretation remains human. "You still need someone who understands the fan and the context," he says. "AI amplifies – it doesn't decide."

> "AI amplifies – it doesn't decide."
> – Craig Swaisgood, The New York Mets

Activating insights across the organisation

Bean agrees: "Executives remember one clear narrative, not eighty slides," she says. "Our deliverables create that moment of clarity."

Re-engineering deliverables for decision-making

At Warner Bros Discovery, research presentations look more like TED Talks than technical decks. "We tell a story about today's consumer and why it matters for tomorrow's business," Gomez Garcia says. Stakeholders stay engaged because insights feel relevant.

For Holly Decker, an insights leader at a large financial services company, the voice of the customer must be woven into all strategy decks. "Bring videos and highlight reels to senior management. Help leaders feel something versus just read it on a slide," she says.

"The companies winning today are the ones listening continuously," says Elizabeth Roberts from The Harris Poll. "Our view is simple: if the consumer's voice isn't shaping strategy, you're already behind. The future of insights is an always-on feedback loop that keeps executives aligned to what's shifting in culture, category, and customer expectation."

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CHAPTER 4:

How to design your modern insight ecosystem

The most advanced insight functions no longer sit apart from the business. They operate as **connected ecosystems** – linking data, decision-makers, and consumers in real time through three design principles: **integration, visibility, and rhythm.**

Insight excellence depends not on project volume, but on how seamlessly intelligence moves through the organisation. The teams leading this change design their systems intentionally to generate foresight, not just hindsight.

Integration – connect everything that listens and learns

Integration begins with connection – between disciplines, data sets, and decisions.

WARNER BROS. DISCOVERY

At Warner Bros Discovery, Sofia Gomez Garcia and her team co-create the sales story from the outset. "We build the sales story *with* our partners, not *for* them," she says. That collaboration ensures insights travel the full distance from consumer sentiment to commercial outcome.

COMCAST

At Comcast, Cindy Bean embeds insights into leadership rituals. Each month she meets with the COO and Chief Growth Officer to align new findings with business priorities. Those sessions, she explains, "turn research into a shared language".

Yet for most organisations, integration remains the hardest leap. Data sits in silos, tools don't talk to each other, and teams chase the same questions separately.

Takeaway for leaders: Start by connecting the signals you already have. A community can bridge across brand, CX and analytics to provide context and guide decisions.

Visibility – make insights impossible to ignore

Even the best insights fail if they remain unseen. Visibility turns research from an archive into an operating system.

Craig Swaisgood at The New York Mets pushes visibility further. Every department accesses real-time fan data, satisfaction metrics, and qualitative comments in what he calls a "living library." "It's not about producing more research," he says. "It's about making the right knowledge visible at the right time."

Kasey Griesmer at New Balance closes the loop by turning post-season debriefs into ROI stories – linking past recommendations to sales performance and presenting them directly to senior leadership. Visibility there is proof, not promotion.

Holly Decker, a financial services VP, emphasises the emotional side of storytelling. "We bring the voice of the customer to the room – literally," she says. "Short video reels make leaders feel the story, not just read it."

> "It's not about producing more research – it's about making the right knowledge visible at the right time."
> - Craig Swaisgood, The New York Mets

Takeaway for leaders: Design for discovery, not distribution. Create dashboards, rituals, and repositories that keep insights in motion so knowledge naturally finds its way into decisions.

Rhythm – build a culture of continuous learning

A modern insight ecosystem runs on rhythm – a steady cadence that keeps the organisation listening. Without rhythm, teams react; with it, they anticipate.

At New Balance, Griesmer describes rhythm as "a continuous loop between research and result." After each season, her team reviews how consumer input shaped outcomes and feeds that learning into the next range. The payoff is agility: faster decisions, cleaner launches, greater confidence.

Insights leader Andy Katz defines rhythm as relationship management. "When questions come early – before a strategy is set – that's when we know we're driving the conversation," he says. The focus isn't frequency but timing – ensuring research is present when direction is still flexible.

Takeaway for leaders: Make learning continuous, not conditional. Establish a predictable cadence – weekly pulses, monthly foresight briefings, quarterly ROI reviews – so decision-makers rely on insights as rhythm, not request.

Your checklist for transformation

Transformation starts with intent, not investment. Any team can begin building a more connected, foresight-driven model. These are the 5 steps that matter most.

