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A woman of opinion: Sylvia Ashby and the Ashby Research Service

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the career of Sylvia Rose Ashby (1908 – 1978), a pioneering but largely overlooked Australian business woman. Founder of the Ashby Research Service (1936 – 1974), Australia’s first independent market research company, Ashby received her early market research training while working for J. Walter Thompson. Sensing the potential of social survey research and public opinion polling techniques for the advertising industry, Ashby determined to specialize in this emerging science, travelling to Europe and America to pursue further study and work experience. Returning to Australia, Ashby actively recruited women to conduct market research surveys. Commissioned to undertake Australia’s first nationwide public opinion poll in 1940, she launched the Ashby Consumer Panel in 1944. This network of over 3000 households gathered data about consumer spending – what the public bought or wanted and why – from fly spray to baked beans, frozen peas, floor coverings and cars. The Ashby Research Service Collection is held at the State Library of NSW. These valuable records offer considerable social history research potential for researchers concerned with the study of social practices and cultural meanings and continue to cast light on the everyday Australian consumer attitudes that shape our society.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Ashby (1908-1978), pioneer market researcher and businesswoman, set up the Ashby Research Service, Australia’s first independent market research organization, in Sydney in 1936. In later life, Ashby explained that ‘since childhood’ she had always been vitally interested in what people did and why, which in turn inspired her to start up her market research company (‘Sydney Mother Runs Research Institute’ 1953: 9). The Ashby Research Service

promised to discover, by scientific methods, what the public bought or wanted and why – from fly spray to baked beans, frozen peas to floor coverings and magazines to motor cars. Sylvia Ashby's ground-breaking career spanned three decades and her work continues to cast light on the everyday consumer attitudes of Australians in the twentieth century and their enduring legacy for Australian consumers and society today.



Figure 1: A selection of reports by the Ashby Research Service, the Ashby Research Service Papers. (MLMSS 8907)

The State Library of NSW's collection of Ashby Research Service records was presented by Sylvia Ashby's daughter, Mrs Susan Laverty, in 1992 (MLMSS 8907), with a further consignment delivered in 2015 (MLMSS 9687). As befits a professional perfectionist like Ms Ashby, these records are exceptionally well-arranged and in remarkably good condition. The collection comprises over 120 archive boxes housing personal papers, business correspondence, newspaper clippings and volumes of commissioned research reports conducted between 1940 and 1970, complete with statistical tables and survey tally sheets. These reports include consumer product surveys as well as readership surveys of newspapers, magazines and other media.

In addition, there are many contemporary public opinion surveys conducted on a broad range of questions such as 'What men think of women?' and 'The most important thing in life?' and on social issues including strikes, the (1939-45) war effort, early hotel closing hours and pre-election polling. The Ashby Research Service Papers provide a rich source of primary data for any researcher interested in exploring the opinions of Australian consumers of the

twentieth century. This expands on existing biographical literature about Sylvia Ashby and the business practice of the Ashby Research Service in order to highlight the woman behind the brand.

GETTING STARTED IN MARKET RESEARCH

English-born Sylvia Ashby was a handsome, ‘compact’ woman with a ‘magnetic personality’ (Clark 1998: 13). Raised and educated in Melbourne, in 1923 she enrolled at Frederick Zercho’s Business College, Collins Street (Goot 1993). In the late 1920s Ashby landed a job in advertising, employed as a secretary by J. Walter Thompson Australia Pty Ltd (JWT).¹



Figure 2: Sylvia Rose Ashby (1908 – 1978), ca. 1940, portrait photograph by John Lee. (MLMSS 8907)

The use of market research in advertising originated in the 1920s, coming to Australia through American agencies such as JWT which established branch offices in Melbourne and Sydney in 1929. JWT Australia would launch the careers of a number of significant players in the development of the Australian market research industry, including Rudolph Simmat, W.A. McNair and Stuart Lucy. Rudolph Simmat was a Sydney-based psychologist appointed by JWT as Research Manager to oversee advertising research and to investigate Australian consumer psychology. Acknowledged as having conducted Australia’s first market research survey in

¹ This was despite reports her shorthand and typing were ‘very weak indeed’, and that she had, ‘too many outside hobbies’ (Goot 1993).

