

There's Big Value in a Little Bit of Research

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Nobody knows your business like you do, but how well do you really know your audiences—your customers, prospects, readers, employees, voters, or donors?

What inspires them? What is most important to them? Who will influence them? What will resonate with them? What will motivate them to take the actions you want? What do they think about your business, people, quality and prices? Why do they—or will they—do business with you?

The answers to questions such as these provide valuable insight that can help you more effectively execute your decisions, communicate with and influence your audiences, and obtain better results.

Better understanding of perceptions can also lead to subtle shifts in direction, new product innovations, and actions that help you get it right the first time, saving the time and expense of trial and error.

In short, simple research makes you more effective and improves ROI.

GOOD INVESTMENT OR WASTE OF TIME?

Research, especially market research, can sound like an expensive waste of time. Often it is, but it doesn't have to be expensive—or extensive.

As they embarked on a rebranding effort, Uesugi Farms wanted to better understand how they were perceived by their customers.

A little bit of research can go a long way to better informing and refining your decisions. A lot of research will quickly reach the point of diminishing returns and can lead to analysis paralysis. Over reliance on research can be as costly as not conducting any research at all (as many losing political candidates can attest).

The appropriate role for research is to provide enough information to identify opportunities, solidify your direction and

provide insight into decisions you're going to make.

Research is generally considered primary if it is new and undertaken solely on your behalf. Secondary research involves identifying, reviewing and interpreting existing research conducted by others. Both forms of research can help you better target your actions.

LEAVE IT TO OTHERS

Unless you're trying to return to the moon, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to review secondary research. You just need the time, curiosity, a good search engine, and in some cases, willingness to spend a little money to purchase studies done by third-parties. You can learn a lot by reviewing industry trade association studies and publications, searching government databases, visiting competitor websites, reviewing blogs and online comments, tracking industry trends and even analyzing your own data.

Finding the information is one thing, interpreting the implications to your situation or identifying opportunities and trends, can be another, but secondary research is relatively easy to do, albeit time consuming. You can do it yourself, you can have an intern or staff member do it, or you can have your marketing agency do it.

SURVEYS, FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

Surveys, focus groups and interviews are all forms of primary research. Surveys are usually relatively short and involve mostly closed-ended questions (yes/no or multiple choice).

Surveys can be conducted on the phone, online and in person. One of the biggest challenges to surveys is developing a list of respondents that is representative of the

larger audience and is statistically significant.

Another big challenge is survey bias, where questions are asked in such a way to consciously or unconsciously arrive at a predetermined result, and/or respondents provide the answers they want you to hear, or they think you want to hear. As we've seen in recent elections, even the best surveying with multi-million-dollar budgets can lead to misinterpretation of the results and erroneous decisions.

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Focus groups allow for more in-depth discussions and insight. Typically, a group of 6-12 people who are representative of your audience will have a 1.5-2-hour discussion with a facilitator. In a focus group, the questions are usually open-ended to encourage discussion. The information gleaned is more qualitative and nuanced than in a survey, as the participants respond to each other and their opinions are clarified and refined. Focus groups, long a staple tool of major consumer product brands, can also include product comparisons and tests of



marketing and branding concepts.

How can focus groups provide insight and value to an independent business? A wine producer might want to conduct a tasting and focus group of their wine club members to identify product mix and improve customer loyalty. A produce company considering a national roll-out of new value-added products might want to conduct focus groups and taste tests in multiple geographic markets to assess regional reactions to flavor profiles and packaging. An animal welfare organization might want to determine the right tone and content of marketing messages that will motivate people to get their pets spayed and neutered. That's exactly what The SPCA for Monterey County did.

FOCUS GROUPS HELPED THE SPCA

“We were struggling to understand what would motivate more people to get their pets spayed and neutered,” said Scott Delucchi, executive director of The SPCA.

“The information we got from the focus groups was invaluable in helping us better understand our clients and what was important to them, which as we found out, was not the same as what was important to staff. As a result, the marketing messages we created were supported by our whole team, have resonated with our audience, and we've spent far less money than anticipated on advertising to fill all available slots.”

SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND

Interviews with present customers, former customers and prospects are another way to conduct a little bit of research to provide clarity and insight, and help you make better decisions. Speaking with four to six people who are representative of an audience segment (retail customers, wholesale customers, repeat buyers, first-time buyers, distributors, etc.) is usually sufficient to identify trends and broadly held perceptions into how the larger group thinks and will respond.

Combining multiple audience segments frequently results in an interview project

involving a total of 10-25 (usually telephone) interviews, typically lasting 10-20 minutes, and costing less than \$10,000. In these situations, people tend to be more open when they are speaking to an experienced interviewer from outside your company. Interviews use predominantly open-ended questions and provide the opportunity for the interviewer to probe for deeper understanding. Sometimes an offer of anonymity will increase the candor of interviewees, but usually, people welcome the opportunity to give their opinions, and don't mind if you know what they had to say.

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UESUGI ASKED THEIR CUSTOMERS

As they embarked on a rebranding effort, Uesugi Farms wanted to better understand how they were perceived by their customers. “By using our marketing agency to interview our customers, we got more honest information than we would have if we had called on our own,” said Pete Aiello, general manager of Uesugi. “Most of the information we got validated what we already thought, which was valuable, but there were a few tidbits, especially on how we compare to our competitors, that has helped us tweak our sales and marketing efforts to great result.”

MAKE BETTER DECISIONS

No amount of research will make decisions for you, or eliminate the risk of a wrong decision. But a little bit of research can help you better understand and target how you interact with your audiences, give you the confidence to charge ahead, and reduce some of the risk. **CG**