

1. Introduction to marketing research: Scientific research approach and Problem definition

Chapter summary

The chapter will provide understanding towards the nature and scope of marketing research and the scientific process involved. It will also discuss the role of research in designing and implementing successful marketing programmes. It will explain the role of marketing research in marketing information systems and decision support systems and provide the conceptual framework of marketing research process. This chapter will also explain the process of defining a problem in marketing research and its importance. It will focus on describing the tasks involved in defining a marketing research problem and also explain in detail the nature and content of various components of a defining a correct problem. The chapter will help gain understanding of practitioners' view of marketing research and the complexities involved in the overall process of marketing research. At last, the chapter will focus on the issues marketing research cannot deal with and why decision makers need to be cautious when interpreting results of marketing research.

1.1 Introduction

Broadly defined, the purpose of research is to answer questions and acquire new knowledge. This process of asking and answering question which in turn assists us in acquiring new knowledge (or in simple terms the process of research) is often viewed as the pillar of scientific progress in any field. Research is the primary tool used in virtually all areas of science to expand the frontiers of knowledge. For example, research is used in such diverse scientific fields as psychology, biology, medicine, physics, and botany, to name just a few of the areas in which research makes valuable contributions to what we know and how we think about things. Among other things, by conducting research, researchers attempt to reduce the complexity of problems, discover the relationship between seemingly unrelated events, and ultimately improve the way we live.

Although research studies are conducted in many diverse fields of science, the general goals and defining characteristics of research are typically the same across disciplines. For example, across all types of science, research is frequently used for describing an event, discovering the relationship between two or more events, or making predictions about future events. In short, research can be used for the purposes of description, explanation, and prediction, all of which make important and valuable contributions to the expansion of what we know and how we live our lives.

In recent years, the results of various research studies have taken centre stage in the popular media. No longer is research the private domain of research professors and scientists wearing white lab coats. To the contrary, the results of research studies are frequently reported on the local evening news, the Internet, and various other media outlets that are accessible to both scientists and non-scientists alike. For example, in recent years, we have all become familiar with research regarding the effects of stress on our psychological well-being and work-life balance issues, the health benefits of a low cholesterol diet, which automobiles are safest to drive, and the damaging effects of pollution and climate change. We may have even become familiar with research studies regarding the human genome, the Mars Land Rover, the use of stem cells, and genetic cloning. Not too long ago, it was unlikely that the results of such highly scientific research studies would have been shared with the general public to such a great extent and the consumers would be aware of such phenomenon and would have a viewpoint on the same.

A widely quoted definition of marketing was proposed by the American Marketing Association (AMA) in 1985 that “marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives”. The definition was modified further in 2004 by stating that “marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders”. The marketing concept requires that customer satisfaction rather than profit maximization be the goal of an organization. In other words, the organization should be consumer oriented and should try to understand consumers' requirements and satisfy them quickly and efficiently, in ways that are beneficial to both the consumer and the organization. This means that any organization should try to obtain information on consumer needs and gather marketing intelligence to help satisfy these needs efficiently. Research would be the fundamental tool to achieve that efficiency and effectiveness.

The complexity in the marketplace has increased many folds in recent years and related decision making also has got complex by the day. This dynamism of the market affects marketing continuously because of the continuous change in the external environment. The decision maker is finding it difficult to take decision in today's environment because of such changes. For example, external factors like changing character of the market, growing concern for environmental quality, emergence of activist consumerism groups, increase in competition, growing shortage of raw materials, volatility of the political relationships, rapidly changing technology and shift in international economy power give rise to the growing difficulties in making efficient marketing decisions.

As these complexities in market increase, the decision makers feel increasing need for understanding the market and its players be it customers, suppliers or any other stakeholder. Managers must know who their customers are, what they want, what their competitors are doing, if they are to make sound decisions.¹ Due to the increase in complexity each right or wrong decision may cost company a fortune.

1.2 Marketing Research

Marketing research is a critical part of such marketing decision making; it helps in improving management decision making by providing relevant, accurate, and timely information. Every decision poses unique needs for information, and relevant strategies can be developed based on the information gathered through marketing research in action. Too often, marketing research is considered narrowly as the gathering and analyzing of data for someone else to use. However, firms can actually achieve and sustain a competitive advantage through the creative use of market information generated by marketing research. Hence, marketing research is defined as information input to decisions, not simply the evaluation of decisions that have been made. Market research alone, however, does not guarantee success; the intelligent use of market research is the key to business achievement. A competitive edge is more the result of how information is used than of who does or does not have the information.

