



## Episode 102: “BI for the Long Run”

*with Lea Dunn, Principal Quantitative Researcher at Brooks Running*

*Lea Dunn unpacks the value of behavioural science for firms like Brooks, the performance running company. With their passionate customers and culture of curiosity, Brooks creates opportunities to use behavioural science, including both qualitative and quantitative research methods, in everything from developing strategy to evaluating customer satisfaction. Lea also talks about how to champion BI, what to outsource, and how to find opportunities for BI.*

### *Transcript:*

---

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short.

Today we're Calling DIBS on Lea Dunn. Lea is Principal Quantitative Researcher at Brooks, and she did her PhD in Marketing at UBC Sauder School of Business, which is actually where we got to know each other because her last couple of years at UBC overlapped with my first couple of years at UBC. Since then, she's moved down to Washington where she's doing really interesting things at Brooks. Lea is smart, fun, funny, and insightful. So, I'm really eager to have a chance to chat with her today. Welcome to the podcast, Lea.

LEA DUNN, GUEST: Thank you so much. And what an intro.

APPELT: All true.

DUNN: I don't know how I would describe myself that way, but you did it and I love it. Thank you.

APPELT: Usually, we try to start with an easy one. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

DUNN: Sure. a PhD in consumer behavior. I did a little bit of a windy journey to industry at Brooks. started, wanted to dive deep in academics, studying brands, relationships with consumers, complaining behavior, and then transitioned into industry. So, luckily what I studied kind of made itself a nice segue into the industry world.

APPELT: I'm curious because you said you had a winding journey after the PhD a little bit, but what was your journey to behavioral science in the first place? Was that winding or was that more straightforward?

DUNN: It feels straightforward, but it was also a little windy. Okay. So, in high school, I was that kid that just wanted to do everything. I wanted to do art and I wanted to do science, but I was in like the honors society. So, I wanted to do all of the hardcore academic stuff. And as I was working through that, I discovered that I really would love things like advertising. Mad Men was out and about. I was like, what a perfect world. I would

love to just smoke and drink and come up with creative ideas all the time. So amazing, aside from the misogyny. And then as I starting to look for colleges, I was like, okay, so where are places where I could learn but also be officially like not in a large classroom. I wanted to be like a small number and have really personal relationships with professors. And so, I ended up at Reed College down in Portland.

At Reed, it's a liberal arts college. They don't really have a business school there, but they do specialize in things like psychology. And so, I was thinking advertising and psychology could go really well together. And so, I have a background, a bachelor's degree in psychology, specializing in social psychology. But at Reed, make you do a thesis in order to graduate. So, it's almost like a bit like a master's thesis. It's at least a couple of experiments with the hypothesis testing background, like you're writing a paper for publication. And it could be on anything that you wanted it to be on.

And in doing that, I discovered there's entire journals associated with things like consumer behavior or applied psychology. And that really spoke to me in a way that other aspects of psychology necessarily because it felt like it was small additions on the theories that have been around for a long time. But then in marketing and consumer behavior, you could take all of these disparate theories and apply them or connect them in ways that seemed new and exciting and then help explain some of the worlds that we see in some of the ways that consumers make decisions.

And so that felt like the perfect combination. And it kind of opened up this mindset for me. And then I still want to do advertising, but I waited until after college to apply to advertising agencies who really didn't want to pay me because I didn't have a marketing background, but they didn't want to take me on as an intern because I wasn't affiliated with a university. And so, in the meantime, I took a job at a bookstore and I started shopping around ideas.

That's how I met Mark Forehand at the University of Washington. I just reached out. And he met with me and let me like volunteer in the behavioral lab at UW. And that's when he introduced me to the brilliant minds up at UBC, Darren Dahl and Joey Hogue. And I started applying for PhD programs from there because I realized that I really loved the research component as well. So that's kind of where I got to my PhD in consumer behavior.

APPELT: It's so interesting. I love that you had this intuitive sense of like, hey, advertising, human psychology, like that you saw all of those fitting together. I think it took me a long time to understand the relationship. And I love how you went from the undergrad to the grad. And just like the idea of what Reed asked you to do in undergrad is such a good experience. Wow. It was really great. It was a challenge, but it was worthwhile. So now, flashing forward, you're at Brooks, and I want to hear about that. But I thought maybe not everyone might be familiar with Brooks. So, can you briefly give us a sense of Brooks?

