



# Helping marketing research earn a seat at the table for decision-making

## An assessment and prescription for the future

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to help marketing research “earn a seat at the table” where managers and researchers make decisions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper describes approaches that can lead to the integration of marketing research with marketing decision making.

**Findings** – Marketing research needs to earn a seat at the table for decision making in most firms today. Over the years, a back-office, order-taker mentality has beset too many marketing researchers. As a result, the voice of the customer – what researchers should be bringing to managers’ decision making – is simply not heard.

**Originality/value** – In speaking to researchers and managers, the authors offer an improved conceptual structure for understanding the value of information and offer guidelines that will help marketing research’s integration into improved management decision making.

**Keywords** Market research, Decision making

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

While the total world’s spending for marketing/advertising/public opinion research services provided through commercial firms continues to grow and now exceeds \$20 billion in annual revenues (Honomichl, 2005), some have recently observed that the industry might actually be underachieving (Dubrow, 2005). Based on annual revenue, this entire industry would attain a rank of only 295 on the Fortune 500 list of global firms just behind Michelin (Fortune, 2005). The world’s top firm Wal-Mart posted more than 14 times this amount in the same year. If much more research could be done, why is not it?

One reason for marketing research’s possible underutilization might be that many managers do not include researchers to be part of their decision-making sessions. Huppertz (2003) asserts that marketing researchers have yet to claim their place at the corporate table where decisions are made. According to Dubof and Spaeth (2000, p. v), few researchers within the company or from outside the company are rarely invited to the table at which decisions are made by managers. One symptom of possible irrelevance can be seen when researchers strive to merely do the bidding of managers.



Industry leaders at the AMA's 2002 Annual Marketing Research Conference suggested that researchers have been wrapped up in executing the requests they receive from marketers – in other words, taking and filling orders (Huppertz, 2003).

Barabba and Zaltman (1991, p. 26) have described how client-side marketing researchers too frequently lapse into the role of a reactive order-taker for managers – the users of research. Such an exchange where the researcher asks the manager “what do you want?” is usually followed by the user asking “what do you have?”

Such an unproductive exchange discloses the researcher's penchant for not knowing the concerns of management. If the researcher should propose a technique-driven study in this case, this would only reinforce the negative perception that the researcher wants to gratuitously add complexity to the issues facing the firm.

The implication here is that the researcher needs to understand the current context for decision makers. This comes from scanning the business press, following developing stories, attending conferences within the industry, as well as conducting more focused research projects. In short, the researcher needs to be curious and to be one of the best learners in the firm (Malhotra, 1999).

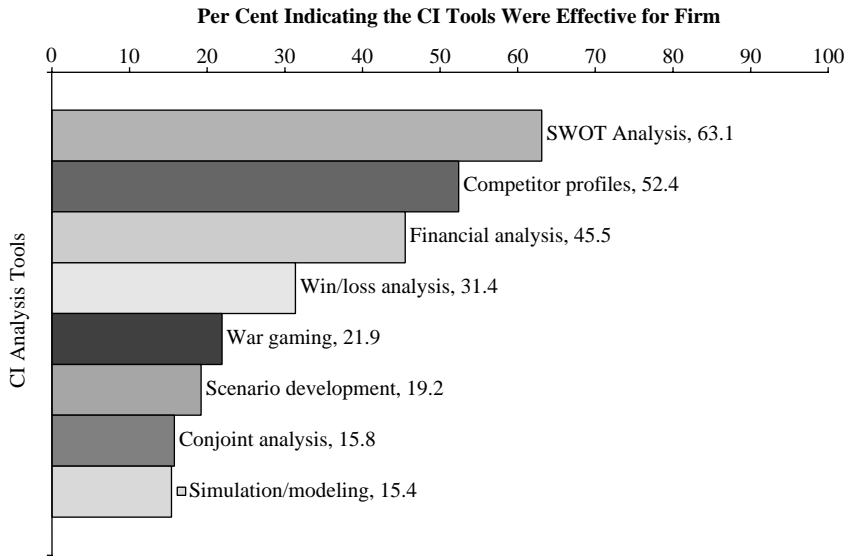
### **Improved learning from improved secondary data**

Today, researchers can learn like never before from secondary data sources. Secondary data sources are not only more cost effective than collecting primary data, but if chosen and analyzed right, they can meet much of the organization's needs for information. For example, scanner data about consumer packaged goods can provide cross-price elasticity estimates, responses to sales promotion, and shelf displays. Historical data obtained from within the company or from external sources can be used for conclusive rather than exploratory research as long as the data/product category is aligned with/suitable for the research problem at hand. Public-sector researchers routinely utilize such scanner data when conducting analysis about agriculture policy. Secondary data also plays a role now in conducting due diligence research about company strategic issues, such as proposed mergers (Lopez, 1999).