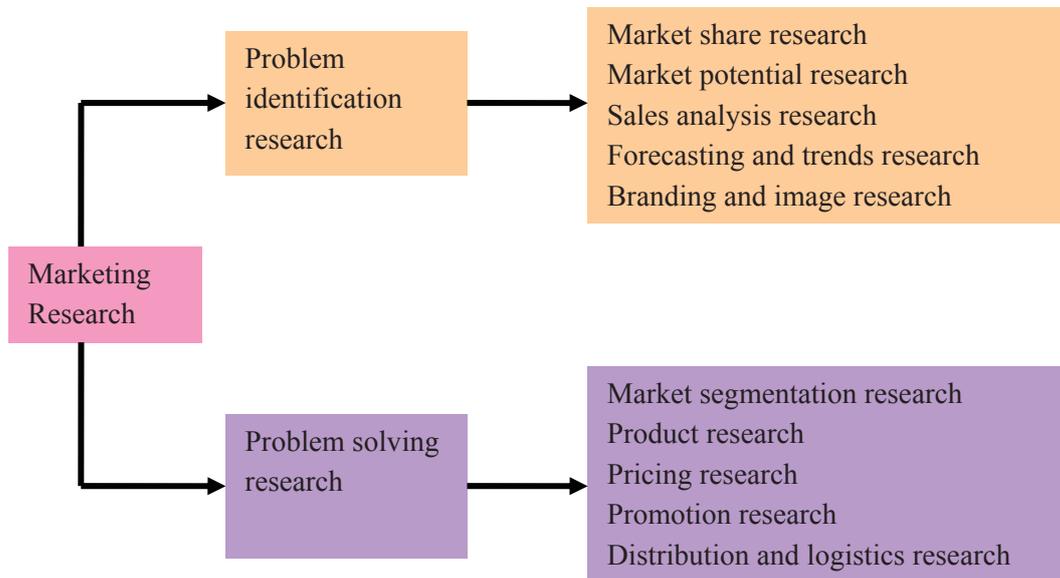
1.2.1 The need for marketing research

As stated above understanding customers and more importantly identifying who they are, what they want in terms of products or services, how and where they want it to be available and delivered and at what price they will purchase it are some of the most important decision criteria a manager must be aware of. However, due to the globalised and very complicated system of branch offices, wholesalers, and retailers a barrier is created between managers and their widely scattered consumers. Therefore, most managers are far removed from their customers – the individuals who in the final analysis determine success or failure of an organization.²

Organizations worldwide lose half their customers every five years. But most managers fail to address that fact head-on by striving to learn why those defectors left.³ More than two – thirds of organizations fail to satisfy superior customer needs because their perceptions of what their customers really want are far from reality.⁴ It is not because they don't care about the customer's needs; but they try to reach the wrong end with the wrong mean. More often than not, companies conduct research to learn what went wrong. After – the –fact research is the most common type of research in world.⁵

From the above discussion it can be observed that, marketing research can help organizations in various decision making processes which can be put into two separate strands; (a) problem identification research and (b) problem solving research. The problem identification research is undertaken to help identify problems that are not necessarily apparent on the surface and yet exist or likely to arise in the future. On the other hand, problem solving research is undertaken to help solve specific research problems. The figure below provides classification of problem identification and problem solving research.

Figure 1.1:
Classification of marketing research



Adapted from Malhotra, N. (2004), Marketing research: An applied orientation, Pearson Education, New Jersey.

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Classifying marketing research aids our understanding from theoretical as well as practice perspectives. However, there are no water-tight compartments between these two strands of research. A research project may involve both problem identification and a problem solving research simultaneously.

For example, a research project focusing on consumers' preference of green tea in the UK provided results on the following:

1. Analysis of market trends as well as global production of green tea, and the growing importance of green tea in comparison to black variants and UK green tea consumption with forecasts to 2007. (Problem identification research)
2. The key health benefits attributed to green tea and awareness of such benefits among various consumer groups according their age, gender, income class and such other demographics. (Problem solving research)
3. Profiles of more than 30 tea players offering green tea in the UK market. (Problem identification research)
4. Consumer choice process and preferences in buying tea and related products. (Problem solving research)

The example demonstrates that a single marketing research can encompass both problem identification and problem solving research. Furthermore, the research process involving both these research strands is common in nature.

