



“The Hidden Costs of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Research”

In these days of instant information gratification (otherwise known as “Googling” or Wikipedia surfing), people are often tempted to use “DIY” marketing research to answer important questions about the market or their customers. With budgets becoming increasingly lean, short cuts that avoid the expense of hiring outside professionals look particularly enticing.

After many years of watching clients use results from a wide variety of research approaches, I’m convinced of the wisdom of basing important decisions and planning efforts on more than “gut reactions.” If nothing else, looking beyond your own opinions can give you insights into how well you know your market. If what you hear runs counter to your own “read” of the situation, it is even more important that you clearly understand why those differences are occurring.

PROCESS VS RESULTS

In deciding how to investigate an important issue or measure a critical aspect of a product or brand, those who are tempted to do their own research often already have a feeling for the process. That is, they may assume that they should “run a couple of focus groups” or “conduct a quick survey” to get at the information that they need. This comfort with the approach to the investigation of a topic can sometimes lead to results that reflect your expectations more than the reality you meant to study.

“Just because you can run a good sales meeting doesn’t mean you should moderate your own focus groups.”

Although most people in business can get some insights from people gathered together, there are distinct differences between facilitating a meeting and “moderating” a focus group. It has to do with the chemistry of the group dynamic (a moderator does not “lead” the discussion) and expectations that *are not created* among group members as to what the moderator wants to hear. (In fact, I would advise you to opt out of playing poker with a good moderator because of this ability to not be read!)

If you are too close to the question, without even being conscious of it, you may expect to hear certain reactions from respondents. This “filter” may mean you miss important information that sounds close to what you expect but have important distinctions that could get lost. A person who is knowledgeable about your topic but who does not have a stake in the outcome often hears a greater variety of reactions coming from the group setting. Also, this type of “third party” moderator is often seen as a person to whom group members can reveal their true feelings without censorship because they don’t have a vested interest in the outcome.

“Just because you can program the questionnaire with SurveyMonkey doesn’t mean respondents will answer the questions you think you are asking.”

There is a reason why cognitive testing has long been an important part of developing a questionnaire whether for academic pursuits or practical business use. The questions that we often think we are asking are not necessarily the ones that respondents hear. One of the most eye-opening experiences anyone who designs research can have is to listen to people describe their reactions to various questions after taking a survey. In some cases, respondents answer the question more literally than you might expect.

For example, research among children would be hilarious if you didn’t have to make important decisions based on the answers they give to what they thought you were asking. In a series of cognitive sessions conducted in the early 2000’s, the moderator asked children to agree or disagree to a series of statements about smoking. In response to the statement, “Smoking makes me look older” one child indicated that he didn’t know because he had no idea how old the moderator was ...



There is nothing like living through an analysis of data that, too late, you realize has been impacted simply because of the order questions were asked, the wording that was used or the way respondents were able to skip questions or read ahead before answering any question. Paying for the knowledge and skills of a professional who has lived through such disasters in the past often costs less than the lost value of the research being conducted today.

PROJECTABILITY

Even those who use research that is well-designed and executed can be attracted by the siren song of “quick and in-expensive” sampling methods. The questionnaire may be excellently crafted and the analysis based on both statistical testing and insightful examination but, you may still sacrifice more than you know depending on the sampling process you use. Unless every member of the population you want to measure has an equal chance of being included in your survey sample, results won’t be statistically projectable to the overall population. This is true regardless of the statements of error ranges and Confidence Levels that may be claimed. (These are not legitimate measurements if the sample is not statistically projectable.)

This is not to suggest that research must always use a projectable sample. Qualitative research is usually conducted with non-random populations and is well-known for providing valuable research results. The point I want to make is simply: *Know Thy Sample*. The best use of research results occurs when it is built on an understanding of the source of the information. Attaching statistical evaluations to the results of a study that is not based on a projectable sample is, at best, a misuse of the statistics and, worse, can possibly lead to the wrong conclusions.

Listening is Different than Asking

Let me make a final comment about using “new media” or social networks to get to know what your consumer is currently thinking instead of conducting more traditional types of research. This access to your customer base or market provides a wealth of insights. The idea that such information comes from *listening* rather than *asking* is an important distinction. It represents points of view and ideas that are most passionately held – the truth and sincerity of these opinions must be recognized. However, don’t fall into the trap of assuming that the insights gained from these sources are necessarily representative of all of your customers or the market as a whole. These are the comments of very specific segments of the market – perhaps your biggest fans, perhaps people you may have disappointed. Putting their opinions into perspective relative to who they represent is a critical element of benefitting from “listening” to them.

THE REAL COST

Taking responsibility for specific parts of a research project that you need to have conducted can be an excellent way to make your marketing and marketing research dollars go farther. If budgets are tight, it is often a better approach than skipping the research altogether. The important thing to remember, however, is to be mindful of the **source of your information** (the sample), the **assumptions you are making** as you design the questions you will ask or investigate and the **impact you or your staff may have on the information** as it is collected and analyzed.

A few hours of consultation from a professional trained and experienced in the type of research you seek can often be the difference between valuable insights and understanding at a moderate price and low cost research with questionable or compromised results.

For further information, contact:

Sue Black
SVP – Research & Design
sblack@gilmore-research.com

www.gilmore-research.com
800.573.4498