1929, Simmat had discovered through direct experience that women made more effective fieldworkers than men. While at JWT, he standardised interviewing techniques and, by 1932, he and his team had interviewed over 32,000 Australian housewives.

New Zealander William McNair (1902-1979) arrived in Sydney in 1931, to take up his role as a director, accountant and research manager at JWT (Goot 2000). Besides writing questionnaires and survey reports, McNair conducted interviews and selected interviewees. Within a year, as global economic depression set in and business began to falter, JWT lost the General Motors account (which had brought the company to Australia) and was considering pulling out of the country. When the Melbourne office was shut down, Ashby was moved to the firm's Sydney branch where she worked in the market research and psychology departments, thereby receiving her early market research training under Simmat. The JWT agency was saved by ongoing support from Arnott's Ltd., *The Daily Telegraph*, and (from 1933) *The Australian Women's Weekly*, as well as new business from Kellogg Australia Pty. Ltd. and by staff agreeing to salary cuts. In 1933, Ashby, now McNair's assistant, decided to resign; travelling to England and America, she spent the next three years studying the market research side of the advertising business.

Returning to Sydney in 1936, Ashby detailed her work experience whilst in the UK in a letter written on 27 February 1937 to a potential employer (Goldberg Advertising Agency). While working with Chas W. Hobson Ltd., recognised according to Ashby 'as perhaps the most high-class London advertising agency' (Correspondence files, MLMSS 8907), she was engaged to reorganise the Media Department and direct a Research and Intelligence Department operated 'on modern American methods, similar to departments existing in the more progressive organisations' (Correspondence files: MLMSS 8907). The principal part of her work in London, she continued, 'was to be always on the look-out for ideas for campaigns' for which she created special research files (Correspondence files: MLMSS 8907).

THE BUSINESS OF MARKET RESEARCH

At this time, 'marketing research' was considered an emerging science, combining the 'skills of economists, statisticians, chemists, engineers, psychologists, industrial designers, packaging experts and consumer survey specialists' (McLeod 2007: 98). In his pioneering study of radio advertising in Australia, McNair had specified that market research required the compilation of already available data as well as collection and collation of new data in its raw form followed by interpretation and analysis to obtain information for specific market segments on matters

not covered by official or private statistics (McNair 1937: 47). Analysis of consumers with respect to buying and reading habits and commodity preferences provided a wealth of valuable information for advertising purposes.

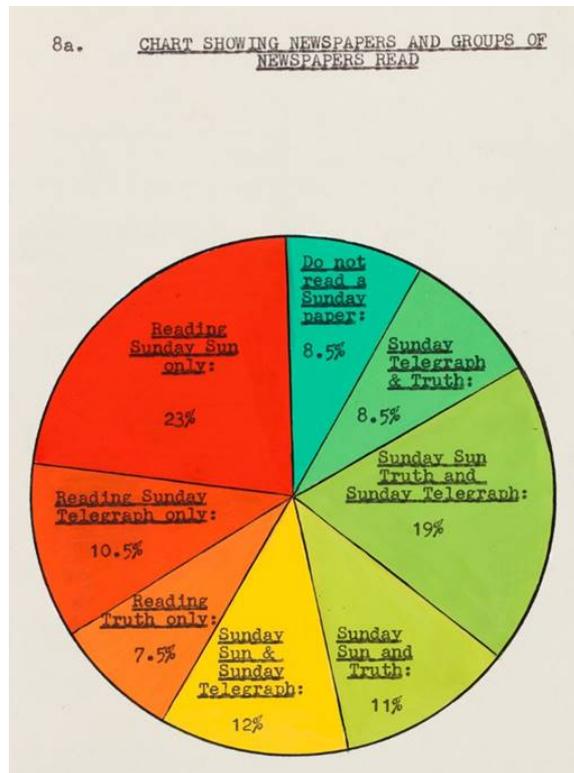


Figure 3: Examples of survey data analysis presented to clients by the Ashby Research Service. (MLMSS 8907)