1.2.2 Marketing research defined

The European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) defines marketing research as follows:

Marketing research is a key element within the total field of marketing information. It is the consumer, customer and public to the marketer through information which is used to identify and define marketing opportunities and problems; to generate, refine and evaluate marketing actions; and to improve understanding of marketing as a process and of the ways in which specific marketing activities can be made more effective.

Marketing research specifies the information required to address these issues; designs the method for collecting information; manages and implements the data collection process; analyses the results; and communicates the findings and their implications.

There are several aspects of this definition which are important in understanding marketing research as well as its role in the real life environment. Firstly we need to note that marketing research is one of the key elements of the total marketing information domain. That means there are other key elements also which help in decision making process and marketing research is not the only element which can assist in the overall process.

We also need to understand the focus provided on all the players involved in the market: Customer (a person who buys the product or services) the consumer (a person who consumes the product or services) and the public (an individual or group who is directly or indirectly affected by the buying or consumption of the product or services). Marketing research provides information regarding all these players to the manager using which the manager can make the right decision which create win-all situation.

Furthermore, we can also observe the way in which marketing research can assist a manager in decision making. Marketing decisions involve issues that range from fundamental shifts in the positioning of a business or the decision to enter a new market to narrow tactical questions of how best to stock a grocery shelf. The context for these decisions is the market planning process, which proceeds sequentially through four stages; situation analysis, strategy development, marketing program development, and implementation.⁶ During each stage, marketing research makes a major contribution to clarifying and resolving issues.

The definition also provides a clear understanding of how marketing research process takes place. The process is founded upon an understanding of the marketing decision needing support.⁷ The most important aspect here is to define a correct problem. Many times loosely defined problems lead to results which would not help in final decision making. For example, there could be hundreds of reasons behind a sales decline. If the manager defines the problem to be 'sales decline' the research will not lead to the correct identification of problem/opportunity. The manager has to provide further focus to the problem statement such as: what are the factors which lead to decline in sales?

If the problem is defined correctly the right kind of information can be gathered through employment of range of appropriate data collection methods. The data will then be analysed, interpreted and inferences will be drawn and finally the finding and their implications will assist the marketer in correct decision making.

The problems addressed by marketing research are as varied as its methods. Some of the most common include forecasting, buyer analysis, segmentation, choice processes and information processing as well as factor choice and testing.⁸ It is also interesting to note here that how marketing research differs in various situations. A consumer preference study regarding a new choice of soft drink may involve large sample surveys or experiments as well as employment of advance statistical methods. On the other hand, a study understanding the buying behaviour of consumers related to soft drink may involve a longitudinal study (a study carried out over a long period of time) or a consumer panel. Research in the developing nations is most likely to be a struggle to collect reliable data.^{9 10}

1.3 Scientific marketing research process

In the above discussion we observed how marketing research can assist managers in taking relevant decisions. However, the question here is that how the information required for the marketing research can be obtained? The question arises because much of the marketing information is difficult to come by, expensive to obtain and in case of emerging markets sometimes it does not even exist. Furthermore, the manager also would like to know the optimal process to find and utilize this information? In this section we will discuss about the scientific process of marketing research.

Before delving deep into the marketing research process there surely is a need to define the idea of scientific method and process. The development of the scientific method is usually credited to Roger Bacon, a philosopher and scientist from 13th century England; although some argue that the Italian scientist Galileo Galilee played an important role in formulating the scientific method. Later contributions to the scientific method were made by the philosophers Francis Bacon and René Descartes. Although some disagreement exists regarding the exact characteristics of the scientific method, most agree that it is characterized by the following elements:

