

3

Determining the Research Question

Learning Objectives

- 1 Explain the importance of critical thinking when making assumptions
- 2 Describe the critical thinking process
- 3 Understand the process of obtaining internal secondary data
- 4 Appreciate the importance of writing a clear research question

ONE LOOK AND THEY KNEW THEY WERE MEANT FOR EACH OTHER!

If it sounds like a line from a romance novel, it could be. But it could also be what a publisher says to a new romance novel author. Publishers love romance, as no other type of book has a higher profit margin than romance novels. This fact is attributed to the knowledge publishers have of romance novel readers. Publishers will have researched everything – from where romance novel readers buy their books to what type of book cover they find attractive. And having this knowledge means fewer books that don't sell and happy readers who keep buying more books that do sell. In fact, romance novels bring in twice as much revenue as either science fiction or mysteries.

How do publishers get this information? By obtaining qualitative information from bookstore staff about what customers want and quantitative data from their own research on sales figures. In contrast publishers of other types of fiction simply publish lots of books in the hope that some will sell well.

Questions: How would you convince publishers of mysteries, science fiction and novels to follow the example of romance publishers? What type of arguments do you feel these publishers would make in return?

Source: Andriani, 2007

3.1 Critical Thinking

A problem can be described as a question for which there is currently no answer. When faced with a problem, it is tempting for an organization to start researching the answer immediately. The temptation to begin researching right away results from the belief that an organization both understands the source of the problem and that the answer is self-evident. However, time will not be saved if a company starts to research immediately. Instead, both time – and money – will be wasted, as the first analysis of a problem is rarely correct (see box below).

WRONG ASSUMPTIONS CAN RESULT IN EXPENSIVE MISTAKES AND UPSET CUSTOMERS

The combination football and baseball stadium became a popular idea during the 1970s as a way for cities in the USA to save money. Cities were fighting to attract more sports teams to their areas and building new stadiums is expensive. So why have two stadiums when one will be sitting empty so much of the year?

It was assumed that it would make no difference to sports fans what the stadium looked like and where the teams played. It was also assumed that all sports attracted an undifferentiated mass of sports fans.

Did fans accept the combination stadium? No, they cried 'Foul!' While many people certainly attend more than one sport, football and baseball are different products that provide different benefits and need to be packaged and sold separately.

What city officials found was that sports fans have an emotional connection to where a sport is played. They prefer a football stadium and a baseball stadium to be just that. As a result, San Francisco invested in building a new baseball stadium downtown rather than play baseball at the football stadium. Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh and Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, both of which were combination stadiums, have been demolished and replaced with separate sports facilities for baseball and football. In Pittsburgh, the Three River Stadium was replaced with the Heinz Stadium for the Pittsburgh Steelers and PNC, a classic style baseball park for the Pirates. Somebody should have asked the fans!

Source: Ries and Ries, 2004

This decision to start research without proper planning is a common mistake made by all types of organizations. Unfortunately, a company that starts to research prematurely has probably not even correctly identified the source of a problem. This failure will lead to one of the most frequent mistakes in marketing research, which is to base the research study on the wrong research question. If this is done, the original problem will remain even if the research is conducted correctly because the researchers asked the wrong question. In the example regarding combination football and baseball stadiums, the question asked was how to save money. The question that was not asked – and should have been – was how the fans might react to the change.

3.1.1 Critical thinking and faulty assumptions

The most common difficulty faced by organizations when starting the research process is making a faulty assumption about the cause of a problem. Assumptions can be thought of as facts that are believed to be correct without proof. Faulty assumptions are often based exclusively on personal experience, rather than on objective fact. This rush to judge why a problem exists is naturally simpler and quicker than searching for facts, as it takes little critical analysis. Yet just because the cause of a problem seems self-evident, this does not make it true. An assumption about a new product opportunity that is acted upon without questioning can lead to expensive failures. Therefore, instead of making assumptions, researchers need to take the time to think critically about what the true nature of a problem or opportunity.

A classic example of starting a business without first conducting research is the dot com company Webvan. This online grocery purchase and delivery service was started with the mission that it would revolutionize the way people purchased groceries. The founder of the company was so convinced of the success of his idea that he managed to persuade others to invest \$1 billion. And yet, Webvan declared bankruptcy in 2001 having lost \$830 million. As the founder said later, 'Retail 101 is "Prove the market and then grow"'. The way to prove that there is a market available is first to do your research in order to make sure your original assumption is correct (Swartz, 2001; Fost, 2003).

