

Are you reaching the right customers?

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I hope you enjoy the following excerpt from the HealthLeaders Media book, *A Marketer's Guide to Market Research: A Strategic Approach to Reach the Right Customers*.

Specific to the unique needs of hospital and health system marketers, *A Marketer's Guide to Market Research* takes a strategic, data-driven approach to healthcare marketing. Written by respected healthcare marketing experts, this unique resource gives you actionable information you can use today to:

- » Define research goals, objectives, and expectations
- » Determine the best methodology for your research project
- » Develop realistic budgets for research initiatives
- » Interpret and present research data effectively
- » Apply research findings to your future marketing efforts

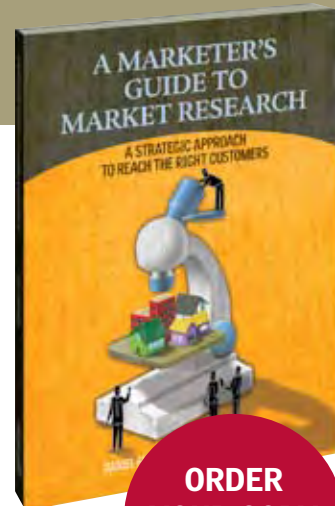
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The research process

Start with the question

The first step in the market research process (see Figure 3.1) is defining exactly what data you want to collect. This step is critical to the success of the research project because if you don't ask the right questions, you cannot hope to get the information you need. Once the research question is clearly defined, the research moves to the second step in the process: developing the research plan. The research plan details the necessary data and the procedure you'll use to collect it. The next step in the process is the actual collection of the data, followed by analysis and presentation of the research results. Finally, marketing actions are taken based on the results of the research.

FIGURE 3.1
THE MARKET RESEARCH PROCESS

The market research process includes the following steps:

1. Define the research question
2. Develop the research plan
3. Collect the data
4. Analyze the data
5. Present the results
6. Take marketing action

To maximize your investment in research, it is important to approach the research process in a linear fashion, addressing each of the six steps sequentially. However, at times internal or external clients may ask the marketing researchers to short-cut the process by conducting a quick survey or focus group. Although good information can be gleaned from almost any well-conducted research project, you'll get more value from research efforts when you put more thought into the need or goal behind the research. The best starting point for isolating the research question is to discuss the issues driving the research request. This discussion may result in a survey, but often other research approaches emerge, such as a focus group or in-depth interviews, that may be appropriate to provide the information.

Research questions usually emerge from problems, opportunities, or environmental scanning efforts.

Problems

Problems are perhaps the most frequent reason for marketing research efforts. They often occur as a result of environmental changes that affect the health-care provider. For example, declining market share or a public relations crisis that results from negative press can stimulate market research. Problems also can arise due to changes within the organization, such as the resignation of key management personnel. Finally, problems can arise due to general business trends.

RESEARCH TIP

Leveraging qualitative and quantitative research

Qualitative and quantitative research work well when used together. Conducting qualitative research first can uncover topics or issues that you may want to test statistically using quantitative studies. Conducting quantitative research first can uncover trends that you may want to explore in greater detail using qualitative research.

Opportunities

Opportunities generally occur for the same reasons as problems—that is, environmental changes, organizational changes, or general business trends create opportunities that a hospital's management team wants to explore. For example, the declining fortunes of a competitive healthcare provider may create a takeover opportunity. In recent years, several environmental trends have emerged, creating opportunities for alert healthcare providers. In many communities, for example, hospitals have built successful competitive

positions by providing an upscale, patient-friendly maternity experience or being a leader in outpatient diagnostic and surgical services. Targeted research can help healthcare leaders identify and exploit opportunities that grow business volumes and open new markets.

Environment

With the rapidly changing marketplace, many leading healthcare organizations formally scan their environment on a systematic basis. They conduct periodic consumer perception studies in their markets designed to monitor consumers' opinions of their hospitals, as well as opinions of their competitors. In essence, the consumer perception study provides a snapshot of the marketplace. By scanning their environment through such a technique, hospitals are alerted to shifts in consumer attitudes and perceptions that could signal emerging problems or opportunities.

Define the question

Determining the true research question is the most important and perhaps the most difficult component of the marketing research process. Its importance cannot be overstated: Ask the wrong question, and you'll get information that's useless to the organization. To identify the research question, conduct a thorough examination of why you need to conduct the research.

Consider this example: A hospital finds that it is losing market share in its maternity service line. To address this problem, the hospital commissions research to identify the upgrades to its maternity facilities that would be most

appreciated by expectant mothers in the area. The research project is easy to design and to implement. But there's a problem: What if the loss of market share is due to something other than facilities? Maybe there's a lack of confidence in the qualifications or bedside manner of physicians, nurses, or staff at the hospital. In that case, a community perception or employee morale study may provide much more useful information to hospital administration than polling expectant mothers to see what kind of amenities they'd prefer.

For the research project to be a success, it is imperative that the researchers have a clear understanding of the research question. To get at that question, the researcher should rigorously assess the need that underlies the request for information. In the maternity example, the initial focus was on what facility enhancements would be most appreciated by expectant mothers. However, if we ask why that information is needed, another question will soon emerge. Instead of determining what facility upgrades would be most favored by patients, the question to ask is, "What is causing a decline in market share?" To define the research question, simply continue to ask why the information is desired until you reach the true underlying research question of interest.

RESEARCH TIP

Answer the most important question first

The most important question any researcher can ask is, "How will we use the information we learn from this research?" if you start with this question it will drive everything else you do in research—including asking the right questions.

Develop the objectives

Once the research question is clearly defined, it's time to develop the research objectives. The objectives delineate the information outcomes expected from the research. These expected outcomes should be stated in a specific and straightforward manner that is not open to varied interpretation.

The statement of research objectives has multiple benefits. First, the researcher has a clear understanding of the research question and the nature and scope of the upcoming project. Second, the statement of research objectives gives the client another opportunity to ensure that the expected information should provide information adequate for addressing the underlying need driving the research. Finally, the statement of research objectives ensures that both the researcher and the client are on the same page concerning this project and its expected information outcomes.

Typical research objectives answer the following questions:

- What is our awareness level in our primary marketplace?
- Which hospital has the highest preference ratings in the marketplace?
- Is employee morale rising, falling, or staying the same?
- Why is our maternity market share declining?
- What type of outreach campaign would be most effective with our target market?

RESEARCH TIP**Need to know versus nice to know**

Be careful not to let survey projects and questionnaires grow too long. Often issues and questions are added because someone thinks it would be nice to know the answers, when in reality the information is rarely used and only adds to the time and cost involved in the study.

Examine constraints

The last step is to look for any constraints on the research. Unfortunately, we rarely have the opportunity to research a question without any constraints at all. The two most prevalent constraints are time and money. Time often constrains our research methodology. Although each methodology has its own strengths that make it appropriate for certain research needs, time constraints often override methodological concerns. For example, if you need the information very quickly, a mail-based survey may not be the best option—even if it is the most appropriate methodology for the type of research you are conducting.

Money also affects the research methodology and scope. For example, the common rule-of-thumb for focus groups is that you should continue to conduct focus groups until you stop getting new information that fits your research needs. However, by the time you rent the facilities, pay the moderators, and give participants incentives, cost often becomes a major factor that restricts the

number of groups conducted. Further, although it may be advantageous for an organization that serves more than one region to conduct focus groups in several different locations, cost may prohibit research of this scope.

It's important to make sure that everyone involved in the research has a clear understanding of everything that goes into formulating the question, including the problems, opportunities, or environmental factors that prompt the research, constraints on the project, and the expected outcomes.




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