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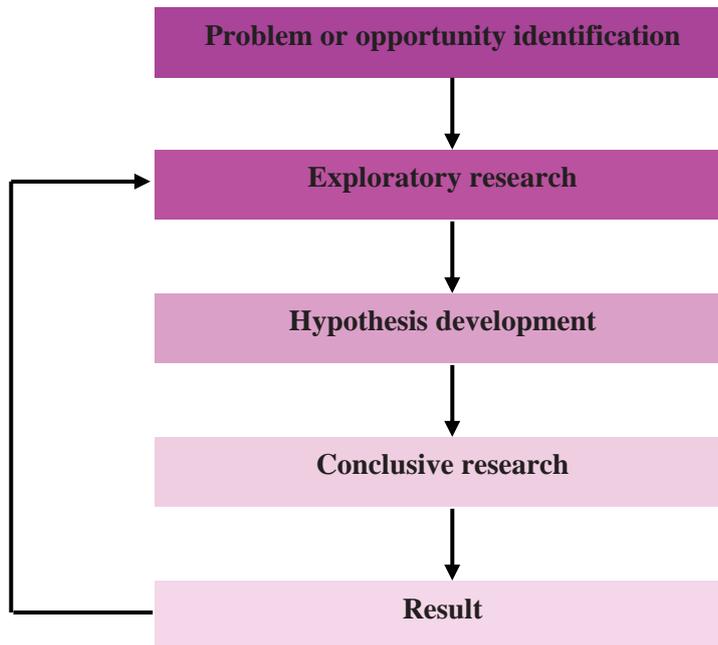
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There has been some disagreement among researchers over the years regarding the elements that compose the scientific method. In fact, some researchers have even argued that it is impossible to define a universal approach to scientific investigation. Nevertheless, for over 100 years, the scientific method has been the defining feature of scientific research. Researchers generally agree that the scientific method is composed of the above mentioned key elements.

Before proceeding any further, one word of caution is necessary. In the brief discussion of the scientific marketing research process that follows, there will be several new terms and concepts that are related to scientific marketing research process. Do not be intimidated if you are unfamiliar with some of the words in this discussion. The purpose of the following is simply to set the stage for the chapters that follow, and each of the term would explained in the later chapters of the book.

Most marketing research involves obtaining information from marketplace directly or indirectly and therefore the common ground is in the realm of method and technique. The scientific marketing research process can therefore be defined in five stages. (1) Problem or opportunity identification; (2) Exploratory research; (3) Hypothesis development; (4) Conclusive research and; (5) Result. Marketing research being a continuous process most times the results provide a new perspective but at the same time point towards further research required to improve the understanding of the dynamic marketplace. The process is explained figuratively in the figure below.

Figure 1.2:
The marketing research process



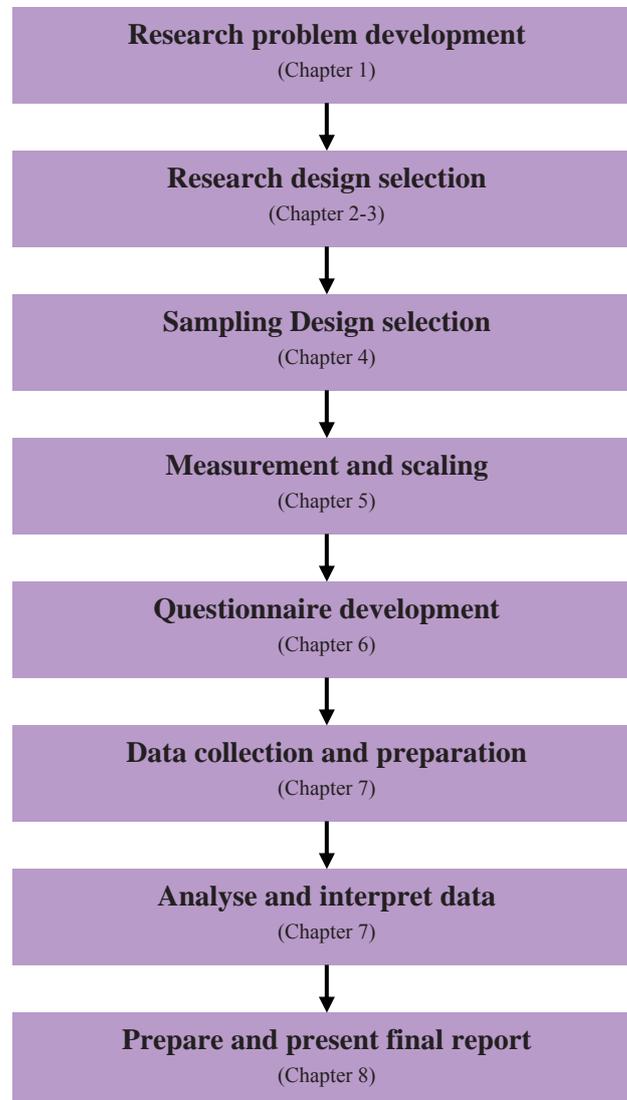
The problem or opportunity identification stage relates to managements' understanding of the market forces and interpretation. This will become the basis for the exploratory research which is conducted to explore and gather further insight and ideas specific to the problem or opportunity. Exploratory research is generally found to be qualitative. The exploration into the problem or opportunity will lead a researcher to ideas which can be further defined and measured quantitatively. This stage is called hypothesis development. The hypothesis is tested using the conclusive research through a larger sample size. Conclusive research tends to be largely quantitative. The conclusive research will lead to the final results which as stated earlier will lead to further exploration. We will discuss each of the above steps in details in coming chapters.