If a wrong assumption about the cause of a problem or the potential success of an idea is made, the wrong research question will be asked. The company will then design and conduct research which will result in the wrong answer. As a result of the wrong assumption a great deal of research time, money and effort will be wasted. One way for market researchers to avoid this situation is to use critical thinking, which is a process of questioning and evaluating assumptions. Critical thinking is a difficult skill that requires effort and a creative imagination. However, research results will improve by applying critical thinking to the research process.

Sometimes a company can find that the change required can be as easy as packaging the product in a different size (see box below).

AMERICANS ARE GETTING BIGGER – SO NABISCO IS REPACKAGING THEIR SNACKS

It may seem as though everyone is trying to lose weight, but obviously not everyone is succeeding. The amount of food Americans have available to eat has increased by 18 per cent since the last generation, and Americans have taken advantage of this increase by consuming 23 per cent more in calories. Societal concern about obesity is serious and, of course, everyone knows that cookies, crackers and chips are not diet food. Marketers at Nabisco, part of Kraft Foods, took note of this change in the external environment and decided to react. The problem was that although consumption of products such as Oreo cookies, Chips Ahoy, Wheat Thins and Cheese Nips can add to weight gain because of the calories and carbohydrates they contain, the company still wanted consumers to purchase.

(Continued)

(Continued)

A first response to this problem might have to change the recipe of the snacks to lower the calories. This is the route the company could have taken, however they knew from research that it was the taste of the treats that made them popular. Therefore, they tested another solution to the problem – packaging the treats in 100-calorie servings. Kraft had also noticed the popularity of certain diets, such as the South Beach Diet expounded upon in a bestselling book. The packaging of smaller portions has become so popular that Kraft is now repackaging new foods that will meet specific diet requirements. Consumers can now enjoy their snacks – while still following their favorite diet and controlling their waistlines.

Source: Kraft Foods, 2004, 2006

3.2 The Critical Thinking Process

Critical thinking can be thought of as a three-step process. The first step is identifying the pre-existing assumptions held by company employees regarding the cause of a problem or a potential opportunity. The second step is to use internal research data to challenge whether these same assumptions are accurate and based on fact. The third step is to explore new ideas about the actual source of a problem and its possible solution.

3.2.1 Challenging assumptions

Unfortunately the second step in challenging assumptions about the cause of a problem is where the critical thinking process often stops. As a result assumptions are accepted without being questioned. The reasons for this automatic acceptance include common patterns of thought among company employees and the natural desire most people feel to conform.

If everyone in a company tends to view that company's product, their consumers and the external world in the same way, it is difficult for researchers to argue against these beliefs. However, it is these common patterns of thought that can cause a company's problem and its solution to seem self-evident. These common thought patterns can also keep companies from seeing opportunities that can be explored by using research. If everyone thought the same, who would think of flavored bananas (see box below)?

HOW MUCH WOULD YOU PAY FOR A BANANA?

In pre-Starbucks' times, coffee could be purchased inexpensively at many types of establishments. Consumers didn't expect the coffee to taste great, or the coffee shop to look good. After all, at least the coffee was cheap – so who could complain?

(Continued)

Then along came Starbucks. In 1983 Howard Schultz, who had joined Starbucks the previous year, was visiting Milan, Italy, where he was impressed with the popularity of espresso bars serving high quality coffee drinks in a relaxed atmosphere. He convinced the owners of Starbucks to use research to test his assumption that Americans would be willing to pay much more for a quality coffee product. The idea was successful and today there are 7,569 Starbucks around the world. People are willing to pay much more than 50 cents for a Starbucks' coffee because they consider Starbucks' products to be better.

Bananas are another inexpensive and common product. Can this same quality and price transformation happen to the banana? Chiquita International Brands Inc. would like to increase revenue by having people not only eat more bananas, they would also like them to pay more for their bananas. To make this happen, the research labs at Chiquita are working on developing flavored bananas with a hint of another fruit flavor. Eight different flavors have been developed thus far. Is their assumption that people would pay much more for a unique banana correct? Consumer research to test this assumption will have to take place before large-scale planting of the banana varieties begins.

Source: Cornwell, 2004; Starbucks, 2007

The more prevalent these common patterns of thinking are, the more important it is to challenge such assumptions. And yet if everyone else is sure of the problem and wants to move forward with corrective action, there is a natural desire to conform to their opinion. Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of market researchers to ask questions about whether such assumptions are based on fact, even when this is unpopular. Only after false assumptions have been eliminated can new ideas based on true facts be proposed.