McNair went on to conclude that consumer investigation ‘tells the advertiser what class of people buy their product, where they buy it, how often they buy it and why they prefer it to competing products’. Further, ‘it discloses what they don’t like about the product and the extent to which they buy other competitors’ products’ (McNair 1937: 47). Media investigations revealed publications read and media channels preferred by different groups according to sex, age and income.² According to McNair (1937: 48) and Ashby (1946: 8), the first step in executing field research was the questionnaire. Too long and people would not complete it; ambiguously-worded and the questions may not be understood; vaguely-worded and tabulation would difficult, leading to incomplete and unreliable results (McNair 1937: 48).

² JWT had divided the Australian market into four segments based on income: Classes A and B were high-income housewives; Classes C and D were average- or low-income housewives (Goot 1993).

AN UNUSUAL OCCUPATION

Early in her career, *The Sydney Morning Herald* thought enough of Ashby's unusual enterprise in deciding to set up her own business to publish two articles about her. In April 1937 she was described as 'probably the only woman in Australia who has specialised in market research as applied to advertising' ('These Women Have Unusual Occupations' 1937: 4S). On 17 November 1938 she declared she was 'the only woman conducting a Market Research organisation in the British Empire' ('Women Will Talk to Men' 1938: 22). Fifteen years later, returning from an extensive round-the-world business trip, Ashby told the Melbourne *Argus* she had tried to find her counterpart in Britain, Europe and America, '[b]ut without success... It seems I am quite unique' ('Sydney mother runs research institute' 1953: 9).

Within three years, Ashby had received glowing testimonials from several leading local agencies. On 12 August 1941, writing in praise of the survey work of the Ashby Research Service, Governing Director of Goldberg Advertising Agency Frank Goldberg stated: 'you have gone about your findings in the most intelligent and capable manner ... securing excellent information for our various clients'; a day later, George Patterson, Director of an eponymously-named agency confirmed that:

[O]n many occasions the manner in which the information was secured and presented ... disclosed serious errors in the marketing policy of national advertisers ... [which] were immediately remedied and a new plan of attack developed with highly successful results. (Correspondence files: MLMSS 8907.)

The outbreak of war saw a shift in manufacturing towards wartime production, resulting in a decline in the need for market research. Ashby kept herself busy sampling opinion for the Sydney press and surveying commercial radio audiences. As the need for surveys of political and social issues increased, opinion polling made market research viable during the war. Ashby's polling subjects ranged from 'Do women really want a career away from home?' to 'Should the national anthem be changed?'

To meet increasing business demands, Ashby hired John Stuart Lucy, a journalist from New Zealand.³ Lucy later set up his own research agency but as Ashby afterwards quipped to the press, they were 'rivals only in business' ('Sydney mother runs research institute' 1953: 9). As a housewife herself, with a home on Sydney's upper North Shore and as the mother to two

³ On 4 November 1939, the couple married (Goot 1993).

children (Susan and Richard), Ashby's answer to successfully running a 'big business' and a home was:

[a] sound routine ... You can't trust to luck when you have someone looking after your children and home, and I've always typed a daily routine for my home help so that I'll know what is happening every hour in my home although I'm at business ('Sydney mother runs research institute' 1953: 9).

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST OPINION POLLS

In 1940 Sir Keith Murdoch, media tycoon and wartime Director of the Department of Information, the Government's main propaganda disseminator, was keen to find out what Australians were thinking about a range of issues. An early enthusiast of the then-new technique of opinion polling, Sir Keith dispatched Roy Morgan – an accountant-cum-financial journalist working for the Murdoch newspaper group – on a confidential mission to the US to learn the methodology of modern opinion polling from George Gallup, its founder (Goot 2012).