DUNN: Brooks is Brooks Running. We are a performance run brand, so specializing in running shoes in particular, but also apparel, sports bras, and accessories. We're a global brand. Brooks was actually started as a small organization in 1914, making all different kinds of shoes. So, I think we started with bathing shoes and then ice skates and cleats and basketball shoes. And it was just a full spectrum of shoes is where we kind of have footwear at the core of what we do. But then running was introduced in sort of like late seventies. And that was where we really took off was creating innovation for running. And some of those designs we've actually reintroduced as our heritage shoes just recently, which is pretty cool.

But then we decided to pivot and we said, you know what, let's focus on run. Let's really think about the runner, the innovation that goes into the biomechanics of running, and let's just dive in and focus on performance running. And since then, we've become a leader in performance run. We're global. We are in most of the world, which is really exciting from an industry perspective, being able to think globally when you're thinking about your insights and who you're talking to and whether it's a universal trait or if it's unique to the country or culture in which you're studying it.

So that's Brooks and Brooks really is, we're working on redefining the run, helping to innovate around movements and what that means for consumers. And what I really love about it is that the runner really is at the center of everything that we do, which is why behavioral insights are just so fun to work with because it's about the runner, the runners going through biomechanically, psychologically and motivationally. And that really helps sort of expand outward into the products that we create and how we talk and the communities we build, the athletes that we work with.

APPELT: I love that. And it's, it's interesting to hear the history and then also to think back to what we saying before about like this idea of like finding the connections and the idea that there is a connection. If you were just to look it up, might just think it's a retail company that focuses in this area. What connection does behavioral science have? But then you're saying, the runner is a human and they're making decisions. Can you tell me a little bit more about why Brooks is interested in behavioral science and more about that connection?

DUNN: Behavioral science, I think, goes hand in hand. From the beginning, we've been working on like the biomechanics side, right? Because running, to innovate in running shoes, you have to actually know how the human body works. But then part of that is to understand why people are running. What's the why behind it? Um, how do you understand what gets them out every day? I think what I really like about Brooks is that runners are so passionate. And whenever you think about people who are passionate about what they do. You get to uncover all of these different components of it. Motivational components, community components, relationship building, aspiration, inspiration, all of those things that make someone tick and get out and run every day, or what stops them from getting out and running every day.

Those are really good things that you can just explore. And the more that you know about that, the easier it is to communicate, to create products, to really develop a relationship with consumers, which I think Brooks does really, really well, is finding those connection points and building strong relationships with our runners.

APPELT: That makes a lot of sense. And I love how it's already bringing up some of the stuff we do as part of any behavioral science project, like looking at both the things that get you to your goal behavior and the things that keep you from your goal behavior. So, I love that you're already bringing that up. Can you tell us a little bit as some of the use cases for behavioral science at Brooks?

DUNN: Like most companies out there, behavioral science is used in a whole slew of different ways. So, part of what I do is to just check in on how Brooks is doing as a brand. So, turn some traditional market research stuff like who's aware of us, how are we doing, what are the attitudes that people are focused on? And that's something that every company wants to kind of check in on just to make sure that what we're doing is resonating really well with the brand. So behavioral science is used in that way.

We've also used it as generative. So, coming up with ideas about how to communicate or product features that could be really useful for consumers, how those are received, what changes need to be made, all the way up to sort of a validated approach. So, someone has a really great idea and we want to just say, okay, this is where we're running. Let's go ahead and make sure that it's hitting the way that it's supposed to be hitting. So, what I like a lot about our approach is that we're, we start at the beginning and we have check-in points throughout the entire process.

APPELT: That's funny because I've been having some conversations about how sometimes it feels like we're only able to insert behavioral science at very specific points. And so, it's really cool to hear about including it throughout the whole journey from, pre-emptively, proactively, and then reactively at the end. That's awesome. I imagine to do that, Brooks must have a fairly large insight team. And I would assume that gives you the ability to mix methods. Is that something that you're able to do? And what does that do for you?

DUNN: We do have quite a large team. I think that's great. Honestly, it shows that they're investing in us and the importance. We're really just like really highlighting how important it is to understand our runner, the people that we work with every day. And that shows that there's investment there. It also allows us to do more. Like I'm saying, some companies or industries will focus on quantitative only doing market research surveys. Some will focus on qualitative only. And what's nice is that we have such a mix and a large team that we get to do all of it, which I think gives us a broader understanding of who we're talking to and a deeper understanding of who we're talking to. So, it's not just what they're doing, it's why and what gets you there and what doesn't get to you there. What are your fears? Like it's very much like a deep therapy lesson. I think it's one of the insights that makes us a great brand to work with and for consumers to build relationships with.