For example, a company that produces bulletin boards targeted at university students for use in dorm rooms might be faced with the dilemma of declining sales. In an initial marketing meeting about the problem, the sales department might suggest that the problem is caused because the product is too expensive for students to purchase. This answer is based on the assumption that all students are on limited budgets and would purchase this item if they could afford to do so. Therefore the sales department may recommend the product price be lowered. The production department staff might assume that bulletin boards are at the end of the product life cycle and no longer needed. Therefore they may recommend that the bulletin boards be dropped from the product line. This answer is based on the assumption that students keep all their information on their computers and have 'paper-free' dorm rooms. Both answers seem to be based on true assumptions – students do lack significant financial resources and they do use computers.

3.2.2 Using internal data to challenge assumptions

However, in this case market researchers should challenge the assumption that sales are down because students cannot afford this product – by asking if students' limited budgets keep them from purchasing other products. The answer can be found by analyzing internal company data on student spending. The data might demonstrate that students are still spending money on this company's other product offerings and therefore are able to make such a purchase. The second

assumption (that dorms are now paper-free and therefore bulletin boards are obsolete) could be checked by interviewing the company's sales staff who will be familiar with student dorm rooms. Here evidence would be found that bulletin boards were still needed for a variety of uses, such as posting photos or menus from pizza restaurants that deliver. Internal data found through this process may be sufficient to prove or disprove assumptions at this stage of the research process. While this may seem to slow the process down, time will be saved in the long run because the correct research question will be the end result.

Even large, successful, businesses must routinely go through this process. When Disney first introduced its films into the Indian market they were not a hit with audiences. They realized that their assumptions of what people wanted in a film were based on their American model. After researching consumer assumptions they made the decision to produce films locally, in India, so that the content better reflected the local culture. This same model is now being used in China, Russia, Latin America and South Korea (Marr and Fowler, 2007).

3.2.3 Generating new ideas

With the initial assumptions dealt with and any wrong assumptions discarded, it is time for the final step in the critical thinking process. This is to explore new ideas regarding the problem or potential opportunity. This step in the process demonstrates why market researchers' knowledge of a product and target market is essential. Using this product and consumer knowledge shortens the process of generating and developing new ideas. This is because a researcher will have already challenged many of the assumptions and will have a knowledge base about the product and consumers on which to form new ideas. This is one reason why market researchers will often specialize in conducting research on a product category or specific market segment. If a market researcher does not have this information, additional external secondary research will be needed.

In the example above of why students were not buying bulletin boards, a researcher might check sales figures from the finance office for other products aimed at the university market to see if they have also suffered a decline. In addition, they might interview employees in the sales department who are knowledgeable about the university's student market segment. By doing so they might obtain information that students are in fact buying bulletin boards – they are just buying a competitor's model!

A research question can now be asked as to how to improve the product. The question might be phrased as 'What additional product features and benefits need to be added to meet the competitive threat?' A company will now be ready to invest time and money in designing research to find the correct answer (see Figure 3.1).

3.2.4 Making a correct assumption

Not every problem requires extensive critical thinking. Sometimes the assumptions made about the cause of a problem are clear to everyone in a company, including the researchers. For example, if the owners of a local coffee shop see customers' cars across the street in the parking lot of the recently opened Starbucks, the problem is clear. Little questioning is needed to challenge the assumption that the customers left because they are buying that competitor's product. However, if the coffee shop's owners who take pride in their product conducted additional research, they might find that customers want more than a cup of coffee.