The proliferation of secondary data on the internet has enabled more companies to engage in competitive intelligence (CI) – the process of enhancing marketplace competitiveness through a greater – yet unequivocally ethical – understanding of a firm's competitors and the competitive environment (SCIP, 2005). Specifically, CI is the legal collection and analysis of information regarding the capabilities, vulnerabilities, and intentions of business competitors, conducted by using information databases and other “open sources” and through ethical inquiry.

CI enables senior managers in companies of all sizes to make informed decisions about everything from marketing, R&D, and investing tactics to long-term business strategies. Effective CI is a continuous process involving the legal and ethical collection of information, analysis that does not avoid unwelcome conclusions, and controlled dissemination of actionable intelligence to decision makers. CI is a crucial part of the emerging knowledge economy. By analyzing rivals' moves, CI allows companies to anticipate market developments rather than merely react to them.

Overall, CI has a greater strategic/marketing focus than a tactical/sales focus. As can be seen in the accompanying bar chart of Figure 1, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis was seen to be the most effective of the CI tools (Powell and Allgaier, 1998). Here, firm CI personnel would go through the



**Figure 1.**  
Effectiveness of CI  
analysis tools

SWOT analysis for rival firms. The results of such a SWOT analysis would be of keen interest to senior managers unless a similar study had already been recently shared. Additionally, composing a competitor profile was also seen to be a useful tool. Both of these leading CI tools involve an external focus on rival firms.

Secondary data sources can also be a solution when primary data collection is prohibitive due to its cost. This point is particularly relevant for cross-cultural marketing research (Malhotra, 2001). Rather than individual researchers collecting data on their own; we imagine that there will be an effort to create similar databases across different cultures/countries on an ongoing basis. Marketing research consortia may be an effective solution. This will enable the comparison of variables/data across different cultures and aid multi-national marketing research efforts. As marketing research firms across the globe consolidate, the formation towards global databases for marketing research would be expected.

### Beyond mere facts

Presenting “just the facts” will overwhelm managers with detail. Instead, marketing researchers desiring to provide high-impact research must strive to synthesize or grasp larger meanings emerging from their analyses. An extremely valuable concept for understanding how to increase the impact of marketing research is the information value chain. Researchers, such as Lurie (1999), as well as Lesh and Schmalensee (2004) have described the step-wise increase in value as data is imbued with more meaning. We elaborate further on how this value chain applies to marketing research. As shown in Figure 2, the gist of the information value chain is this: there is a progression in value for the user as data is rendered into information, and then into knowledge, then into decisions, and finally into what is needed to implement the decision (in other words, as one moves from left to right across the boxes of Figure 2).

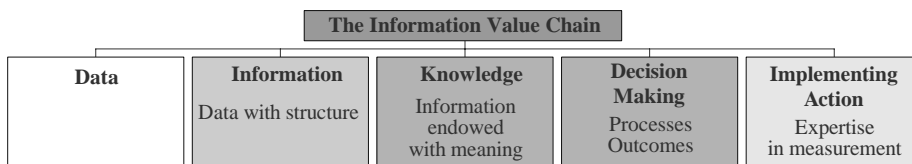
Using a spreadsheet analogy, each column of the spreadsheet would correspond to a separate question on a satisfaction survey. “Data” would correspond to the individual cell entries of the spreadsheet. “Information” would result from analysis of a more aggregated form of the cell entries, such as computing averages for each corresponding column. “Knowledge” would result from comparing these average values among themselves. Now, the information would be endowed with meaning, as the generally lowest rating and the highest rating could be identified. Richer knowledge would result from comparing the firm’s average ratings with the same ratings for a competing firm, or from comparing the firm’s current performance with its performance in the past (Malhotra and Peterson, 2006).

The information value chain for marketing research is a framework for understanding the potential relevance of research that could be shared with managers. For example, in the spreadsheet example cited earlier, managers would find a review of the cell entries in the spreadsheet as extremely tedious. If data with structure, such as averages for survey questions was shared with managers, this would be more worthwhile – but still tedious. If a comparison of the firm’s average ratings on customer satisfaction was made with the average ratings of a firm’s two major competitors, this would be much more worthwhile. “I don’t want researchers to deliver information,” Ocean Spray Cranberries CEO Thomas Bullock has said. “I want insights” (McManus, 1999).

