

Making Marketing Data Work for You

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You've got your list of questions for your upcoming research study. Now before you spend a lot of time and money, ask yourself: "If I get the exact answers to all the questions on my list, what would I do differently at the college?" If you don't know the answer to that question before you begin the research – don't begin.

All too often research involves getting a group of people together to find out things that "would be nice to know." Good research, however, should be a lot more than that.

Why Do Research?

Although marketing professionals can make effective use of marketing research to solve a wide variety of problems, we have found that there are a few basic reasons that marketing research is used:

1. Since we are not our target audience -- even though we may think we know them -- we study target markets to understand their basic needs and perceptions. This understanding helps us develop programs and services that more closely meet their needs and more effective marketing techniques to reach them more precisely.
2. We are making decisions for the future now. Since we don't know exactly what tomorrow holds, we use marketing research to help us understand current trends which, in turn, increases the chances that the actions we take today will be correct tomorrow.
3. We use marketing research to help us evaluate the present and the future. We need to know what things that we are doing today are working and what things are not, and we also need to establish a "base line" of the current conditions so that we will be able to evaluate in the future the impact of the actions we take today.

The basic message is this -- it is important to know why you want to do marketing research before you do marketing research.

Where Do You Begin: The Problem Definition

Although it varies depending on whom you talk to, marketing research usually involves four distinct phases: Problem Definition, Data Collection, Data Analysis and

Recommendations, and Follow-up. Although each step is important, the Problem Definition phase is by far the most important for one simple reason – once you leave this phase and proceed to Data Collection, you start spending the money. And if you’ve defined your problem incorrectly, that money at best will be completely wasted, but even worse – it could lead to wrong conclusions and incorrect actions involving even more money. It is a good idea to talk with people in the affected area (e.g. admissions, a particular department, etc.) for their view and examine pertinent internal records (e.g. enrollment trends, past marketing plans, etc.). This can help to reinforce your feelings and even lead to additional information that you might need in the survey itself.

The Next Step: Data Collection

There are a wide variety of ways to gather data and each has its advantages and disadvantages.

Focus Groups

Although not statistically significant, one of the simplest and yet most effective approaches is the use of focus groups. Focus groups involve bringing together 8-12 members of your target audience (students, business leaders, citizens in the community) and asking them the basic questions you’ve developed. Sometimes 2 or 3 focus groups are used and responses in the different groups compared. This method is often used to pre-test a larger regional survey or even to help define the problem before you begin to collect data. Remember, the key is to find out what the focus group thinks, so ask the questions, but then be quiet and listen.

While focus groups can be done professionally, it is also something you can learn to do on your campus. So often, colleges don’t do research because they think the *only* option is complicated and expensive. Yet collecting information through informal conversations with a cross section of your target audience is something you can do easily. For example, get together a group of your students and have them look at your publications as well as some examples from other colleges. Ask them what they like and don’t like about them or ask them what you could do to make a schedule book, for example, easier to use. You’ll be surprised at how much useful information you can get and how sometimes the simplest change -- such as making phone numbers more prominent -- can make a difference. (Another group to consider asking similar questions are your front line staff who spend all day hearing the same questions over and over from students and, therefore, know what’s on their minds.)

Logging

Logging responses to inquiries is another example of something that you can organize relatively easily on your campus to gather valuable information on what is working. Develop a simple form to be kept at every desk for student inquiries. At the end, ask what made the person call that day and how they found out about the college. Have these

forms returned to a central location and logged. You'll soon get a very useful picture of what media outlets, vehicles are most effective for you. Similarly, log all return cards from brochures, fairs etc. Ideally, this information will go in a single college computer data base used to follow up on which students eventually register and give you reports on what information outlets worked best (advertising, schedule book, fairs, tours etc.). Even without a systematic, computer program, however, you can still log responses and use this information to constantly adapt what you are doing.

Surveys

At other times, research that involves personal interviews, telephone surveys, or the use of direct mail questionnaires may be needed. These are usually more involved and more complex. A few key points, however, are usually common to all approaches:

- To be statistically valid the survey sample must be random (i.e. every person in the population being studied must have an equal chance of being selected);
- Questions must be asked in a manner that does not lead the respondent; “no opinion” or “none of the above” may often be required;
- If you are going to break a large sample down into smaller sub-samples and do cross-tabulations (see next section), you will need a larger sample to begin;
- Questions that deal with demographics (age, income, educational level) are usually left to the end.

You might also want to consider using internal experts among your faculty or a marketing research class taught on campus. While these save money, time constraints may work against you. A research class may take a semester to finish the survey. If you're not in a hurry that's OK, but if you need the results yesterday it might be wise to look elsewhere.

What Does It Say and What Should We Do: Data Analysis and Recommendations

There are two important aspects to data analysis. The first is the actual totals and percentages that are obtained from the research. Thanks to computers and a variety of software packages this is a lot easier than it used to be. But more important is the interpretation of these figures as to what they say about the problem at hand and what recommendations may be made based on this interpretation.