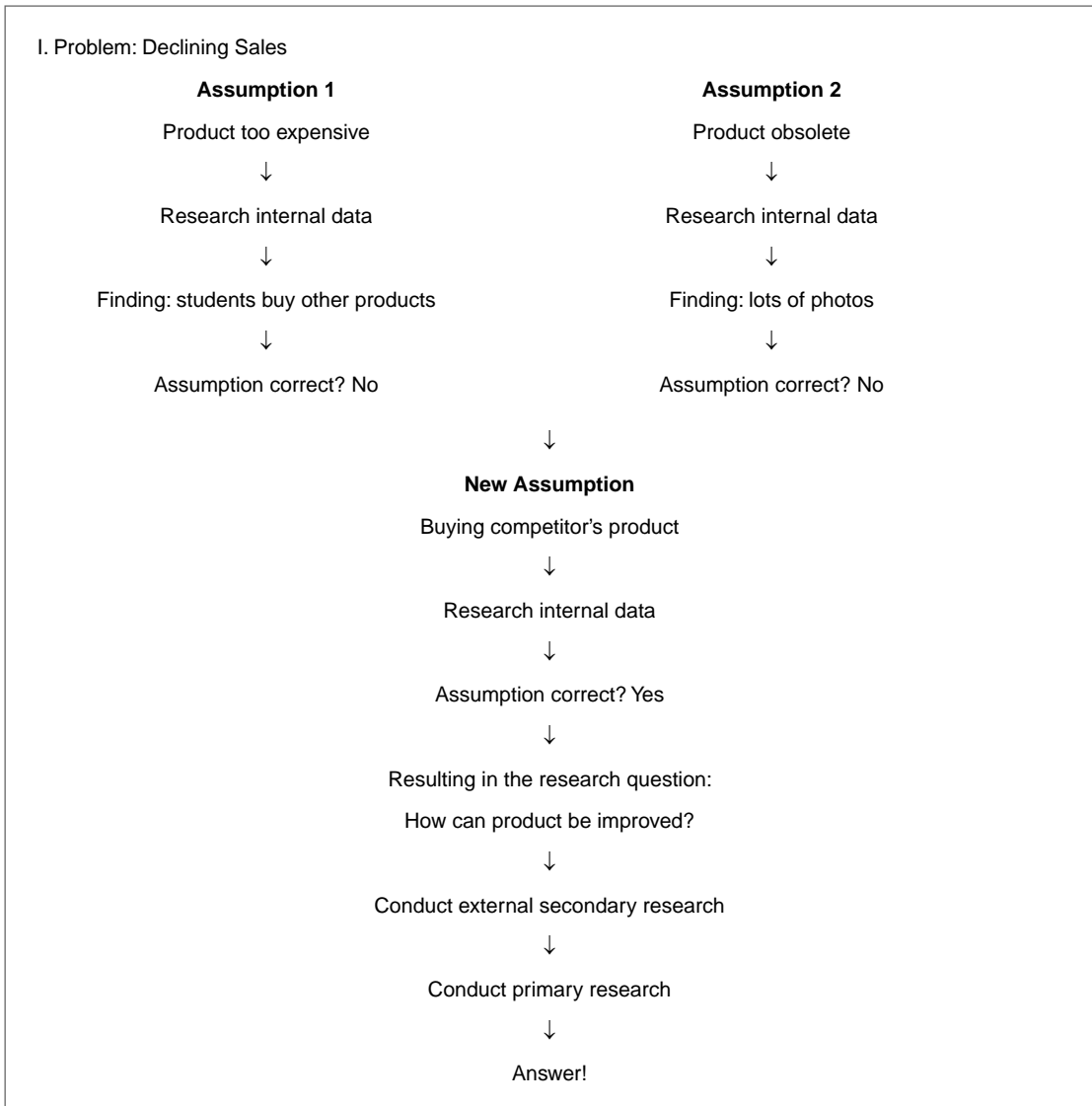


Figure 3.1 Critical thinking as part of the research process

Yet even when assumptions as to the cause of a problem are correct, critical thinking skills must still be used when deciding what research is needed. The next step for the coffee shop owners here would be to plan research to decide what action to take to counter the competitive threat.

For example, the owners might have a number of ideas on how to counter the threat, which could include lowering prices or increased promotion. The problem is that the owners will not know which idea might work. In this case, research on how other coffee shops have responded to competition should be conducted before a plan of action is devised.

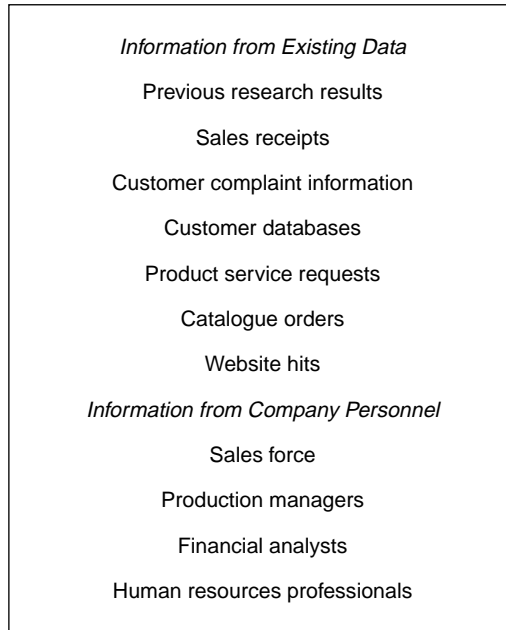


Figure 3.2 Sources of Internal Secondary Data

After checking with other local coffee shops, the owners may find that more than one idea can be used to successfully regain customers. However, the owners may only have enough resources to implement one idea. If this is so research would be needed to confirm which approach would motivate the most consumers to return from Starbucks.

