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JULY 2026

The hidden cost of slow research decisions in emerging markets.

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The hidden cost of slow research decisions in emerging markets.

How research timelines shape commercial outcomes in fast-moving markets, and what fast-moving teams do differently.

The brief gets signed in January. The launch window is Q3. The research team scopes a thorough study: discovery, focus groups in three markets, a 1,200-respondent validation survey, segmentation analysis, deck and workshop. Timeline: fourteen weeks.

The study lands in late April, on schedule. It's excellent. The team is sharp, the analysis is rigorous, the recommendation is clear.

By the time the launch reaches market in September, three of the study's core assumptions about consumer behaviour have quietly shifted. Not because the research was wrong. Because the market moved between April and September.

This is the cost of slow research, and it is almost never on the line item.

What slow actually costs

In a stable market, a fourteen-week study costs you fourteen weeks of waiting. In MEA, it costs much more, and the cost compounds.

Take a category we work in often: FMCG launches in Egypt. Between the moment a brief is signed and the moment a launch recommendation lands, the following typically happens:

> A competitor runs a promotional cycle and resets price expectations.

> The Egyptian pound moves three to seven percent against the dollar, changing the import economics of the SKU under consideration.

> A regional player you weren't tracking quietly enters the channel.

> The retailer you planned to anchor with reorganises its category planogram.

> Three of your assumptions about consumer behaviour become quietly stale.

None of this is exceptional. This is what a fourteen-week window looks like in markets that move. The research isn't slow because it's bad. It's slow because the question was scoped for a different speed.

The maths nobody runs

The honest framing is this: every additional week the decision waits has a price. Most teams don't calculate it, so it doesn't enter the conversation about study design.

The price isn't theoretical. It shows up in three places:

Share lost to whoever moved first. If a competitor launches into the same window with a less-researched answer, the share they take is rarely fully recoverable. Late entrants spend disproportionately more to take back what an earlier mover defended cheaply.

The cost of the team waiting. Marketing, product, supply chain, finance, all paid, all idle on this specific decision, while a study finishes. For a mid-sized launch, that's a real number sitting in a spreadsheet somewhere, even if nobody adds it up.

The decay of the answer itself. The longer a study takes, the more of its findings expire before the decision is made. In a stable market, a six-month-old segmentation is still useful. In MEA, it's a question mark.

Even without a precise number, the direction is clear. A fourteen-week study has to deliver an answer meaningfully better than an eight-week study to justify the additional six weeks of cost. Most of the time, it doesn't. The difference between "very good" and "excellent" research at that scope is rarely visible at the level of the actual decision being made.

Where the time actually goes

When we audit slow research, the time is rarely in the field. Field is twelve, maybe fifteen working days for a properly run mixed-methods study. The time is in:

> **Scope expansion at the brief stage.** Adding "while we're at it, can we also look at…" to a tight brief.

> **Decision rounds inside the client.** Three rounds of internal alignment on what the study should answer.

> **Methodology over-engineering.** Choosing the most rigorous design when a less rigorous one would answer the actual question.

> **Reporting delays.** Two weeks for the deck, another two for stakeholder alignment, a third for the workshop.

None of these are research problems. They are decision-making problems. And they compound, because each phase tends to expand to fill its allotted slot.

What faster looks like

Fast research isn't shallow research. It's tightly scoped research, run by people who know which corners are safe to cut and which aren't.

The questions we ask before scoping any study now:

What's the decision this study is meant to make? Not "what do we want to learn." What single decision will be different if this study lands tomorrow versus in fourteen weeks. If the answer is unclear, the study isn't ready to start.

What's the window? When does the decision have to be made? If it's six weeks from now, a fourteen-week study is not a tool, it's a luxury.

What's the minimum viable evidence? What's the smallest amount of data that would give the decision-maker enough confidence to act. Often this is far less than the original brief assumed.

What gets cut? Every fast study has a "we deliberately didn't look at this" section. Naming it openly, in advance, gives everyone permission to ship.

These four questions, asked at the brief stage, will shorten most studies by three to five weeks without sacrificing the answer.

The harder conversation

The hardest part of this is that it's often a client-side problem. Research teams in MEA are professional, capable, and frequently faster than they're allowed to be. The slowness lives in approval chains, in shifting briefs, in the cultural reflex to do more research before deciding.

The role of a senior research partner is to push back on that, gently and repeatedly. To say "this study is

overscoped for the decision you're making" before agreeing to run it. To name the cost of waiting in numbers, not adjectives.

We've started writing the compounding cost of delay into our scoping documents. Not as a threat, but as a frame. The conversation that comes from "this study will cost you weeks of delayed launch share" is very different from "this study is comprehensive."

The second conversation is the one most research firms have. The first is the one we think the next decade of MEA marketing actually needs.

The Consultants MEA is a senior research and decision-support practice based in Cairo, working across MENA's fastest-moving categories.