An important aspect of the analysis is the cross-tabulation of data. Cross-tabulation takes place when the answers to two or more questions in the survey are analyzed together. For example, you may be interested in how good a job people surveyed thought the college did with regard to registration, but you may be even more interested in the answers to this question when segmented (cross-tabulated) by age groups, races, or income levels. Finally, it is important to remember why you did the research in the first place. What does the data

interpretation suggest as to possible solutions to the problem? Good research leads to good solutions.

One college, for example, did an excellent study on retention, analyzing students by various segments. One factor they found that was particularly predictive of success of students coming directly from high school was whether they participated in orientation. Knowing this, it became important for the college to create a way to encourage and perhaps eventually make some type of orientation program mandatory.

Where Do You Go From Here: Follow-up

Possibly the worst thing that can happen in marketing research is to have good research that sits on the shelf and is wasted because no one was responsible for implementation of the resulting findings and recommendations. The best way to avoid this is to have a clear understanding *before* the process is begun as to who will be responsible for the implementation of the recommendations. When possible, a timetable for this implementation should also be established in advance.

Hiring the Outsider

Many people consider marketing research, but dismiss an outside researcher up front because they assume that the cost will be prohibitive. Unfortunately for them, this is not always the case and it is unwise to make that assumption. Remember what was said above: when you're risking a lot of dollars and your college's reputation depends on educated guessing as to what the future holds or what people think, it is appropriate to consider an expenditure to increase the probability of success. The cost of research obviously varies depending on the study being considered, but good quality research can be performed by independent companies for as little as a few thousand dollars. To be sure, there are studies that can cost tens and even hundreds of thousands of dollars, but the average college doesn't necessarily need that kind of study very often.

When considering an outside research company it is important to ask the right questions: Have they worked with colleges, especially community colleges? Do they have samples of previous studies you can examine? How will the data be presented? How do they charge? (e.g. are cross-tabs extra?) Will they present marketing implications and offer recommendations or are they simply providing the data for you to interpret? Will they assist in the follow-up? If so, is that assistance included in the base fee or additional? Be sure to compare overall costs and value. And don't hesitate to get bids from more than one company.

How Can Marketing Research Be Used: Some Brief Examples

Some examples from community college research help illustrate the points above.

As Cuyahoga Community College was preparing a major new promotion campaign a number of years ago, it turned to research to help shape the message and then later to evaluate its effectiveness. Focus groups told us our students were serious, career-minded, and needed to be encouraged to take that step and enroll. While general awareness of Tri-C seemed high, potential students did not know exactly what we offered and many were not considering us in the college decision process. A creative campaign featuring lions who learned to roar and eagles who learned to fly helped break through the media clutter on TV and radio, created top of mind awareness and told our audience they too could learn a skill. Print ads focused on specific benefits identified in the research and later listed career offerings to get that information out.

In the years that followed, the college consistently did research to evaluate the efforts. One obvious measure was the immediate turnaround in enrollment after six years of decline. Further, our awareness levels increased and individuals remembered and understood our ads, being able to report back themes and messages. For us TV was the prime vehicle, starting with 57 percent recognition and increasing over a few years to 70 percent of the audience. We dropped our bus and outdoor advertising when additional research showed that the recall figures for those media were very low.

Further, our continuing annual research not only helped us shape our approach and message, but helped us justify the significant dollars we were spending on media buys. In fact, the year following a budget cut, we were able to document a corresponding drop in the awareness levels of our audience.

We stayed with the same basic successful strategy and even the same TV ad for three years. Too often institutions feel they need to change ads and brochures continually, losing the value of sustained, recognizable efforts. We did, however, make adjustments as our campaign and research continued. When research also told us there were still questions about our quality, our next series of ads focused on outcomes, showing our grads were able to transfer and get jobs.

At other colleges for which our company did similar perception and media recognition research the results were quite different. Nearly half remembered the advertising through a schedule book mailing, and less than 10 percent through any kind of mass media. Further, respondents could remember no specific message. This research supports continuing a schedule book mailing, but revising both the schedule book and mass media ads to give a much clearer, hard-hitting message with a call to action based on the benefits shown in the research.

The point here is not whether one college finds TV or some other outlet more effective than schedules etc. but that you, as an institution, know what benefits you need to emphasize and what media outlets work best for your college both as a baseline for your initial plans, and on a continuing basis as you measure success and modify your efforts.

A final excellent example of using research to measure a new marketing approach was used at El Centro College of Dallas County Community Colleges. They had decided to use a number of telemarketing approaches as part of their new marketing plan activities. For the fall quarter, they used volunteers to phone the more than 700 potential students who had applied, but not yet registered. By tracking the calls, they were able to show a dramatic value to the telemarketing. Of those students who were actually reached and spoken to, 39 percent enrolled, compared with only 19 percent of the potential students they were unable to reach. Similar research would make sense for any telemarketing efforts such as calling students who inquire, those who drop out or stop out, current students called to reregister etc.

Research is clearly an important part of your marketing mix that can help you save time and money. Used wisely it can help you set the right directions and then evaluate how well you are doing.

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