1.3.1 Phase wise marketing research process

Figure 2 above provides a brief illustration of the marketing research process from scientific perspective. However, to a novice research it would be difficult to understand how these can be actually conducted in the real life scenario. Figure 3 below explains the marketing research process implementation step by step.

Various researchers provide different diagrammatic explanation for the marketing research process. However, the implementation of marketing research project will largely follow the process mentioned in figure 3. At this juncture, it is also necessary to understand that in most instances researchers would follow the four phases in order, although, the individual steps may be shifted or omitted. We will discuss such issues in details in later chapters.

Figure 1.3:
Phase wise marketing research process



This book has been developed with the practical marketing research process in mind and so the chapter structure also follows the marketing research process structure. Chapter 1 focuses on the marketing research process and research problem identification from management dilemma. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on research design both exploratory and conclusive to create a blueprint of the research project. Chapter 4 deals with sampling as a phenomenon which is followed by a chapter on measurement and scaling (chapter 5). Chapter 6 will discuss questionnaire development in details followed by data collection and preliminary data analysis (chapter 7). The last chapter focuses on report preparation and presentation issues.

1.4 Defining a problem

Research in general is related to queries and queries arise when we observe some anomaly (or inconsistency). This anomaly can provide the basis for a problem or opportunity. Thus, defining a research problem or opportunity correctly is of major importance in any research. If the problem defined is not exhaustive the research may lead to incorrect or in some cases contrasting findings. In the following discussion we will touch upon the issue of how can correct problem definition be achieved and how it can enhance the chances of making the 'right' marketing decision?

1.4.1 The importance of defining a right problem

An old adage says, "A problem well defined is half solved". Defining a problem in general circumstance is not very hard as we keep on identifying right problems. Such as, while driving (Which way to drive? Not to change the lanes suddenly etc.), walking (Walking in a way without hitting any obstacle), eating (Eating food which we are comfortable with, Choice of places to eat, etc.), breathing (yes, even to breath or not to breath is a choice like, while underwater we define correctly that we should not breath without the right gear) and so on.

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We can answer such questions easily because every decision has a pattern involved in it. The simplest of decision situation can be characterized by the following condition:

1. A decision maker is operating in a set but dynamic environment in which there is a problem. (*underwater environment and breathing as a problem*)
2. There are at least two courses of action to choose from. (*breath or not to breath*)
3. Any of the choices made regarding the course of action will lead to two possible outcomes of that choice and the decision maker prefers one over the other. (*breathing: death by drowning; not breathing: bringing oneself on surface and survival*)
4. There is a chance, but not equal chance, that each course of action will lead to the desired outcome. If the chances are equal, the choice does not matter.¹¹

The decision situation and defining of problem may sound easy in most situations; however, problem definition becomes sticky in most business situations because both marketing managers and marketing researchers often flounder in answering several important questions. This is because the decision is not taken by a single person but generally by a team and so it is important to have agreement on various issues for defining a 'right' problem. Following are the questions which must be asked before a marketing research problem is identified.

1. Have the decision makers and researchers framed an initial question and looked at the alternatives clearly? Is there an agreement on the initial question and the alternatives among most participants?
2. Is there agreement on the basis for selecting one alternative over others? Have acceptable criteria been developed?
3. What consequences would a 'wrong' decision bring upon?
4. Is there a serious disagreement among the team members with regards to choice of research alternatives and their adoption?

If the answers to all four questions are yes, marketing research information is needed to reduce the chance of making the wrong decision. In most failed research exercises it is observed that the team members did not define the answers to the first two questions clearly. If the answer to question three leads to serious consequences and similarly in the case of question four serious disagreements among the team members are found the problem definition needs to be revisited. An example of the same is explained below.