3.3 Obtaining Internal Secondary Data to Help in Critical Thinking

Information which is internal to a company will be needed during the critical thinking process to challenge assumptions and to help define problems. Figure 3.2 above provides a summary of sources of internal data. Rather than searching for the 'right' answer to a question, at this point in the process a researcher should realize that there may be several right answers, parts of which must be integrated into the final answer (Martin, 2007).

Researchers can obtain existing information by analyzing internal company data. In addition, they can interview company personnel who have relevant information about the problem. All companies have at least some available data that can be used by researchers. For example, data gathered together in useable form as the result of previous research may already exist. The marketing department in a larger company usually routinely conducts consumer research when developing new products or new promotion campaigns. These research data would be kept in a marketing information database in order that they would then be available to assist in answering future research questions.

Also available to the researcher are raw data that come from other departments in a company. For example, even small companies have sales receipts that researchers can use to learn where their customers live. In addition, customer complaint forms will provide useful information on product improvement ideas. A company's financial records will also give information on sales activity by time period and region. If a company is large enough to have a customer database, the data it contains will provide information on customers' purchase habits. Data on product service requests can provide insights as to possible design problems, while catalogue orders display information on customers' geographic location. Finally, website hits will let a company know how many people are accessing the information. In fact, companies may have a significant amount of internal data already that could be analyzed as discussed in the box below.

COLLECT YOUR OWN INTERNAL DATA!

Of course, a marketing department can find out how satisfied customers are with a company and its employees by looking at the customer complaints that have been logged. However, these are only the customers who have bothered to complain. There are additional ways that could be recommended to collect data.

Market researchers can call this company's own 800-number line and ask for assistance. Are they greeted warmly? Could the employee answer their question? Did they hang up satisfied with the help they received?

Another way to collect internal data is for the marketing department to regularly check this company's website. Is it well designed? Does it provide the needed information or are the information and links out-dated?

These actions will provide researchers with a bit more internal data that could help determine the cause of such problems as declining sales.

Source: Donath, 2004

3.3.1 Obtaining existing internal data from people

There will also be company employees with information that will be useful to researchers. Which employees researchers speak with is partly determined by the nature of the problem. If a company is faced with the problem of falling sales revenue, there may be a variety of departments within that company that will have employees who should be interviewed. For example, interviewing someone in the finance department to provide an analysis of revenue figures may answer the question of whether the decline in sales has been a reoccurring phenomenon or is a surprising event after years of increased sales.

The production department may be able to provide information on any changes in a product's quality. Staff should be able to answer questions such as if they believe any changes in the production process have affected sales. The human resources department might not be the first port of call for researchers, but they also might be able to provide necessary information. Their staff should be able to answer questions such as whether the increasing difficulty of hiring good sales personnel has negatively affected sales. The sales force can be a wonderful source

Table 3.1 Information from company employees

<i>Department</i>	<i>Possible question</i>
Finance	Has sales revenue fluctuated seasonally or yearly in the past?
Purchasing	Has there been any change in the raw materials used in production that has affected quality?
Production	Have new manufacturing procedures affected product quality?
Human Resources	Has there been a difference in the education level and abilities of company personnel hired?
Salespeople	Have any new market segments been purchasing the product and if so why?

of information. They can be asked if they have noticed any changes in the purchasing habits of the consumer segment that usually purchases the product. Table 3.1 above provides examples of possible questions that could be asked.

3.3.2 Conducting internal interviews

Gathering information from internal sources should be handled in the same professional manner as conducting research outside of an organization. The researcher who is conducting interviews should prepare beforehand a set of questions that need to be asked. The answers should be carefully noted during the interview for later analysis and reference. To prevent any confusion if it is necessary to go back for additional information, the researcher should record the name and title of the interviewee and also the date and time of the interview.

Besides gathering facts, the researcher should also use the interview questions to learn more about what the company employee feels is the reason for the problem. If an employee gives more than one reason, they should be asked to prioritize these as to importance. Once the most important problem has been decided upon, the researcher should then ask the employee why they believe this is true and what evidence or insight led them to this conclusion. Asking for concrete examples of the problem that they have experienced in their department will also help to clarify the issue at hand. Finally, asking the interviewee if they would recommend anyone else that should be spoken with could assist in uncovering additional useful information.

3.3.3 Deciding not to conduct additional research

Conducting market research takes time, costs money and uses staff resources. There are occasions when a marketing researcher will recommend that research is not conducted. It may be that initial discussions with internal personnel regarding an issue have provided enough information to correct a problem. Perhaps such a problem resulted merely from a breakdown in communication flow within an organization. While this is certainly a problem that must be addressed, it is not one that needs research to be undertaken by a marketing department.

