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THE ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS

» A WINNING STRATEGY FOR MARKETING RESEARCH SUCCESS

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"If you do not ask the right questions, you do not get the right answers."

- Edward Hodnett

The first thing you should do before starting research for marketing is figure out what question your research must answer. It's not always easy. Most of us learn in school that we're supposed to answer questions, not ask them. In this article, we offer some tips about the art of asking questions to ensure that your marketing research is a success.

The key is to get your marketing team focused not on the research process and methods, but on the business questions around which research (if you really need research!) will be designed.

Usually your marketing team has substantive questions—they just need help formulating them.

We recommend a simple focus group technique to do this. Get all stakeholders in the same room for 90 minutes. Ideally, you will have day-to-day managers, as well as the senior decision-makers involved. Give each person five sheets of paper. The first step is to have each person brainstorm silently, writing questions on each sheet of paper.

Lead the team through the process as follows:

1. The mission-critical questions.

On the first sheet of paper please formulate three questions you must have answered by this research to make it worth investing time and money. Focus on your business, and what would help you grow your business or do it more effectively. Do not phrase these as survey questions or focus group questions, or something you would like to ask your customers. These are business questions that you need to have answered.

2. The nice-to-know questions.

Now on the second sheet of paper write down three "nice-to-know" questions that you or other stakeholders might like this research to address. These are secondary questions that you are willing to forgo if time and budget become a constraint. These might be questions that others in the organization with alternative agendas will want to sneak into your research, or that somebody would say, "While you're at it, why not explore the widget market?"

3. The red-herring questions.

List three questions that could lead us down the wrong path if we are not careful designing the research. These might be related to business ideas that you have already decided not to pursue. Or they might be questions with answers that provide no opportunity for you to address. Or they might be relevant and important issues, but not the focus for this research.

4. The already-answered questions.

Sometimes organizations fail to take stock of what they already know, and launch research that arrives at an answer already discovered in the last study. Write out three important questions that are related to the current effort that you already know the answers to, but that we might end up re-answering if we are not careful in designing this research. These are questions that you would definitely want answered by this research if you didn't have the answers, and as such they are questions that people in the organization with only a partial view might be tempted to include.

5. The look-elsewhere questions.

Finally, please list three questions that would be relevant and illuminating for us to pursue, but that could be answered by taking a second look at other research we've already done, or by analyzing other internal data.

Next, lead the group through a discussion. Some participants will not even realize their questions have already been answered by other research, and all will benefit from a collective understanding of what the research should be answering and what it should not be answering.

As the discussion unfolds and as each participant refines her or his list of mission-critical and nice-to-know questions, the final step is to ask them to formulate at least two possible or likely answers to the questions posed. If a question has only one likely answer, then consider the answer "known" and not worth pursuing. When each question has at least two likely and different outcomes, then proceed to a discussion of what action the organization would take based on each outcome. If you find outcomes leading to dead ends where not much can be done even if answers are known, then cross the question off the list.

Good research is always designed to answer a central question, and every element of the research process, from beginning to end, must be focused on that question. So if you really want to help your marketing with research that matters and that delivers insight, ask and answer compelling questions. As Francis Bacon, an early philosopher of the scientific method, advised: "A prudent question is one half of wisdom." Likewise, a good question is one half of your research problem solved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joe Hopper, Ph.D., president of Versta Research, was formerly on the faculty at the University of Chicago and with the National

Opinion Research Center (NORC). As president, Joe helps clients turn data into stories. This means helping clients understand their customers, prospects, and competition by bringing expertise and academic brainpower to rigorous market research, and then helping clients communicate research findings to managers, reporters, or the internal audiences they need to reach to make smart decisions.

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