1.4.2 Converting management dilemma into research question

One of the largest cinema chains in the UK faced with a problem of declining audiences. The team in the first meeting came up with the initial problem statement as 'to discover why cinema audiences are declining'. However, several members of the team were unhappy and stated that research into this problem will lead to vague answers and unimplementable results. An alternative statement of problem was developed 'to identify ways in which more people could be attracted to attend the cinema'.

Although the two problem statements look quite similar, the outcomes of the research defined after revision will be action oriented in the case of the findings of the second statement, which would not be possible with the general statement defined as the former problem statement. The problem defined at first might bring answers which are beyond the remit of influence for the cinema chain managers. For example, if people stated that the movies now a days are not matching their tastes, it can't be acted upon by the management of the chain. However, with the second research problem the management can reliably know what the people want from a cinema theatre and such improvements can assist the management in attracting more people towards the cinema.

The above example demonstrates the importance of defining the right problem and how it can have a huge effect on the outcome of any research. The major question facing most managers is how to convert a management dilemma into a researchable problem. In real life situation it is not hard to define a management dilemma, however, the difficult thing is to identify a single dilemma on which to focus. As discussed above, choosing a wrong or incorrectly defined management dilemma will result in waste of resources as well as may lead to wrong decisions costing further on the company's bottom-line. The figure below shows the process of formulating a research question out of management dilemma. It also provides the factors to be considered by a researcher in the process of developing research question.

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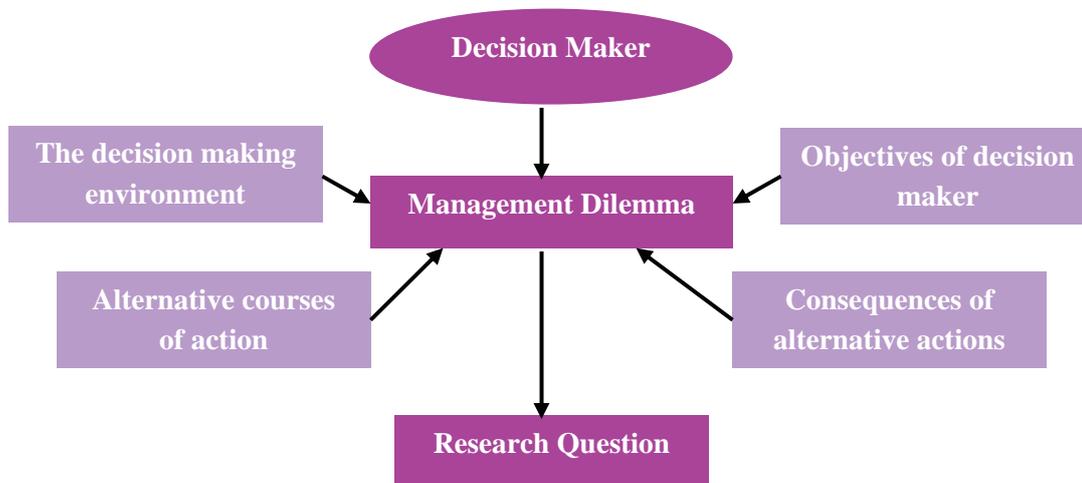
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Figure 1.4:
Process of developing research question



The above figure explains the process of developing a clearer research question. A manager when faced with a dilemma is surrounded by various elements of decision making namely: (1) The decision making environment; (2) Objectives of decision maker; (3) Alternative courses of action and (4) Consequences of alternative actions. If the research question is developed without keeping the above four elements in mind there are all chances that there would a bias in the early stage of the research which will carry itself further in the total process and may lead to wrong conclusion.

For example, a private radio station with declining listener numbers wanted to understand consumers' listening preferences and a team of researchers were asked to prepare a research proposal for the same. The entrepreneur in charge of the operations at the station stated to the researchers that he already knew what the consumers wanted and wanted the researchers to work on a project the way he had planned it.

The above situation is observed quite often in real life situations where the managers have already made up their mind regarding the research and its findings and so the research in such cases becomes a futile exercise. Being unbiased through the complete research project is one of the most important aspects of marketing research. Many times, real objectives of conducting the research are seldom exposed to the researcher (most to do with researcher being an outside organization and company not intending to divulge confidential information). Therefore, it becomes utmost important for the researcher to probe deeper and bring on surface the real objectives of the research. One effective technique for uncovering the objectives is to confront the decision maker with expected outcomes of the research and asking the decisive course of action from the decision maker.

