

Quick and relevant research

Five simple rules

Can research lead to valuable insights even when faced with time pressure and cost-cutting? By Dirk Engel

Everybody is familiar with the situation from their daily work: an unexpected problem arises and a quick decision needs to be made. There are lots of meetings, fruitless discussions about which option to choose, time is running out, but no decision is made. We might wish that a wise King-Solomon-like figure would appear and make the final decision but in marketing there should be only one King Solomon: the consumer! The market researcher's point of view is not important – the researcher's data and presentations are merely the means by which the voice of the consumer is heard by the management board.

Hearing the consumer's voice, however, is not always easy. Additional information is often needed because the available data sources are insufficient. An extensive market research study must be undertaken. But the money for this is often

not available as the budget has already been dedicated to other projects and time is getting short. So what can be done?

The three options

The first option is the best: *the necessary money is provided and the study is done*. But the likelihood of this option working is rather low since many companies have market research budgets that are allocated years in advance, mainly for continuous long-term research. Most often, there is no money available for a quick study that is designed to solve a specific, one-time problem.

The second choice is the easiest, but worst option: *you don't do any research at all and make a gut decision*. This practice is quite common as decision-makers are often proud of their

gut instincts. But psychologists have conducted a lot of experimental research that proves that our intuition can play tricks on us, especially if we impose our own interpretations onto what we think the consumer wants.

There is, however, a third option, falling somewhere between the two choices. This most pragmatic option is to *start ad-hoc research, while accepting possible cutbacks in the complexity of the study*. The study does not need to be perfect, but it must deliver relevant information for the specific problem and at a speed that delivers the results quickly enough to aid in making a decision. The research staff will tell management that this study is 'quick and dirty'. Well, of course it is quick, because it must deliver insights before a decision-making deadline. But there is no reason that the research needs to be dirty. I prefer to call it 'quick and relevant.'

Fortunately, there are a few simple rules to follow that can improve the decision-making process, reinforce the client-agency relationship, and strengthen the position of the brand and the company.

Follow these rules, and you will deliver quick and relevant input for your clients' decision-making processes. With this approach, we can ensure that the wisdom of the consumer is always being heard – and it is our job to ensure that the consumer has the final say when making controversial marketing decisions. ■

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Rule 5:

Keep cost-efficiency and time to market in mind

This rule is so obvious that there is little need to explain it further. Of course, the job of a research agency is to always deliver by the deadline. And of course nobody wants to waste money. However, sometimes when you work on a project you lose the focus of the objectives and the project itself captures all of your attention. While you must not lose sight of your objectives, speed is a crucial variable in the process of research-based decision-making.

Rule 1:

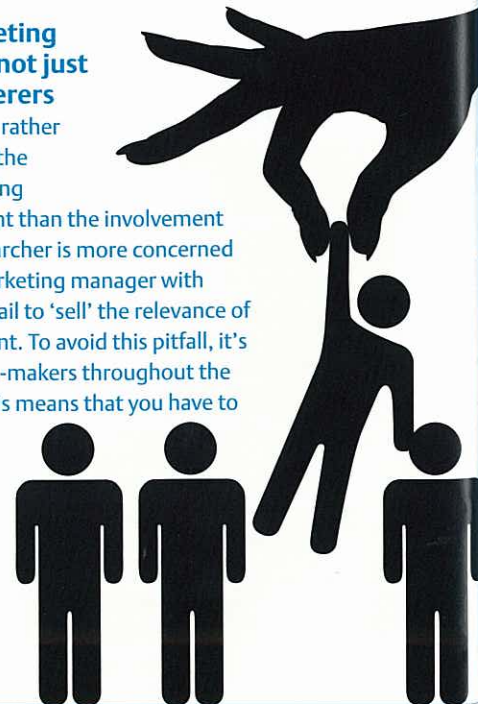
Think problem-driven, not project-driven

Corporate market researchers and especially research agencies usually want to conduct projects with favourable timescales, reliable methodologies and sufficient funding. They hate 'quick and dirty' studies, which they think might fall short of the highest methodological standards, and prefer continuous research projects that are conducted over a period of many years. For ad hoc-research, the research agencies offer standard tools, but these tools are often not easy to adapt to the specific and unique problems that the marketing department has to face. Even when we get a briefing that looks like a normal research project, we may discover that the decision-makers are not absolutely clear about what the real problem is.

Rule 2:

Involve the real marketing decision-makers and not just the information gatherers

If we think about problems rather than projects, we find that the involvement of the marketing managers is more important than the involvement of the researcher. The researcher is more concerned with methodology; the marketing manager with results. Researchers often fail to 'sell' the relevance of the research to management. To avoid this pitfall, it's good to involve all decision-makers throughout the entire research process. This means that you have to discuss details with people who may not be very skilled in research, but it also means that you will get full commitment to your research from all the relevant parties.



Rule 3:

Use simple studies and tools that aid in decision-making

There is a tendency by some types of researchers to make everything a bit more complicated than necessary. Avoid over-complexity not only when it comes to presenting the results, but in designing the studies as well.



Rule 4:

Ensure a flexible but trusting cooperation between client and research agency

In order to achieve speed, we must ensure that all involved parties work together. When I give a request to a market research agency I have not worked with before, I normally receive a response like, "We'll send you our offer in two days." Well, that's pretty good timing for a big research project that will last for several months. But for my ad-hoc research, two days of waiting will bring me two days closer to my deadline. Research agencies are able to deliver such offers earlier, but they have to know exactly what the client wants. And often the briefings provided by clients (especially by agency staff!) are anything but specific. It is important to establish some routines that speed up the process of calculating costs and timing in order to develop the overall research design.