APPELT: That makes a lot of sense too when you think of that you're already mixing methods in the sense of, like you said, the biomechanics and adding behavioral science and then to be using the full toolkit within behavioral science. Just it seems like a natural fit there. I know for many organizations, there's thoughts around how much behavioral science work do you do in-house? What do you do with external consultants, whether those are market research firms or survey fielders or panel providers? From what you've seen in various experiences, what are some of the reasons to use one or the other or both in-house and, I guess you don't say out-house, but external research expertise?

DUNN: Yeah, external expertise. I think it just depends on the question that you're trying to answer. Sometimes you need help finding, remember, we're global company, and so that requires finding people in countries that are different than the United States or Canada, or North American fields. And so that requires someone on the grounds who understands the culture that we're working with, who understands the language.

And so, we do a lot of external work there to try and find the right people, to talk to the right people, to make sure we're asking the right questions, to get a full 360 holistic perspective of the world in which these runners live. And it's sometimes hard to do that if you're not on the ground. And so, we will work with external teams to help do that. Sometimes there's like advanced methodologies that you would really love, but maybe you don't have the time to do yourself. And so, you get some help external. So, agencies that can help you do like complicated, MaxDiff, conjoint, like implicit associations, like all of those things that you would love to get a bit more of an understanding than more than just an attitudinal survey could give you. That helps a lot.

Sometimes you've got so many projects in your boilerplate that you need a little bit more help saying like, you know what, I could program that survey, but maybe I need a little bit extra help so I can like spare my brain and the time that I need to actually think about what do I do with this outcome later. I'd say the benefit of having internal is that we really do know who we're talking to. Like we are the experts on this group of consumers, this type of runner.

And when you externalize that to different agencies, right, so agencies are working with all different types of consumer-packaged goods or B2B or different types of products that they don't necessarily have the time or the expertise to have the nuanced approach to understanding who this consumer actually is. So even if we do go external, there's always so much value to having an internal person sort of reviewing what's coming in, especially when you're trying to discuss bigger, more strategic conversations or bring that company point of view to what's being shared with stakeholders.

APPELT: I love how you framed it because I think it really emphasizes the point about it kind of lets everyone do what they're best at. So you can focus on where you can really deliver value, like you said, your knowledge and you're not necessarily programming a Qualtrics survey, which you could do very well, but someone else could do equally well, but someone else doesn't have that runner knowledge or like you said, someone on the ground in a different country who really understands how to get you participants from that pool. So, I love that way of really leveraging what everyone's special talents are.

One thing I'm curious about, because it's something I personally have sometimes struggled with, is the idea that because behavioral science is relatively new compared to a function like accounting or HR, sometimes there's this role of explaining the purpose and value of behavioral science internally within an organization so that the other teams understand when to call on you and your value? Is that something that you've ever dealt with and do you have thoughts or strategies for how you socialize behavioral science within an organization?

DUNN: I think it's always something that you have to work with, especially if part of our jobs is to come up with new ways of approaching a topic. And anytime there's something new, there's some education that has to go along with it. I would say what's nice about Brooks in particular is that there's always so much curiosity. I mean, it's a scientific oriented brand, really focusing on innovation. And because of that, there's like this understanding of the need and why it's important. It's now, now that you've got like that, that drive and sort of respect for what it could be, it's more of explaining sort of what are the things that we're doing and how does that translate into the jobs that everybody else is doing, right?

We're just one small piece of the puzzle. And so, part of what we do is try to figure out how do we shape what we're saying or the insights that we've come up with or found, how do we shape that in a way that can help someone else do their job better? And so sometimes it depends on who we're talking to. So, am I talking to marketing? Am I talking to footwear? Am I talking to designers? Am I talking to? And so that's really like, how do we shape these insights to show there's value across these different domains? So, I think that's part of it. Really good organizations want to learn about new things.

And so, our HR team has done a really great job of doing these like cross functional learning sessions. It happens every, I think every month or so we have like a lunchtime learning where everybody just comes together if you want to, but you get to learn about what other people are doing in the business. When I started, I had no clue how footwear was actually put together, like the manufacturing process, the research

and design that goes into like. the sustainability and all of those different components of building a really good product, I had no clue. What's a last? Like, what's a number? What's a midsole? What's a foam? Why is all this stuff? And going to those, I got to learn from other people about what they do really well and the understanding that they have.

And I think that makes what I do more impactful because now I have an understanding of the topic area where I'm not an expert, but I know how to talk about it. And it's the same, we'll do introduction, but like, this is how we're doing, this is what we found, this is who we talk to. Like, let's talk about what good brainstorming sessions look like. So, we bring the information and socialize it around.

