John Smart (1940-2008): An appreciation of a life

Chuck Chakrapani, FMRIA, CMRP

John Smart was one of the finest human beings I have ever known. It was my privilege to have known him as my friend, my business partner, my client, my supplier, and my intellectual sounding board.

When I first came to this country many years ago, I replaced John (not that he could be replaced) as chief statistician at Canadian Facts. I heard many amusing stories about him. I heard that he had once sold candles in Yorkville back in the 1960s, when it was the home of the hippies. I heard about his yellow Corvette, and I heard about his many exploits. Then I met the man. We have been friends ever since.

John was an innovator. In the 1980's John and I created a company, Applied Marketing Statistics, which was devoted solely to providing statistical services, such as sampling and multivariate analysis, to the marketing research industry in this country. It was the first of its kind, and I could not have had a better partner than John.

John was curious. He did not treat statistics as something that provided him with a livelihood. He loved the subject and was constantly learning. If I became curious as to why chi-square does not work well with small cell sizes or why we divide variance with n or the square root of n or had some other methodological problem, he was the person I'd go to. Not just to get an answer. He would be as curious about the problems as I was, and we would spend a lot of time thinking about them, discussing them, and arguing about them. He was a voracious reader. If I mentioned any book or article that interested him, I'd be sure to receive an email from him asking for more details.

John was devoted to his craft. He knew that he had a terminal illness and might only have a few weeks to live. Yet about two weeks before he died, he was actively reading professional books and journal articles. Here's an excerpt from his last email to me two weeks before he passed away.

I reread your paper … well constructed … but as one often sees the online folks just blasting out to get responses on a completely nonrandom population. I think that a requirement should be that one must start with a probability recruited panel and get opt-in. With that you can trust the results except for the usual non-response. … It is our goal to get as close as possible to this kind of standard.

Only someone who is truly devoted to his profession would be reading journal papers and thinking about industry issues rather than indulging in self pity. Extraordinary.

John provided a lot of laughs. Most of them unintentional. Like the time he dived into a pool at a PMRS (MRIA) conference at 3:00 a.m., not realizing that the pool was drained. Ouch! Or the time, at midnight after an office party, when he drove with a friend, intending to go to Scarborough, only to end up in Mississauga. He had, I was told, the only Corvette in North America with a baby seat. He was the stuff of legend, especially in his early years.

John was an all-round good guy. In all the years I knew him, I never heard him speak ill of anyone or express any negative thoughts, least of all about others. He never had a hidden agenda. Never thought that anyone else had one, either. He took people at their word. I do not know of anyone who did not like him. Occasionally, he got angry (you would know it only if you had known him as long as I had), but he carried no grudge against anyone. At any time.

My greatest regret is that I couldn't see him before he passed away, even though I very much wanted to. In his last email to me he wrote, "Hilde is trying to get me to the cottage today and with homecare set up for Southampton I might stay for 1– 2 weeks. Let's try for a get-together when I return." He did return after two weeks but wasn't able to make the meeting. The day after he returned, he passed away.

His wife Hilde will miss him. His daughter Liese will miss him. I will miss him. The research community will miss him. So will anyone whose path ever crossed with his.