In the meantime Murdoch commissioned Ashby's fledgling local market research service to undertake Australia's first nationwide public opinion poll to find out what Australians thought of the Menzies government's war effort. According to Daniel Oakman, Ashby, still in her early 30s, despatched her team of investigators to question people in Sydney and Melbourne about the presentation of war news and the forthcoming general election. Unfortunately she had not considered the wartime 'Don't Talk; the Enemy Listens' campaign; Ashby's staff were detained by suspicious police officers demanding to know what her clipboard-wielding interviewers were up to. In the end the results of this controversial poll were never published (Clark 1998: 13).

In October 1941 Murdoch duly published 'Australia's first Gallup poll', a survey conducted by Morgan asking if women deserved to be paid the same as men for equal work (interestingly, 59% favoured equal pay). Ashby's survey does, however, remain the first Australian opinion poll – if not the first published poll as claimed by Morgan, who also asserted Ashby did not conduct her survey nationally. On completion of her first opinion poll (1940 – 1), Ashby was offered contracts by Murdoch and Frank Packer (1906 – 1974), Chairman of Australian Consolidated Press (1936 – 1974). Ashby took up Packer's more attractive offer and continued to take polls on referenda and Federal elections and she is probably best known for her 1947 Nationalisation of Banks Survey. Canvassing the opinion of voters about the Chifley government's controversial scheme, the *Daily Mirror* published its support for the

survey of 3000 electors as offering a more than adequate sample to give a reliable indication of public opinion. The results of Ashby's poll suggested nationwide opposition to the proposal, which became a potent source of anti-Labor sentiment in the 1949 Federal election ('States ruled by Labour: Oppose Nationalization of Banking', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 September 1947: 7).

MODERN MARKET RESEARCH METHODS

Conducting industry information sessions to mostly male audiences throughout the 1940s and 50s, on 2 July 1946 Ashby had outlined her business process in an address delivered at a meeting of members of the Institute of Industrial Management in Melbourne. In *How to Conduct a Market Survey* (1946), the brochure later published by the Institute, Ashby highlighted the benefits of her scientific procedure in revealing likely sales volume of any particular product, advertising and sales methods required, sales budgets and detailed production schedules. If the failure of a marketing campaign lay with poor advertising, Ashby claimed, then market research 'helps to pinpoint the trouble, and diagnose the most likely remedy for eliminating such stumbling blocks to success' (McLeod 2007: 98). Further, she concluded, if consumers did happen to notice an advertisement, it did not mean that it made an 'impression' on them and, even if it did, an impression was far from a guaranteed activator to purchase (Ashby 1946: 3)

Ashby's most important post-war venture, however, would be her instigation of the Ashby Consumer Panel (ACP). Launched in Sydney in 1944, and gradually extended to become a nationwide consumer survey by 1947, this was the Ashby Research Service's major contribution to market research methodology in Australia. Aiming to 'check the pantry shelf' of Australian consumers, the panel comprised a network of housewives who kept regular shopping diaries of goods purchased in order to monitor what each householder was buying (brand, type, size, variety, flavour etc.), where they shopped and how much each purchase cost (Goot 1993). The ACP researched groups of consumers, rather than individuals, with approximately 3,000 households throughout Australia taking part. The panel showed why certain products were not acceptable to the public and, in many cases, raised product standards.

In November 1963, *Better Business* ran a one-page advertorial for the Ashby Research Service, which proclaimed the Ashby Consumer Panel as offering 'the only reliable quantitative measurement of a products movement through every type of retail outlet (even door-to-door selling)'. Through its 'continuous monthly audit of consumer purchases in 6100

Australian homes', the ACP further professed to tell more about a 'product and its competitors than any other form of Market Research currently available'. The advertorial also confirmed the ACP's data collecting practice: 'every month some 237 Ashby interviewers call personally on Panel members to discuss purchases recorded day-by-day over the previous thirty days' (Advertorial, 'Ashby Research Service', *Better Business*, November 1963: 58).



