

Marketing Research

Marketing research in the early days was aimed more at finding techniques to increase sales than to understand customers. Researchers applauded the development of store audits, warehouse withdrawals, and consumer panels to provide needed information on product movement.

Over time, marketers increasingly recognized the importance of understanding buyers. Focus groups, questionnaires, and surveys came into vogue. Today the marketer's mantra is about the importance of understanding buyers at either the segment or the individual level. According to an old Spanish saying, **“To be a bullfighter, you must first learn to be a bull.”**

Today's marketers use a whole bevy of marketing research techniques to understand customers and markets and their own marketing effectiveness. Here are some of the major research techniques in use:

- *In-store observation.* Paco Underhill, author of *Why We Buy*, runs Environsell to study in-store customer behavior.⁴³ His researchers use clipboards, track sheets, and video equipment to record the movements of shoppers. They are “retail

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anthropologists” studying over 70,000 shoppers a year in their “natural habitat.” The findings include:

- Shoppers almost invariably walk to the right.
- Women are more likely to avoid narrow aisles than men.
- Men move faster than women through store aisles.
- Shoppers slow down when they see reflective surfaces and speed up when they see blanks.
- Shoppers don’t notice elaborate signs in the first 30 feet of the entrance.
- *In-home observation.* Companies send researchers into homes to study household behavior toward products. Whirlpool arranged for an anthropologist to visit several homes to study how household members use large appliances. Ogilvy & Mather sent researchers with handheld videocameras into homes to prepare a 30-minute “highlight reel” of in-home behavior toward different products.
- *Other observation.* Observation can take place anywhere. Japanese carmakers stood in supermarket parking lots watching American women strain to lower their groceries into their car trunks and came up with a better trunk design. McDonald’s executives once a year “work the counters” to experience customers firsthand. Marketers can learn a great deal by “stapling themselves to a customer.”
- *Focus group research.* Companies frequently recruit one or more focus groups to talk about a product or service under the direction of a skilled moderator. The focus group may number 6 to 10 members who spend a few hours responding to the moderator’s questions and to each other’s comments. The session is usually videotaped and discussed later by a management team. While focus groups are an important preliminary step in exploring a subject, the results lack projectability to the larger population and should be treated cautiously.

- *Questionnaires and surveys.* Companies gather more representative information by interviewing a larger sample of the target population. The sample is drawn using statistical techniques, and the persons are reached either in person or by phone, fax, mail, or e-mail. The questionnaires typically ask questions that are codable and countable so as to yield a quantitative picture of customer opinions, attitudes, and behavior. By including personal questions, the surveyor can correlate the answers with different demographic and psychographic characteristics of the respondents. In using the findings, the company should be aware of possible biases resulting from a low response rate, poorly worded questions, or faults in the interviewing process and setting.
- *In-depth interviewing techniques.* Questionnaires are considered by some to be naive “nose counting” and their preference is to go deeper into the minds and motivations of consumers (often called “head shrinking”). Years ago, Ernest Dichter, who was trained as a Freudian, set a pattern of “motivational research” where he would enter into deep discussions with respondents to discern unconscious or repressed motivations. His findings, though interesting, were sometimes bizarre. For example, he concluded that consumers resist prunes because prunes are wrinkled and remind people of old age; therefore advertisers should feature “happy young prunes.” And women don’t trust cake mixes unless adding an egg is required so that homemakers can feel that they are giving “birth” to a “live cake.” Dichter’s findings lacked “scientific evidence” and “projectibility” but were always of interest to marketers and advertisers.⁴⁴

A more recent technique, the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), developed by Professor Gerald Zaltman, seeks to bypass the verbal left brain and dip into the right brain and unconscious. ZMET asks small groups of

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consumers to collect pictures, create collages, and discuss these in an interview. ZMET claims to achieve insight into product themes and concerns that do not emerge through verbal research.⁴⁵

- *Marketing experiments.* The most scientific way to research customers is to present different offerings to matched customer groups and analyze differences in their responses. Using split cable television or mail, companies are able to feature different ad headlines, prices, or promotions to see which one(s) draw better. To the extent that extraneous variables are controlled, the company can attribute response differences to offering differences.
- *Mystery shopper research.* Companies hire mystery shoppers to check on how well sales clerks handle difficult questions from customers, how well telephone operators answer phone calls, how easy it is to locate merchandise in a store, and many other uses. Mystery shopping is used to evaluate a company or competitor's marketing effectiveness rather than to understand customers' needs or wants.
- *Data mining.* Companies with large customer databases can use statisticians to detect in the mass of data new segments or new trends that the company can exploit.

Remember, marketing research is the first step and the foundation for effective marketing decision making. Herbert Baum, CEO of Hasbro Inc., said: **“Market research is crucial to a corporation’s marketing process. I don’t think anybody ought to be making marketing decisions without some form of research, because you can waste a lot of time and money.”**