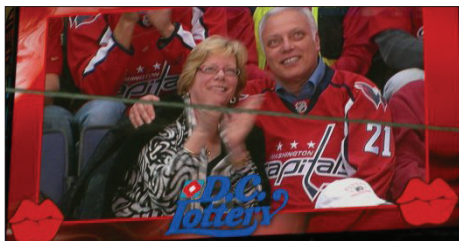


# The Dynamic Duo: Merrill and Mark Shugoll

By Amy Shields, PRC



Circa late 90s – I’m attending my first MRA conference and have the good fortune of being introduced to Merrill Shugoll; already a well-known and respected leader in the marketing research profession at that time. It was a pivotal moment, as I’ve always credited this meeting with my desire to become involved as a volunteer with MRA. What I discovered from our first encounter, which has been reinforced the longer I know her, is that Merrill truly cares about the industry, people, and the world. It is impossible to spend five minutes with her and not feel special and to not learn something. It is my sincere honor to share a mere glimpse of Merrill and Mark Shugoll’s inspiring life story with the readers of *Alert!* magazine.

**How long have you worked in MR? What, exactly, is your role at Shugoll Research? How did you get started?**

*Merrill:* I have worked in market research for 37 years and I am President of Shugoll Research. I began my career in market research when I joined the research division of a major advertising agency in Washington, DC. After spending 9 years with the agency conducting both qualitative and quantitative research studies, I declared my love for qualitative research and decided to go out on my own. At the same time, my mother-in-law, Joan Shugoll, who founded Shugoll Research back in 1957 decided to make me an offer I couldn’t refuse. She asked me to come on board to diversify her business. In 1984, we began providing design and analytical services in addition to data collection services for clients who needed consulting assistance.

*Mark:* I am the CEO of Shugoll Research. My background (Ph.D.) is in policy research. That was my first career. After Merrill joined my mother’s business, we were up late one night writing client reports when I asked her why she was still up at 2 in the morning. Merrill said

she needed a partner to help her deal with the growing client load and I said, “What about me?” We both laughed, because we weren’t sure we wanted our personal relationship to also be a business one. We were not sure it was healthy to be together 24-7, but it has been amazing because we complement each other so well. So, I have been in the marketing research business for 28 years.

**Tell us a little about Shugoll Research.**

*Merrill:* As I mentioned, Shugoll Research is a full service market research firm and we conduct both qualitative and quantitative research studies for a prestigious list of clients. Qualitative research is, of course, an extremely important part of our business. We are headquartered in Bethesda, Maryland just outside of DC. We have magnificent, newly renovated focus group facilities and a large call center that provides recruiting for our clients’ qualitative studies. Recently, we acquired our major competitor on the other side of the Potomac. We now own a brand new 3-room facility in Alexandria, Virginia and two rooms in Fairfax, Virginia effectively doubling our facility and recruiting capacity to 10 spacious focus rooms. This allows us to provide complete geographic reach of the Washington, DC metro area to our clients.

*Mark:* Many people refer to my mom as the “matriarch of focus groups” since she created one of the first focus rooms in her home. But one of the aspects of Merrill’s and my role in the business was to turn it into a full service research company, since that is our background. Some people don’t realize that full service is half our business base.

**What professionally inspires you? What do you enjoy most about working in the field of marketing research?**

*Merrill:* I love people and always want to know what they think, how they feel, and why they do what they do. I pride myself on having unconditional positive regard for every person. I believe people sense that I am interested in them, care about them and want to listen to them. So they share willingly. I also love to interpret, translate and write up the findings for the diverse qualitative projects I manage and

then make strategic recommendations to our clients so they have a roadmap for success.

*Mark:* I’ve found a way to merge my love of the arts with my career as a researcher. We have a large client base of arts organizations for which we perform full service research. I love working on those studies. I also love the variety of work we do: full service and field service, qualitative and quantitative, in person and online on many different topical areas in many different industries.

**What advice would you give to someone just starting in the marketing research profession?**

*Merrill:* Take an entry level position to learn the business from the ground up and find a mentor within the company who will nurture your growth. Join MRA so that you have access to the wealth of information it makes available about the profession and network with colleagues at meetings so you can learn from them. Be curious, ask questions, show initiative and do every task with pride so you deliver quality work. If you are both detail oriented and a big picture, strategic thinker, you will be given more responsibility and will thrive in research.

*Mark:* Marketing research is an enormously rewarding field. Make the commitment to learn the basics, and many exciting doors will open. Also, as you grow in your career, make time to give back to your community through charitable work. It can be as important and rewarding as your professional career.

**How long have you been an MRA member? Tell us a little about how you’ve given back to the profession.**

*Merrill:* I’ve been an MRA member since the mid 1970s. I am active in many of our industry associations. I first participated in MRA at the local level by chairing chapter conferences and speaking, and eventually becoming a director on the Mid-Atlantic board of directors. I attended just about every MRA national conference, came to know many members and eventually ran for a national board position and won. I have been a director at large, secretary, president-elect, president and, of course, immediate past president – the best job of all. I am still very involved in MRA. I was on the selection committee to find

our CEO, I'm working on updating MRA's Code of Marketing Research Standards and I'm working on a very important joint MRA/ORCA project to protect qualitative research from cheaters and repeaters. I am also very active on the Field Committee for ORCA.

