

Research for the truth

Mark Abrams

MY MEMORIES as a young executive of Mark Abrams, the founding father of British social and market research, who has died aged 88, are of being inspired by his enthusiasm. Working at Research Services Ltd (RSL), counting and re-counting 1966 general election forecast questionnaires through the night in those pre-computer days was deemed a privilege.

While he rarely articulated moral imperatives, the climate in which we worked was of the absolute virtue, in which the only reward was in the educated and eternal quest for truth. "Client Service" was interpreted as doing what was best, rather than what was desired. At the same time he was always practical — and sometimes cynical — about the uses and abuses of research findings.

Mark founded RSL in 1946, capitalising on his thirties advertising agency experiences and wartime work at the BBC and in psychological warfare. He remained there until 1970. Under his leadership RSL pioneered British market research theory and practice and alumni of companies influenced by RSL dominated the business for the next 30 years.

From the earliest days RSL combined public sector and political work with the more commercial activities of media, advertising and product usage and attitude research. From RSL's 1946-47 archives one can chart the progress of Britain from shortages and rationing to the beginning of modern consumer society. The importance of measuring social and economic changes to understand changes in consumer behaviour became part of RSL's enduring philosophy. Simultaneously Mark was developing the ABC1 system of socio-economic classification which, with regular updating, has survived

into the nineties as the most effective discriminator of consumer behaviour.

He was uninterested in money, and, at least in later years, for such an able statistician, quite unaware of the effects of inflation. Involvement in a social research project with Mark over the last 20 years has inevitably included a telephone call from the Great Man along the lines "My dear Dawn, you must realise that my client doesn't have that sort of money", followed by incredulosity when I tell him what our — scarcely over-rewarded — interviewers are paid!

Mark was interested in research because it mattered; we researchers were in possession of a tool which could change society for the better. He was always ready to learn and adopt techniques from around the world, including clinical psychology. When he retired he translated his personal situation into a new challenge, the way in which research could benefit the elderly: his later work was sponsored by Age Concern.

The ethic with which Mark imbued all those who worked with him has continued to dominate the company he founded. Indeed the greatest sadness among younger staff is that he will not be participating in

the 50th anniversary celebrations of RSL planned in 18 months' time.

Dawn Mitchell

Michael Warren of the Market Research Society writes: The lasting memory of Mark Abrams is of twinkling eyes, a wicked grin, and a researcher who knew that knowledge of how society works is a prerequisite of good government. As a research colleague he was amiably demanding. As a consultant on research techniques — for Age Concern and the Consumers Association — he was open minded, constructive and forceful without being dictatorial.

One of the lasting symbols of his vision was the Market Research Society. In 1946 he was one of two dozen researchers who saw the need for a professional association to support what was then little more than a cottage industry and is now in Britain alone a £500 million business. Their luncheon club became a society which now has more than 6,000 members, runs training courses, publishes technical and other journals and runs a 1,000-delegate annual conference.

Mark Alexander Abrams, born April 27, 1906, died September 25, 1994.