Another reason for research not being conducted is when answering the question will cost more than the problem. A company that produces backpacks in black only might plan a \$5,000 research project on what other colors consumers might prefer. However, the sales department may estimate that offering the product in various colors will result in an increase in sales of only \$3,000. In this case the additional revenue exceeds the cost, and the study should not be conducted.

3.4 Determining the Research Question

Writing a research question that clearly states the problem to be researched takes considerable thought. Since this question is the rationale for the all research that will be conducted, it is well worth the effort to make sure that this question is focused on the correct problem. In addition, a research question will need to address what current or potential consumers will need to be asked to learn more about a problem. A well written research question will make planning the remainder of the research study much easier. Table 3.2 below provides examples of the relationship between type of organization, specific problems and the resulting research questions.

Table 3.2 Examples of problems and research questions

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Problem</i>	<i>Question</i>
Large corporation	Declining market share	What new product should we introduce to motivate purchases by older consumers?
Small business	Reduced marketing budget	What is the best way to communicate our marketing message to college students?
Government	Increased demand for recreational facilities	Who are the users of our parks and playgrounds?
Non-profit organization	Decline in funding	Who are our contributors and why do they donate?
Business start-up	Determining location	Who are our customers and where do they live and shop?

3.4.1 Decision-making process

When conducting internal research, researchers may uncover many different possible research questions that could be asked. The following three-step decision-making process of writing, prioritizing and choosing based on cost/benefit analysis can help to clarify which research questions should be asked. To begin with, after gathering information from internal data and people, a marketing researcher will state the general problem that needs to be addressed. Researchers will then write down possible research questions that address the issue.

After this has been done, a researcher will prioritize the relevant possible research questions that have been discovered through internal research. Nearly all problems are complex and there will be more than one insight that could be researched. For example, the problem of declining purchases of carbonated soft drinks by young consumers could give rise to a research question addressing the effectiveness of a company's current promotion campaign. Another suggested research question might address the packaging of a product, while a third might suggest that price is the issue a research question should focus upon.

Researchers now analyze the potential benefits of the data that would be obtained from those questions that have been prioritized as most important versus the cost of the research. The cost of conducting a research study includes not only financial costs but also staff resources and time. Some of the financial costs of research will include the money spent on determining appropriate participants and designing a research instrument. Actually conducting the research will involve such financial costs as distributing survey forms, making phone calls, hiring specialized staff, paying participants and conducting focus groups. In addition, if staff do not have the specialized skills required, they will face the expense of hiring extra staff.

All this activity also takes up staff time which in turn cannot be devoted to other marketing tasks and responsibilities. A research project can take a significant time commitment – anywhere from weeks to months to complete. Only after taking all these financial and staff factors into consideration, are researchers ready to decide which research question an organization should address.

3.4.2 Purpose of the research question

Good research starts with data, which are turned into information to provide companies with the knowledge they need to solve problems. Researchers must always remember that research is conducted for the purpose of solving a company's problems. For research to be useful researchers must have an understanding of companies needs, and not just a knowledge of research methodology (see box below).

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE COMPANY

'The thing is, practically everybody who's not actually in research and of research is talking about how research is broken'. This quote was the result of a reporter's attendance at the 2004 American Association of Advertising Agencies Media Conference. What did he mean by broken? The consumer marketplace is increasingly complex because of the many means of reaching consumers. How and where consumers receive marketing messages has become extremely fragmented. Because of this it is difficult for researchers to track where consumers have heard a particular marketing message.

Researchers, therefore, are not able to provide the knowledge that companies need to understand the effectiveness of their promotional campaigns. The reporter argued that many research companies are so busy competing with each other by touting their own specialties that they do not take the time to understand what companies need.

Source: McManus, 2004

To provide the necessary information it is important to have the right research question stated correctly. The research question may be stated in either an interrogative or declarative style. An interrogative research question identifies the information needed in question form: for example 'What type of media is the best means to communicate promotions to college age males?' A declarative research question identifies the information needed as a statement: for example 'The purpose of this research is to determine the best media to use when communicating promotions to college age males'. Either form can be used as the start of a research proposal.

3.4.3 Research questions and research approaches

Research issues may be expressed with questions that start with 'Why?' or 'How?', such as 'Why have young people stopped purchasing our soft drinks?' or 'How can we use online promotion to regain our market share of young soft drink consumers?'. These will most likely result in an exploratory research approach that is qualitative. This is because researchers do not have enough

information to state the question more narrowly. Therefore, they may anticipate that many different answers from participants will result and that the answers may vary greatly.