Research can be properly designed only when the alternative course of action being considered are known. The more obvious course of action is generally provided to the researcher but it is the researcher's duty to probe deeper and find out other alternatives which are not being communicated by the decision maker. Quite often the researcher will not be informed of some of the options being considered. The researcher should check to see that all implicit options have been made explicit,¹² since it is important that the research be relevant to all alternatives. Researcher at times must adopt the role of detective in order to discover the hidden agendas and alternatives lurking beneath the surface in any decision situation.¹³ If a critical piece of information remains undiscovered, even the most sophisticated research techniques cannot solve the problem. In the case of the radio firm it was found later that the managers were forcing the researchers to conduct the research in a certain format as the plan was to sell of the business using the research results.

A great deal of marketing research is intended to determine the consequences of alternative course of action. To achieve success in the marketplace a decision maker has to continuously balance the strategy against the changing micro and macro environmental factors. Marketing research is undertaken by organizations to accurately assess the alternative courses of actions and provide support to the decision maker in the process of decision making. However, many times due to various market pressures an organization pursues a blinded version of marketing research without understanding the consequences of the same and could face trouble.

A detailed understanding of the decision making environment; objectives of the decision maker; alternative courses of action and consequences of alternative actions would enable researchers to translate the management dilemma into an accurate research problem.

1.5 What marketing research cannot do?

All the above discussion was focused on how marketing research can be effectively used in the real life marketing environment. However, this should not make one feel that marketing research can provide solutions to every management problem. If manager is uncertain of a market phenomenon and cannot find support at hand within the organizational knowledge pool, marketing research can assist in providing support and reduce the risk in taking an intuition based decision. However, many marketers recount cases where the use of marketing research has resulted in failure or where decisions based on gut feeling or intuition have proved to be successful.¹⁴ Given the above critique of marketing research, it is fair to point that there are cases where the use of marketing research has resulted in poor decision making or even failure. There are two areas of misconception of the role of marketing research.¹⁵

Marketing research cannot provide decisions. Marketing research's role is not to make decisions. Rather, marketing research gathers data on an uncertain and dynamic marketplace and rearranges it into a form which can assist the decision maker in understanding the phenomenon better and take good decisions on the basis of the same. Realistically, it has been observed that research recommendations are often used as a stepping stone for decision making after the appropriate approval is granted.

Marketing research cannot guarantee success. Marketing research at best can improve the odds of making a correct decision. Anyone who expects to eliminate the possibility of a failure by conducting marketing research is both unrealistic and likely to be disappointed. The real value of research however lies in the improvement of the long term decision making and improved bottom-line performance.

London's campaign to win the 2012 Olympics has been panned as being out of step with the British public and told that the effort might have had more success with 'Beat the French', rather than the 'Back the Bid' slogan says a report from ad agency Publicis. The report from Publicis highlights public petulance and impatience as an increasingly effective marketing tool. According to the report, 77% of British argue more, 44% enjoy ranting and a whopping 92% agree that more people are willing to say what they think rather than hold their silence, which has in the past been seen as a typical British consumer trait. The report goes on to say that through the act of petulance, consumers are reacting "against" not "for" things, demanding honesty and choice on their terms rather than being told what to do.¹⁶

The above mentioned example provides an interesting insight into what researchers said and what managers did. While researchers suggested for the London Olympic bid 2012 the public message to be 'beat the French' rather than 'back the bid' the managers kept the later message flowing and London won the bid for the 2012 Olympic.

1.6 Conclusion

Marketing is becoming a highly challenging task for the marketers in today's dynamic and ever changing environment. It is becoming more and more difficult for marketing managers to get the right products or services for the target consumers at the right place with a right price using the right promotion due to various internal as well as external forces prevailing within the organization and the market.

Marketing research provides a ray of certainty in the uncertain marketplace if the managers follow the marketing research process through the various phases of marketing decision making within the organization. It plays a key role in providing the information for managers to shape the marketing mix. Moreover, the interaction between the market researcher and manager also has to be focused upon and there must be a continuous interaction between both parties.

Defining a correct problem is an utmost importance task in conducting marketing research. If the team involved in marketing research project fails to define a correct research problem from the existing research dilemma there are chances that the research may lead to wrong conclusion which in turn can hurt a company's bottomline.

Scientific marketing research process which resembles with the decision making process also sometimes is misunderstood by managers as decision making tool itself. Marketing research should be used as a decision support tool. Furthermore, marketing research cannot guarantee success but it can reduce the chances of failure if used in correct manner.

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