Another thing we've done is that if we've run a project that we think is really impactful, even if people haven't asked for it yet, we start to do, we call it like the tour, we put up the tour. Oh, hey, creative team, we know that you're working on this project. Like we have some insights that we think would be super valuable for you. Like, let's go ahead and like talk about the process that we went through. I'd say sometimes there's an easier understanding to qualitative research. I think when you have the voice of the consumer coming through as clearly as verbatims from people who have said exactly this, that can take on a lot more power pretty easily. and it's something that's more understood.

And then you have to kind of, on the quantitative side, I do think that there's a bit more when you're doing advanced statistical modeling or like prediction or mediation or something that's a little bit less intuitive, I think there's a bit more work that goes into being like, this is why this exists and why we did it this way and how it could tell us or uncover insights similar to how qualitative can uncover insights. And then let's work together to make a really nuanced understanding of the experience.

APPELT: That was great. I love this idea of the culture of curiosity. That seems so fundamental and positive. And I can see how it gives you this common language to find areas where you can work together. And it must open up so many opportunities. Like you said, the more you know about how a shoe is made, the more it might trigger questions for you. And when they hear that you have this method, it might trigger questions for them. So, I can imagine that being really generative and really exciting and make you all just really interested in working together, which is the dream, right? And you talked a little bit about coming up with cool insights and neat ideas and getting to share them internally. With behavioral science, sometimes we find things that we think can have value outside of our specific context.

So, I'm curious if, I know when you're working in industry, there's a different layer of how you approach communicating externally because there's some limits to what can be shared. What do you think are potential options for folks who are working in industry to be able to share results externally? Is there like a mechanism for how that might be able to work?

DUNN: I mean, that's a really good question, right? I think it depends on what industry you're in, sort of like the freedom to share. You know, internally, we're still working on cycling out, like figuring out how to share our findings with the broader team across the company. And I do feel like externally, to your point, the things that we find aren't necessarily rooted in our competitive advantage, right? Like there's universal truths that come out that are fascinating to the human condition. Are there ways in which we can share that externally that is either, I would say that could also benefit the relationship that consumers have with us.

When you're thinking about sharing, for example, one of the topics that comes up a lot in running in particular are things like burnout, right? And that's something that is experienced in everything, right? We're a post-COVID world, right? We've all had burnout at least between like 2020 and 2022. A lot of people know what that feels like. Athletes know what that feels like. Parents know what that feels like. Like those, it's a universal experience.

And so, figuring out how to help runners or this broader community based on what we've learned, if it's like a blog or a podcast or something that really taps in to here's this universal truth that we found that we really understand what you're going through and here's how we can potentially help. I think that's kind of where it leads to is where's the line between what's proprietary and what is like a universal experience. And how do you get that communicated outward?

APPELT: It's a really good point. And I think it's also something academia is still struggling with, right? Like we obviously have peer-reviewed articles and those are wonderful at what they do, but they're not necessarily how you communicate universal truths more broadly. So, I think we're all reaching for which are the insights that are worth communicating and what are the right ways to do it. So.

DUNN: And you're right. It's the same with, I remember in academics being like, how do I communicate when I'm finding to a broader audience? And that could be like utilizing some of the channels that we already do really well, like social channels or creating bite-sized pieces of information in an entertaining way, like your podcast. And I think with companies finding a way to like make it true to who you are, think that's the added layer is that it's not just the researcher. It's now this bigger value-driven organization, which Brooks is great at. And I love all of the values that we stand for as a company. And I think there's a lot of opportunity within those spaces to really share and be on brands with our insights that we can communicate out. So, we're definitely exploring ways in which to do that, hoping that you'll probably see like a few things in the near future.

APPELT: We'll look forward to those and we'll have to bring you back as you figure this out and see what you're finding. So now that we've gotten a sense of what you do and some of what Brooks' culture is like, et cetera. What are some of your favorite parts of using behavioral science at a company like Brooks? What keeps you excited about the work?

DUNN: Brooks really, again, because of the value that they place on innovation and the value placed on science, there's so much opportunity that our team has at sharing our information and being thought generators and collaborators at all levels of the company, which I think is really valuable. I haven't been in other organizations, but I have heard from some friends that that's maybe not the same way that insights teams are used. And so, I think that's really exciting. I'll go back to it. Like when you have a group of consumers that are runners, right? Like somebody, anybody who's passionate about what they do, be it fitness or community or whatever it is, there are so many things that you get to learn and rediscover and have more depth and understanding.

