As of 2001 Mediamark Research, Inc. (MRI), was one of the largest magazine readership research and demographic/psychographic modeling companies in the United States. Its traditional competitor has been the Simmons Market Research Bureau. Although the two companies address many of the same questions, they use different methodologies and thus frequently come up with widely divergent results, pointing up the inexactness of reducing consumer behavior to a science. Both companies are widely respected, however, a fact that led one advertising executive in 1985 to point out the dilemma of never knowing for sure which one was right.

MRI is based in New York City and is a leading U.S. syndicated magazine research company. It is a wholly owned subsidiary of United Business Media and claims to be the only national multimedia audience research service to be accredited by the Media Rating Council, Inc., the organization whose mandate is to maintain industry confidence and credibility in audience research.

Mediamark was founded in January 1979 as Magazine Research, Inc., by Timothy Joyce, Philip Wenig, and Alain Tessier. Joyce, a graduate of the University of Cambridge, was a founder of the British Market Research Bureau’s Target Group Index. The British Market Research Bureau, at that time a subsidiary of the J. Walter Thompson Company, later became a subsidiary of the British holding company the WPP Group.

MRI moved around a good deal in its early period. The company originally set up operations in Wenig’s New York City apartment, then moved to a borrowed office on 23rd Street, and then into the San Carlos Hotel on 50th Street. By the end of 1979 MRI moved to two floors of a narrow corner building at 44th Street and Madison Avenue.

Joyce was the principal force behind MRI in the beginning, designing and defending its product and ultimately making it work. In 1981 the company added the measurement of advertised goods and services usage to the survey, and Magazine Research, Inc., became Mediamark Research, Inc. MRI’s basic service menu was in place and the company became the U.S. research subsidiary of Mills & Allen International, a London, England-based financial and media services company.

In August 1985 MRI acquired Nabscan National Scanning Services, which had been founded in 1975 by the Newspaper
Advertising Bureau. Nabscan was an early entrant into the field of product movement tracking through the use of Universal Product Code (UPC) emblems and checkout scanners located in 900 supermarkets by 1985. Nabscan's principal competitor at the time was A.C. Nielsen Company's ScanTrak, which had equipment in 150 supermarkets. The acquisition of Nabscan boosted MRI revenue more than 23 percent to $9.5 million and enabled it to speed tracking study results commissioned by advertiser and supermarket clients from four to six weeks to seven to 10 days.

MRI collects and analyzes data on consumer demographics and tracks product and brand usage as well as exposure to all forms of advertising media, linking its data over the years to the Prizm, Acorn, Vision, and Cluster+ geodemographic models as well as the VALS psychographic index of values and lifestyle types. Major clients for MRI data include magazines, television, and other media; some 450 advertising agencies (including 89 of the top 100, according to MRI); and manufacturers and marketers, which use MRI data to help guide product launches, line extensions, and brand repositionings.

Since 1979 the company has also continuously studied the adult consumer population (all persons 18 and older) of the United States, surveying the demographics, product usage, and media exposure in the contiguous 48 states. The 13,000 respondents MRI polls (the numbers have varied over the years) are selected on a strict area probability basis. "A computer list of approximately 90 million households is merged with other sources necessary to construct a properly stratified sample," according to company literature. It divides its sample into three sections: metropolitan areas; nonmetropolitan counties; and ten major U.S. markets—New York City; Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; San Francisco, California; Boston, Massachusetts; Detroit, Michigan; Washington, D.C.; Cleveland, Ohio; and Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas.

Each of the sample sections contains a number of designated household "clusters," selected according to various methods. In rural areas, clusters are defined by the random selection of a single household address and consist of that dwelling and several that follow in geographical sequence. In metro and suburban areas, each specific address is listed. MRI representatives interview (when possible) one adult in each household between the initial and final address in the cluster, including any unlisted or newly constructed homes that are in the sample. "Each listed household is predesignated with the sex of the prospective respondent," MRI explains in its basic literature. "If the household does not have any adult member of the predesignated sex, then the available respondent is selected. This is done in such a way that men and women constitute, in effect, separate samples of randomly selected individuals."

The completed MRI sample consists of more than 25,000 respondents, the company says, and each year the pool is completely redrawn, with 13,000 new respondents entering the survey every six months. About 2,400 new clusters are selected yearly from a constantly updated master list. Two six-month waves of fieldwork are done each year involving about 13,500 people. These include a combination of face-to-face interviews, which focus on demographics and media usage, and questionnaires, which are left behind and cover personal and household usage of some 500 product categories and services and 6,000 brands.

Since 1979 Mediamark Research, Inc., based in New York City, has conducted continuous studies of consumer behavior.

Courtesy of Mediamark Research, Inc.
Many techniques are used to gather data. Typically, however, households are notified by mail in advance that they will be contacted by an MRI interviewer. As many as six attempts are made to contact hard-to-reach subjects. Specialists contact non-English-speaking consumers. Each interview runs about an hour, and respondents are given $20 for their time, which includes a questionnaire to be returned by mail. Other special tools and reports include business-to-business, Upper Deck (affluent market), teen market, and the Cable Report.

Timothy Joyce died in 1997. In June 2000 Kathleen D. Love replaced David C. Bender as president and chief operating officer after Bender left MRI to join sister company Audits & Surveys Worldwide, Inc.

NANCY ENGELHARDT AND JOHN MCDONOUGH

Further Reading