Figure 4: 'Just back from shopping a housewife enters purchase details in her Ashby Consumer Panel Purchase Records',
Advertorial, *Better Business*, November 1963, 58. (MLMSS 8907)

During this period of expansion Ashby's activities were constrained by her contractual obligations to ACP. Her business records contain numerous deputations to Sir Frank, requesting equipment (an electric calculator and a punching machine), extra staff and permission to travel (both to develop her business nationally and maintain overseas contacts) as well as regular requests for wage increases – Ashby asserted she received no increase in salary between 1947 and 1951. Ashby's long-awaited business trip to the UK, extending from September to December 1953, was the cause of much distress to both parties and marked the beginning of the end of Ashby's association with ACP.⁴

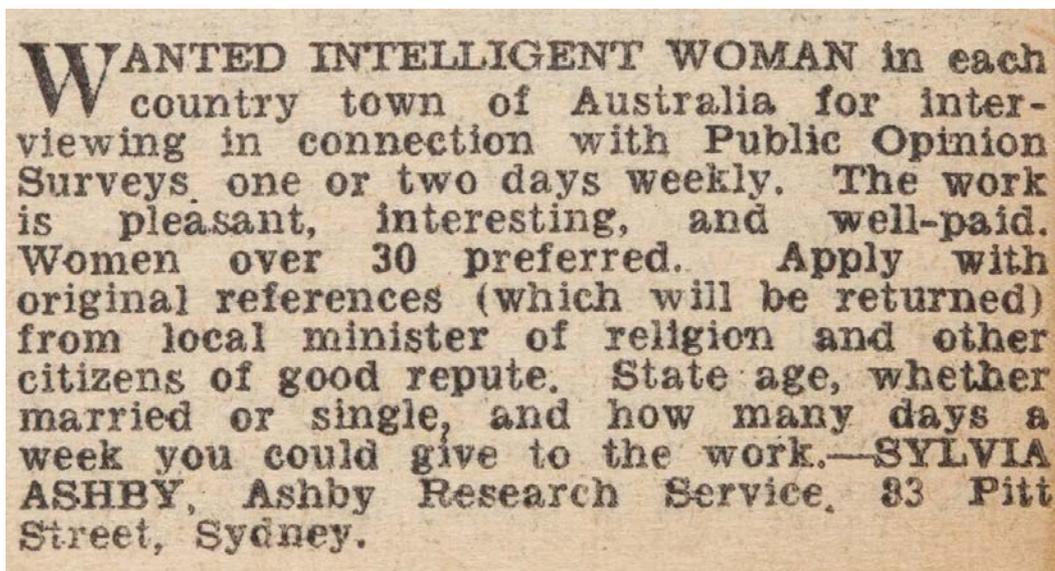
WORKING WITH WOMEN

⁴ Returning from her world tour, an unidentified news clipping records Ashby's pride in her company's achievements: 'I was amazed to discover how well-known the Ashby Consumer Panel was overseas. Considerable interest was expressed in methods used by the panel. Developed as it was to suit Australian requirements and without reference to existing methods used aboard, it is regarded as being original and unique' (MLMSS 8907).

At this time half of Ashby's business involved housewives both as interviewees and employees; the company was largely staffed by women. Throughout her career Ashby emphasised the importance of recruiting women to conduct market research. 'Women make much better investigators than men,' she said. 'They work more conscientiously and more efficiently.' She added that:

[I]t is quite useless to attempt to make investigations from a housewife if her husband is within hearing. Although they may not realize it, women in such cases are not expressing their real opinion but saying what they think their husbands want to hear. ('Women Will Talk to Men' 1938: 22.)

In recruiting her workforce, a series of tiny advertisements placed in the *Australian Women's Weekly* quickly found their mark:



WANTED INTELLIGENT WOMAN in each country town of Australia for interviewing in connection with Public Opinion Surveys, one or two days weekly. The work is pleasant, interesting, and well-paid. Women over 30 preferred. Apply with original references (which will be returned) from local minister of religion and other citizens of good repute. State age, whether married or single, and how many days a week you could give to the work.—SYLVIA ASHBY, Ashby Research Service, 83 Pitt Street, Sydney.