Research issues may also be expressed with questions that start with ‘What?’, ‘Who?’ or ‘How many?’. Questions such as ‘What is the most popular sport among university students?’, ‘Who is the purchase decision maker in families when a new auto is bought?’ and ‘How many consumers will prefer to have our product sold online?’ are all questions that will result in descriptive, quantitative research. Researchers should never first decide the type of research methodology and then phrase the question to justify its use. Instead, the research methodology should be determined by the type of question.

3.4.4 Writing the question

For both quantitative and qualitative studies, the question itself needs to be as narrowly defined as possible. To do so, researchers must define who, where, what, when and how as will be used in the question (shown in Table 3.3 below).

Table 3.3 Defining the research question

Who?	Describe the participants who will take part in the research by demographic, psychographic and usage characteristics
Where?	The geographic location of current or potential consumers or the area of product sales
When?	The time frame of the behavior under study
What?	A specific description of the product
Why?	The attitude or motivation of concern to researchers
How?	The proposed actions that could be undertaken by the company

This includes whose behavior is of concern to the researchers. For example, the question as to why young consumers are purchasing less soft drinks could be improved by defining what age group is meant by ‘young’ consumers. They also must decide if they want this information on all young consumers or only those from a certain income level.

Researchers should also be concerned about where the behavior under study is taking place. For example, they must decide if they mean all young consumers nationally or only those living in urban areas. The geographic area might also be defined by where the product is sold. In the case of company expansion, the area might also be where a product will be sold in the future.

Researchers must also establish the time frame for the behavior that is being studied. For example, the research question might ask about changes in behavior in the last month, year or longer. In addition, researchers must define what products they are studying. For example, are they interested in sales of all of a company’s soft drink products, or only a certain brand, package style or size? The question could be rephrased as, ‘Why are sales of our fruit flavored soft drinks declining among young, single females, aged 18–24, living in metropolitan areas, and who are financially independent from their families?’ The question could be further improved by more clearly defining the ‘Why?’ in the above question. It could be clearly stated as ‘due to increased concern about healthy eating’. Of course, this may not be possible if the researchers have not been able to come to this conclusion before the start of the research process.

The question of ‘How can we regain our market share of young soft drink consumers?’ also needs to be stated more specifically because there can be so many possible means to regain market share. The means could include price decreases, packaging changes, product enhancements or new promotional campaigns. Most companies will not have the resources to plan and conduct primary research to answer all of these questions. The final decision on which question

to research will be based on analyzing the benefits of the research versus the cost. After considering these factors, the final question could be restated as ‘What type of promotional message will motivate purchase of our fruit flavored soft drink by health conscious females, aged 14–18, living at home in suburban areas, over the next year?’ Sometimes who should be the focus of the question will change over time (see box below).

MOMS RESEARCH WHAT MOMS WANT

Marta Loeb started Silver Stork Consultancy because there was little market research on moms. Loeb, a mom herself, believed that since the US birthrate was at a 30-year high in the 2000 census, it was time for companies to pay attention to what moms need in products, by using what she calls ‘mom intelligence’.

She finds this information by employing 12 independent researchers and consultants, most of whom are also mothers. In addition, a network of 3,000 working and non-working moms is paid to hold focus groups in their homes.

The approach works because moms speak the same language and can emotionally connect. This helps provide better information on what moms want to companies who produce products aimed at the mom market.

Interestingly, moms have found that dads are just as involved in family life, with 80 per cent stating they are involved in purchasing the items used daily in the homes. So Silver Stork now calls itself a ‘family-focused’ research company.

Source: Sutherland, 2004; Frukhtbeyn, 2005

There are general rules that should be remembered when a research question is written. First, the question should be an assertion of fact on which the researcher takes a side. It should not be stated in vague terms such as ‘The reason for declining sales may be a lack of promotion’. The purpose of the research will be to determine if it is, or if it isn’t. Therefore the researcher must decide which way to state the question – but it can’t be both ways.

In addition, the researcher must state the question so that it argues only one point of fact. The question ‘Are sales declining because of a lack of promotion or because of increased competition?’ is actually two research questions. Different methodologies and different research participants may be needed for each. Thus if the researcher tries to combine them, the research may answer neither question.

Lastly, a research question must pass the ‘So what?’ test. Does the question generate enough interest from management that they will be willing to approve the research? The answer must lead to a recommendation that will either significantly increase revenue or decrease expenses, or it will not be approved.

Research questions can be developed for any component of the marketing mix and, also, the target market segment and consumer behavior. Table 3.4 below provides examples of research questions that could be asked for each component of the marketing mix.