- **Step 1. Audit your maturity stage**
  Use the four-stage BCG framework – from traditional to foresight – to see where your team stands today. Measure how early you join strategic conversations, not how many studies you run.

- **Step 2. Prioritize for impact**
  You cannot touch every decision. Instead ask, where are decisions slowing down or being made without evidence? Then, prioritize the areas that will have more impact.

- **Step 3. Run one strategic pilot**
  Start with a live business question where influence is possible early in the process. Identify stakeholders who are open to testing and learning. Focus on the intersections of high impact and high engagement – the places where people are willing to build something new on top of what's already known.

- **Step 4. Measure activation, not output**
  Track whether stakeholders use the insight – and what changes because of it.

- **Step 5. Find opportunities to have cross-functional conversations**
  Whether through a community, integrated data sources, recurring forums, or shared narrative frameworks – build ongoing mechanisms for continuous learning. The goal is to keep insight visible and in motion across the organization. E.g. The team at Comcast holds monthly cross-functional sessions with leaders from operations, growth, sales, marketing, and product to share fresh insights and align decisions.

The end goal isn't faster research – it's smarter leadership. Every great insight organisation today is also a change agent.

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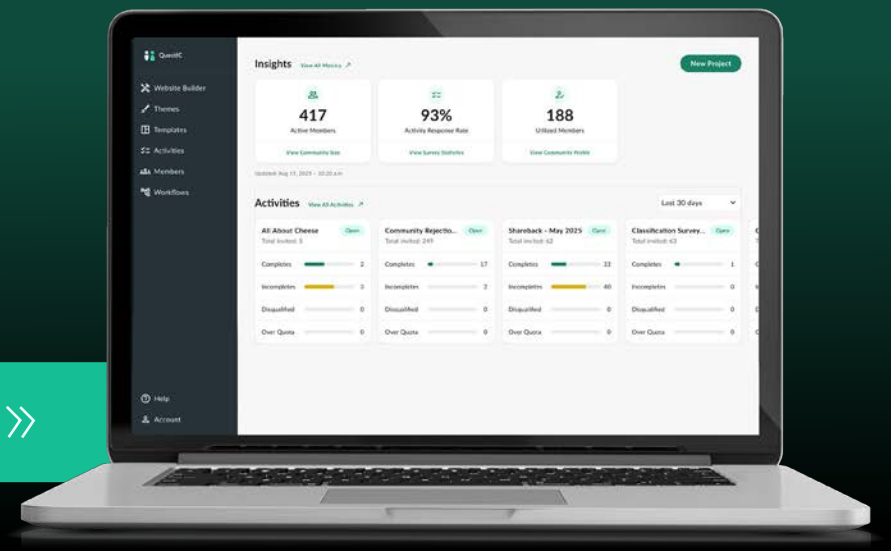
SCHEDULE A DEMO NOW



CHAPTER 5:

About QuestIC

Where speed meets substance.

QuestIC, HarrisQuest's always-on insight community platform, sits at the center of this transformation – bridging speed with substance so teams learn weekly and influence daily.

In a world of fragmented data and one-off studies, QuestIC creates a single, always-on environment where qualitative and quantitative research live side by side. Teams can move seamlessly from exploration to evidence without switching platforms, losing context, or waiting for fieldwork to finish.

With QuestIC, learning becomes a rhythm – not a reaction. You can pulse your audience weekly, test ideas overnight, and translate findings into decisions the next morning.

Consistency is what hooks the organization on insights: when leaders see insight show up repeatedly when decisions are being made, they begin to expect it, rely on it, and plan around it.

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QuestIC helps your brand:

- Build verified, always-on customer connections
- Combine qual and quant in one secure platform
- Deliver decision-ready insights in days, not weeks
- Bring The Harris Poll's trusted governance and analytical rigour to every project

Backed by six decades of research leadership, QuestIC bridges the gap between automation and authenticity – ensuring every signal you capture is both fast and real.

Ready to modernise your research function?

Turn your insight operation into an always-on ecosystem that delivers clarity at the speed of change.

Book a QuestIC demo

About The Harris Poll

For more than 60 years, The Harris Poll has led social and market research, helping organisations navigate complexity and understand cultural change. From emerging technologies to generational values, Harris insights help leaders make data-driven decisions that build stronger brands and deeper connections.