It's sort of like building a bigger and bigger, very complex picture of a human and knowing where the nuances are. And I think the more that I learn about who runners are, the more excited I get to work on them. Also, just so many opportunities to like generate ideas for solutions to problems. And what I love is that our team is super collaborative and that we're not just an installer research team. We work really hard to expand out to

other teams and other parts of the company to make sure that what we're doing is valuable and that there's aspects of what we do that could be useful to everyone else.

And so, I think that's what gets me really excited to go to work every day. The people, the work. runners. I would say it was like runners are weird. Super passionate people are super, I would say, like quirky. And the opportunity actually like sit and work with some of our athletes. And that's huge. Like just having a conversation with people who are Olympic level or Olympic level athletes, and what they do and what motivates them, and how they work internal with us. And those are just really fascinating insights because part of it is so I'm not necessarily a runner, but what they have to say and their experiences, it resonates so much that you're like, this is there's something about this that's broader than just the experience. And so, it just gets me excited to learn more about people and to work with the company that really, I think, sees value in what we do.

APPELT: Passion is contagious. So even if it's not your passion, just seeing people be passionate about something is really interesting. Super fun.

DUNN: And finding connections. The more you know, you're like, oh, there's a thing here. Remember that project that we did two years ago? Like seeing nuances of it over here and weave it together.

APPELT: It feels like it really permeates throughout the company and makes it a really fun, exciting space to be working in. So, I usually have a couple of wrap up questions that I ask everyone. So, this podcast actually started as a supplement to our certificate in behavioral insights. And so, a lot of our listeners are either students who are new to the field or just practitioners who are new to the field of behavioral science. So, any advice or message you would give to folks who are newer to the field of behavioral science?

DUNN: There's so much to learn about how to do behavioral science and it never stops. And so, I think like, don't think that just because you get a degree or you know, a PhD, you're like, oh, I know everything. Um, it is always evolving. And so just be open to having a mindset about learning. If you have this openness to learning, the better you'll be at the job. Learning how to use new technology or learning new methodology or like asking stupid questions. Are not really stupid, but it does uncover like, oh, that's something that's missing. And how could I actually ask or solve that problem?

I think a lot of the day to day is you got your work work, like things you have to do that maybe aren't so exciting. And then you're like, but also this thing popped up in a conversation and nobody's asking for it, but maybe there's a way I can solve that problem. And being curious, being open to learning. I think will really help you get far in behavioral science.

APPELT: Absolutely. think curiosity opens so many doors and behavioral science is far from static, right? We're just constantly seeing it change and it's so, it makes it a fun place to work. Just like we were saying within the organization, people who are passionate about what they do and that can include being passionate about behavioral science, like us nerds.

DUNN: Big nerds. It's okay to be a data nerd.

APPELT: It's cool now. Well, any last thoughts, questions I should have asked if didn't or anything else you want to share?

DUNN: I think you had some really great questions. If you want to brainstorm together about how to make our insights more broad reaching, that's always fun. This is just really fun. think the pivot for me from academics into industry just really opens up. I would say a lot of different ways in which what I learned could be applied. It's nice to see. Right, you're like, is OK, what I do really can have impact, and it's valuable. So, keep doing it, y'all.

APPELT: And it goes right back to that curiosity theme, right? Learning more different ways it can apply is really fun.

DUNN: Yeah.

APPELT: Well, thank you for joining. We haven't gotten to chat so much in recent years, so it's been fun to catch up and hear about the work you're doing. And I'm excited to continue to hear about innovative ways companies like Brooks are using behavioral science. So, thank you for giving us a peek into that world.

DUNN: Well, thank you for wanting to talk with me. I think there's so much that I learned in the pivot to this that there's so much depth to behavioral science and industry that's supposedly continuing to grow, which is good.

APPELT: Absolutely. And thanks to our listeners for joining another episode of Calling DIBS!

---

*Calling DIBS* is recorded and edited on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the [xwməθkwəyəm \(Musqueam\)](#), [Skwxwú7mesh \(Squamish\)](#), and [Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh \(Tsleil-Waututh\)](#). *Calling DIBS* is edited by Rishad Habib, Siobhan Cook, Isabella Jaramillo, Parnian Ashrafi, Kashish Khatri, Ethan Lee, Olin Becker, and Kirstin Appelt. Intro and outro music are excerpts from “resonance” by airtone (2020; <http://ccmixter.org/files/airtone/61321>), licensed under Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial (3.0).