Table 3.4 Sample research questions

Target market	What is the consumer demographic profile most likely to purchase our product? What target market segments are aware of our brand name? Should we expand internationally by selling in Europe?
Buyer behavior	What is the frequency of purchase of our shampoo for sports enthusiasts? Do our teenage customers show brand preference or purchase based on price? What uses do women with families have for baking soda?
Pricing	Will raising the price of our basic product 5 per cent negatively affect sales? Are younger consumers aged 14–18 less sensitive to price changes? Will parents aged 25–40 prefer lower quality if it means lower prices?
Product	What new design features do our older consumers want on sinks and lavatories? Should the company produce a pocket-size version of our product aimed at the ‘tween market? Will demand among children for our toy trucks increase more than 10 per cent over the next year?
Promotion	What automotive sales approach results in the most repeat sales to single women aged 20–25? Are purchases by rural consumers with medium income affected by positive company publicity? What advertising media reaches our suburban male target market segment?
Distribution	What is the best location in Williamsport for our new store? Will importing our product, rather than using local production, hurt sales among families? What is the optimal shelf location in the supermarket for our new breakfast product?

Summary

- 1 Too often organizations will start research without critically thinking through the problem that they are confronting. As a result an organization will make a faulty assumption about the cause of a problem and the wrong research question will be asked. If the wrong question is asked the data will not be helpful to the company. The time and expense of conducting research will have been wasted. Therefore marketing researchers must carefully think through all possible causes of a problem.
- 2 Following the three-step critical thinking process will help researchers challenge commonly held assumptions to ensure that when the research question is written it will focus on finding an answer to the appropriate problem. The first step is to identify such commonly held assumptions. These should then be challenged on the basis of internally obtained data. Finally, if the assumptions are proved false, new ideas as to the cause of the problem should be generated.
- 3 To be able to challenge assumptions, the researchers need to gather as much internal company information from the data and people as possible. They can obtain this data from sources such as sales receipts, databases and service requests. They can also interview company personnel in production, sales, and human resources to better understand how each department views the problem.
- 4 After gathering internal information the researchers will be ready to write the research question. Because the process of gathering internal information may result in more than one research question, the researchers should use the decision-making process to assist in deciding which of these to pursue. The research question that will be used to obtain this knowledge can be written as a question or as a statement, but should be as clear as possible as to what data are needed. It must also clearly define the research problem.

Key Terms



assumption fact that is believed to be correct without outside proof

critical thinking process of identifying pre-existing assumptions, challenging these assumptions and exploring new ideas

decision-making process method of prioritizing when there is more than one solution to a problem by obtaining information, stating the general problem, prioritizing possible research questions, and analyzing the benefits versus the costs of each

internal secondary information data that the company already possesses that can help define the research problem

research question what the company needs to know to solve a problem and the basis for a research study

Discussion Questions

- 1 You are presented with the general problem of declining sales at a small company manufacturing gourmet cookware. What are the steps you would take in the process of trying to determine the research question?
- 2 Why is the critical thinking process when developing in the research question so important?
- 3 Why might a researcher face opposition when she or he challenges assumptions that are held by most company employees?
- 4 Why is developing the research question the most important step in the research process?
- 5 When might it be acceptable not to proceed to primary research after conducting internal secondary research?
- 6 If you were working for a community organization that sponsors basketball leagues for youth and were presented with the problem of decreased participation, what types of internal information should you analyze?
- 7 How would you describe the difference between internal and external secondary data?
- 8 What would be an appropriate research question to use to determine which sports should be offered by your school?
- 9 Give an example of a research question that the local Red Cross organization could use to determine why blood donations are declining. Now state the research question in both an interrogative or declarative style.
- 10 Under what circumstances is not conducting research the right decision?

Recommended Reading



Dewey, John (2007) *How We Think*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. This reprint of a classic book addresses the issue of how people use information to solve problems.

Fitzgerald, Stephen P. (2002) *Decision Making*. Oxford: ExpressExec. This is an interesting book that covers the various ways that a business can make decisions. The steps from contemplation to implementation are discussed.

Lewis, H.W. (2003) *Why Flip a Coin? The Art and Science of Good Decisions*. New York: Barnes and Noble. The book explains the various ways that decisions can be made scientifically and does so without using mathematics.

Robinson, W.P. (2006) *Arguing to Better Conclusions: A Human Odyssey*. Lawrence Erlbaum. Why do people stick to false assumptions when the evidence is contrary to their belief? This book will explain the reasons using communication, language and thinking.

Thayer-Bacon, Barbara (2000) *Transforming Critical Thinking: Thinking Constructively*. Columbia: Teachers College Press, Columbia University. While mainly written for those in education, this book's examination of the thinking and decision-making process is useful for any reader.