Are You Asking the Right Questions of Your Data Team?

People often associate the term “data literacy” with mastering a litany of technical skills: SQL for data querying, Python for data analysis and Tableau for data visualisation, to name a few. However, one skill that is less discussed and has great power to scale data-guided decision making across the organisation is far more basic, though not necessarily straightforward to learn: the ability to ask great questions of a data team.

While this skill can be about setting big strategic directions, it is more often about defining narrower, possibly daily, requests for the team. But what, exactly, are good questions, and how does one go about skilling up an organisation in asking them? With two players in the luxury retail space, Daragh Kelly, VP of Data & Analytics at Burberry, and Joyce Weng, MD of Bulgari UK, we discussed the answer to this and other questions at a recent INSEAD Tech Talk on enabling data-guided leadership and decision making. You can watch the full recording here or continue reading for the key takeaways from our discussion.

What makes a great question for a data team?

Business stakeholders, particularly those with strategic responsibilities, can vastly improve the quality of their analytical teams’ output by asking them great questions at the outset of a project. These should be:

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1. Strategically important. If the question doesn’t support the organisation’s three to five large strategic bets, it’s probably not worth pursuing.

2. Well-bounded. Take the example of a large TV channel. The question “How can I make my shows more successful?” is too large in scope for a data team to approach it analytically. A more specific – and therefore answerable – question is, “Should I be doing more or fewer science-fiction shows?”

3. Actionable. Only questions whose answers can be acted upon are worth the investment; otherwise, they just yield interesting pieces of information that no one can do anything about.

4. Grounded. Starting the research process by having a firm understanding of our existing insight on the topic is an obvious, efficient, fast and much neglected starting position. New questions should be grounded in existing knowledge, rather than dreamt up in a vacuum.

It is the ability to develop this skill that can turbocharge an organisation’s ability to use data to inform decision making. It is often more effective to coach leaders in the art of asking great questions than to rely on “translators” – people who are expected to act as a bridge between business stakeholders and data talent. Although a very select
few are brilliant at this, usually these profiles lack
the industry expertise or the technical training to be
effective in their roles; often, more ends up getting
lost in translation than warrants the role.

Asking great questions is not a one-way street. The
data team itself can also help refine these questions
and challenge stakeholders if they feel that a
request is not solving the right problem in the first
place. Ideally, asking great questions is an iterative
process between business stakeholders and data
talent (although how best to develop this skill in
analytical talent is beyond the scope of this article).

Practice, practice, practice

One of the best ways to develop this skill is to
incorporate the practice of asking data-based
questions into your daily routine as a business
leader. At Bulgari, Joyce Weng starts off every
morning with a cup of coffee and a scroll through an
internal app that gives her access to her most
important KPIs, such as sales by channel and store.
She uses these data as her starting point for
formulating the questions she will ask her team
when she gets into the office (or logs into her first
Zoom meetings).

Generally, Weng asks the same question to various
team members – not just analytical talent, but key
members of her business team, such as her
marketing manager or digital sales team. They may
have quite different answers for why e-commerce
sales are up compared to last week or why an
influencer campaign isn’t delivering the sales uplift
that was forecasted in the business plan. Her job is
to carefully weigh various interpretations of the
same metrics before she makes a decision and
recommends a plan of action. It is this combination –
of looking at the data and then turning to her team of
experts to help her draw conclusions from it – that
yields a better decision than data or human
experience alone.

Weng did not start off her career with this routine.
She comes from a PR background – about as far from
data and maths as it gets – and earlier in her career
she showed little interest in using data to inform her
decisions. It was her mentor and boss at Bulgari in
China who instilled this approach in her, which is
perhaps more reminiscent of Amazon than the kind
of culture one might expect at a luxury retailer.

While this process is highly effective for business as
usual, how to generate the kinds of ideas that can
yield the more innovative applications of data and
AI? An example of such an application is Burberry’s
use of computer vision to determine the
effectiveness of window displays in drawing foot
traffic to stores. This project, which used window
display features such as color schemes, the display
design and store location to predict store footfall,
was borne out of an impromptu conversation
between Daragh Kelly and the visual merchandising
team.

Looking to scale this kind of interaction, Kelly
established the insights hub, a newsroom-like part
of his team – which is run, not incidentally, by a
journalist – with the purpose of educating
stakeholders in what is possible with data and AI.
This journalist communicates what the data team is
working on to the rest of the organisation, such as
the computer vision for store windows example, via
a weekly newsletter, called “The Friday Fix”. These
internal examples are meant to catalyse ambition,
build understanding and encourage other
departments within Burberry to think about how
data and AI could help them attain their goals –
using their own colleagues’ achievements as
inspiration. Stakeholders are encouraged to think
outside the box and ask Kelly’s team questions that
they otherwise would not have realised were
possible to ask.

How to prioritise

However, asking great questions is only the starting
point for creating value-add data products. It is the
data team’s job to help the leadership team
determine which questions to prioritise. Most
companies simply follow an investment grid where
they plot impact (e.g. revenue gains, increase in net
promoter score) over effort (technical costs), and
start with initiatives that deliver the most impact for
the least effort. However, this equation often
overlooks two critical considerations: stakeholder
enthusiasm and time horizon.

It is best to have a portfolio of data initiatives that
deliver value in the near, medium and long term.
The short-term initiatives pay the rent – projects that
establish the data team as a profit rather than a cost
centre. The longer-term investments are generally
fundational investments, for example in data
governance and quality, whose payoffs aren’t as
clearly measurable but are necessary for scaling.
This investment horizon should be combined with
identifying stakeholders who are truly up for it,
people with a genuine appetite for exploring the
power of data and AI.

Stakeholder enthusiasm is crucial because the road
to deriving sustained value from these technologies

The art of the possible with data and AI

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is often long and dotted with failures. Only once these considerations have been firmly established does it make sense to plot use cases on the impact/effort grid and build a roadmap from there.

Of course, it takes more than an effective prioritisation grid to deliver successful outcomes. These require maintaining engagement and delivering technically every step of the way. But framing the problems correctly in the first place – making sure that stakeholders are asking the right questions – provide the foundations for these iterations to succeed.

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