*Mark:* I've been an MRA member since I came into the market research industry in 1984. Merrill and I are both very committed to our industry. When we came into the business, we split up the professional industries so we could contribute to as many of them as possible. Merrill has been involved in MRA and ORCA. I have represented our company in CASRO, serving on its Board and becoming the first Chancellor of CASRO University which developed training programs for the industry.

**What is your most rewarding experience or your proudest moment as a MR professional/business owner?**

*Merrill:* I take great pride in the following accomplishments: 1) First, helping my mother-in-law grow her business into what it is today while maintaining the closest of relationships with her. She is my mentor, my best friend and the best mother and we still get to work together most days! Can you imagine how we both felt when she swore me in as president of MRA in our home city back in 2007? Second, I have built a successful marriage and business with my husband. The secret to success is to find a way to complement each other – I'm the touchy-feely qual person and he's the quant jock. I manage human resources and he manages accountants, lawyers, etc. It works! Third, we have become a third generation market research company. Our older daughter, Cara, who worked at IPSOS ASI in Chicago, then earned her MBA from Michigan and worked at Wrigley Corporation decided to join Shugoll Research two years ago. We are so proud and it's great to have her skills on board. Fourth, we are blessed to have Rick Seale as a partner and friend. He manages Shugoll Research's field operations and facility services with a level of expertise unparalleled in the industry and is one of my closest advisors professionally and personally. Fifth, we have just completed our first acquisition, adding Angela Lorinchak to our management team and what she brings to the table makes us all the more proud. Together, with our incredibly talented and dedicated staff

we are providing the highest quality marketing research services available anywhere.

*Mark:* I second all of Merrill's accomplishments! I'm proud that we've created a company that cares about its staff, has given back to the community (particularly in the arts) and has given back to its industry.

**What is the most outlandish or comical request you've ever had from a client?**

*Merrill:* A client who markets a mental health hospital asked me to do a mystery shop and report on my findings. I mean how does one pretend to have a legitimate mental illness and credibly shop a mental hospital?

*Mark:* Back in the days when fax machines were prominent, when you highlighted text on thermal paper it turned green and it was hard to read. To address this problem, we had a client who tested a "hole punch roller thingy" to underline text by punching holes in it. It never worked right. When we tested it, respondents would just laugh at the product. I felt bad for the client, but the research told them this wasn't a good idea. Probably saved them lots of money!

**Before working in the MR industry, what was the most unusual or interesting job you had?**

*Merrill:* I worked in a French consulting company and orchestrated trips for French engineers to visit nuclear power plants and other utility facilities throughout the US. I got to speak French everyday – ooh, la, la!

*Mark:* My dream out of graduate school was to do work that would better the education system in America. When I worked in policy research, I did numerous exciting projects in education policy. They were very rewarding.

**What are your hobbies? What altruistic causes do you support? What do you enjoy doing outside of work?**

*Merrill:* Mark and I are passionate about the performing arts. We recently got back from London where we saw 11 shows in 6 days. We saw 4 shows in one day in NYC and didn't have time to eat until midnight. Mark and I saw the fantastic musical *Next to Normal* over 20 times. Do you get the picture? We are on numerous arts boards and contribute significantly to non-profit theaters. Also, Shugoll Research underwrites a program called ArtSpeak! Visit [ArtSpeak.net](http://ArtSpeak.net) to learn

more. I will let Mark tell you more about it. We are also avid sports fans and have season tickets to just about everything, but we especially love ice hockey – the Washington Capitals. We even got engaged at a hockey game!

*Mark:* Arts, arts, arts (and hockey!). We created the ArtSpeak! program 14 years ago. Its goal is to excite students about the arts and attending art events. We bring famous Broadway stars into schools and they talk about their careers, answer questions, sign autographs and sing! We've had the biggest stars on Broadway, people like Audra McDonald, Kristin Chenoweth, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Lea Michele and Marvin Hamlisch. Over 70 artists in total. It brings us great joy to share our love of the arts with students. And when they sing they blow the roof off these school auditoriums.

**Where are you originally from?**

*Merrill:* Mark and I are originally from New York. We met in DC, but unbeknownst to us, Mark's parents were customers of my Dad's business in New York and our grandmothers lived next door to each other in Brooklyn and played bingo together every week. Some would say it was Bashert, which is Yiddish for "meant to be." We have been married for 36 years. It's hard to believe.

**If you weren't in marketing research, you would be...**

*Merrill:* I would be a doctor. I love medicine. I know that I'd find the field fascinating, challenging and very rewarding. What could be more rewarding than saving a life or bringing a new one into the world?

*Mark:* I would be an arts administrator. If I knew there was a field of arts administration when I graduated, I definitely would have gone into it. Imagine the loss to the marketing research industry! (Just joking!)

**Do you have a favorite quote or life philosophy?**

*Merrill:* One of my favorites is: "Be true to your work, your word, and your friend." Henry David Thoreau

*Mark:* It is important to bring art into your life and the lives of others. It is important to give back to your community, including your professional community.

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To recommend an MRA member with a special story or background to be interviewed for a future Member Spotlight, please contact the editor at [amy.shields@marketingresearch.org](mailto:amy.shields@marketingresearch.org).