

Kathrin Schumacher

Senior Research Director
Joined Zeldis Team: 2015



What was different for you at Zeldis when you first joined the company?

Well, my background is in engineering. I'm from Nova Scotia, studied in Ontario, and lived in Montreal, moving to the U.S. in 2000. I later earned an MBA from NYU's Stern Graduate School of Business. Early on, I worked for consulting companies, and ultimately joined a company in New York that conducted syndicated research in the bond market. I was the CIO/CTO of that company; my job included designing systems, databases, workflows, etc. I crossed over to the research side of the business, working with our large financial institutions such as Deutsche, UBS, etc., providing them feedback and insights into their product, sales, trading and research performance. That research experience segued into working as an independent researcher where I largely did financial services qualitative research.

So when I moved to Zeldis, while I had a "numbers" background from engineering, my market research expertise was pretty much confined to qualitative techniques like IDIs, focus groups, and bulletin boards. I had less experience with methodologies such as conjoint analysis, MaxDiffs, and online survey instruments. Over the past three years I have expanded my experience and knowledge and now, just like everyone on the Zeldis team, I'm doing both quantitative and qualitative.

Did your engineering background help you in this transition?

I think my engineering experience has helped from a data perspective. Designing databases and understanding how data sets relate to each other helps me think about mining and filtering data to tell the story, and how to use data to advance my client's objectives. It helps to take a logical approach to the client's project, to think, "If I were in charge of building this product, what would I want to know?"

What are the biggest changes you have experienced personally and professionally since joining Zeldis?

For me, it was being part of a team. Having other folks to powwow with – now I have a team that supports me as I support them vs. working as an independent researcher where you are a one-person team. Both formally and informally, I can work with a Zeldis colleague on a project, or one of us has the lead. It varies.

Also, my research focus on financial services has broadened to include a wide range of commercial and personal insurance products.

And how has Zeldis changed since you arrived five years ago?

We've added staff, but the growth has been very thoughtful. Unlike previous, less transparent companies I've worked at or with, Zeldis leadership is very open and very forward-thinking. I like the approach we've taken with new ways to grow the business, and to keep examining how we continue to sustain growth in a measured way. I feel very much part of this team, and of that mission.

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How has your market research work been affected by technology?

Video has had the main impact. A vast majority of the in-depth interviews that I conduct are done by video. This platform not only allows my client to see the respondent, but the virtual backroom allows clients to engage with me while I am interviewing the respondent, resulting in a very seamless client and respondent experience. Bulletin boards are something my clients were using a lot about 5-6 years ago, but in the last few years I've seen a decline in the use of bulletin boards.

There are also some really interesting technologies in the usability space – whether it be in-person usability or remote quantitative usability where respondents are required to complete specific tasks and report on their experience. Other areas that I find interesting, but I have not seen in practice, are psychographic techniques where such things as a respondent's heartrate or perspiration are measured when being exposed to stimuli in order to gauge their reactions to products, concepts, messages, etc.

What do you see as the next frontier in market research – What innovations would you like to see?

Speaking of innovations, I love working with client innovation teams, and I currently am involved with two of them. I have done a few design related online courses and I find it to be a fascinating area and interesting to see what they're doing on the cutting edge to design and build new products. They need better ways to be able to evaluate feedback to their ideas. To support these types of teams, it is critical for the research effort to think creatively but also to respond quickly as the innovation team iterates on ideas.

What advice would you give to someone considering a career in market research?

Lee (Zeldis Vice President Leanne Storer) and I teach an Introduction to Qualitative Research course at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), so we come in contact with a lot of business students who may potentially consider market research as a career path.

I tell them, "You never know where life will lead you. If you are curious, and like thinking about what impact you can have in helping people make better decisions on product design, on position, etc, this may be the career for you."

I would say curiosity about what drives decision making and perceptions, and connecting the dots to understand the implications of those perceptions, are critical skills that I use every day as a researcher.