Figure 5: Advertisement, *Australian Women's Weekly*, November 8, 1941: 16S.

By 1949 Ashby was reported to have a staff of 200, 90 per cent of them women ('Woman Head of Big Business' 1949: 11); in 1952, having moved her offices to Bridge Street, she employed a team of 'between 150 and 300 interviewers consisting largely of housewives' and by 1967 the Ashby Research Service had 30 office staff and 250 interviewers ('Her Faith is in Women' 1952: 4; MLMSS 8907). In order to get the best results from her staff Miss Ashby held daily training classes. After their rounds each investigator made a report of difficulties encountered which were reviewed by Miss Ashby the next day, with suggestions for what might be done in the future, in similar circumstances.



Figure 6: Miss Ashby and two female staff members, Ashby Research Service Offices, Sydney, ca. 1950, photographer unknown. (MLMSS 8907)



Figure 7: Miss Ashby with wooden training figures, *Australian Women's Weekly*, 1 November 1961: 14.

For an *Australian Women's Weekly* article in 1961 entitled 'What makes the successful woman interviewer in house-to-house market research surveys?', Ashby made use of two tiny, jointed, wooden training figures to demonstrate the difference department made to an interviewer:

From the click of the gate, Mrs Right is conscious of the unseen eyes behind the curtains and walks confidently to the door with a pleasant expression on her face. Mrs Right is neatly and quietly dressed whereas Mrs Wrong wears outlandish hats and flashy jewellery which can distract attention, or arouse resentment, especially if Mrs Housewife is not looking her best (1961: 14).⁵

By the mid-1960s there were over fifty market research companies in operation around Australia with the top tier comprising those of George Anderson, William McNair, Roy Morgan, Stuart Lucy and Sylvia Ashby. Early in 1974 Ashby sold her business to Beacon Research Co. Pty. Ltd., having calculated that the Ashby Research Service had been involved in no fewer than 3573 separate market research assignments.

CONCLUSION

The business of conducting market research combines the ‘skills of economists, statisticians, chemists, engineers, psychologists, industrial designers, packaging experts and consumer survey specialists’ (McLeod 2007: 98). From its beginnings in the 1920s through the mid-twentieth century blossoming of Australian consumer culture, market research pioneers such as Sylvia Ashby monitored Australia’s burgeoning brand awareness in an increasingly sophisticated global economy. Thanks to her professional perfectionism and meticulous record-keeping, as documented in the business archives of the Ashby Research Service, Sylvia Ashby built up a unique profile of Australian consumer tastes and opinions from the 1940s to the 1970s which continue to provide considerable interest for researchers in social, media and marketing history. These records offer a rich resource and invite the close attention of popular culture scholars – the research possibilities are endless.

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⁵ Ashby stated it took up to seven months of training to transform an inhibited or over-aggressive Mrs Wrong (head downcast, a bundle of nerves, the epitome of apologetic timidity) into the perfect Mrs Right (erect and relaxed, the epitome of confidence), able to persuade the lady-of-the-house to drop what she is doing and discuss in ‘brief’ or in ‘depth’ the merits of a new brand of soap or baked beans (‘Worth Reporting’ 1961: 14).

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Margot Riley works as a Curator in the Research & Discovery Branch, at the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney. A cultural historian with special interests in many aspects of popular culture including food, fashion and photography, Margot has over thirty years' experience in the cultural sector. From 1992-1994, she completed the Masters in Museum Studies Program at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. Working with the SLNSW collections since 1998, Margot has researched, curated and written extensively about the Library's collections. In 2005, Margot was awarded the inaugural SLNSW Staff Fellowship to study the Library's portraiture collections and in 2010 she was a contributor to the *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion* with her essay: 'Images as a Resource for the Study of Australian Dress'.

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