However, this is not the end of creating value from data. Managers want the implications of new knowledge made clear. Making a concise recommendation to managers is needed, as well as a justification for this recommended course of action over other possible ones. By doing this, researchers now enter the realm of the decision maker. Here, decisions must be made about a future that is only partially visible to the manager. Pressure is part of this domain for managers, because the financial success or failure of the firm hinges on these decisions. Accordingly, the jobs of the firm’s employees or future employees also hinge on these decisions.

The stress associated with decision making can be intense. If one was able to look in the desk drawers of many managers, one would likely find anti-acid medicine, such as Maalox. The successful researcher needs to reduce stress for managers. The successful researcher needs to move into this pressure-filled realm and make concise and well-justified recommendations to management on what the firm should do next.

Lackluster researchers will concern themselves only with the “information” part of the information value chain for marketing research. In the information age, every manager is overwhelmed with information. Accordingly, more processing of the information to render concepts and bigger ideas is needed (Pink, 2005). The outstanding researchers will not only make reasoned recommendations to management, but will position their research team to bring measurement expertise to the evaluation of the unfolding results for implementing decisions. “Implementing action” is the final link in the information value chain for marketing research.



**Figure 2.**  
The information value chain

**Share risk with managers**

Marketing researchers can no longer be content with conducting research, crunching out numbers, and producing reports. Such a back-office mentality will only contribute to managers' unwillingness to welcome research and researchers into the decision-making process for the firm. To prove their worth, researchers need to ensure that the results they produce are actionable and acted upon. This requires active involvement in marketing management as well as marketing research. Therefore, marketing research is quickly evolving from a staff function to a line function (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001). Accordingly, risks for marketing researchers have increased.

Making recommendations to management brings risks, but is indispensable for taking a seat at the table where managers make decisions. Successful researchers make this part of their exchanges with managers. Recently, a veteran researcher for one of the major telecommunications firms in the US described the distinctiveness of researchers who will make recommendations to managers this way:

Researchers are the only junior people in the organization to be able to make strong recommendations to the CEO. In fact, I find that researchers are really the only people who will make clear recommendations when senior managers meet with the CEO.

One metaphor that captures the kind of risk taker that researchers need to become is the scout on the frontier of the Old West of the US. Kit Carson was one such scout (Roberts, 2000). He was noted for being unassuming, yet courageous, and for keeping his word ("His word was as sure as the sun coming up," according to one acquaintance). He traveled and lived extensively among the native Americans of the US in the first part of the nineteenth century. In 1842, Carson helped guide John C. Frémont to Oregon and California, and through much of the Central Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin. Carson did this by ranging ahead, and making sense of the topography, people, and weather conditions for Frémont – the commander of the expedition.

Like Kit Carson, the successful marketing researcher now needs to make sense of the territory or the issues facing the industry and the firm. As Carson understood Frémont's mission, so the marketing researcher needs to know his manager's strategic direction – what the firm's leaders are trying to accomplish, and how this is distinctive relative to other competing firms.

**Scouts stay ahead of the main group**

Not surprisingly, such scouts of the Old West did not ride with the main group. They rode ahead. Today, successful researchers should stay ahead and engage in timely exchanges with managers.

For the researcher, being concise in such exchanges is a key for successful communication. This applies to e-mail communication, as well as more formal presentations. Bruce Lervoog, President of Research International USA, says it is best to condense the entire e-mail message into the subject heading of the e-mail (Lervoog, 2003). One example of such a concise message from researcher to manager that would be included in the subject heading might be "I forecast 1 % industry growth next year." or "I recommend 'go' for new product."

In formal presentations at some major firms, researcher brevity is not only highly valued, it is all that is allowed. How many minutes would a research team that worked on a month-long consumer attitudes research project be given to brief the CEO of

a Fortune 500 company, such as the Ford Motor Co.? One hour? 30 minutes? Both of these estimates are far above what is actually done. According to Mary Klupp, a veteran researcher with the Ford Motor Co. and now Director of Global Consumer Insights for Ford Credit, researchers would be allowed a maximum of 12 minutes. Other senior executives would give researchers a 15-minute time block (Klupp, 1998).

This illustration from Ford typifies the pace of activity at a major US corporation these days. US senior managers move fast, and do not want to become victims of “information overload.” While their counterparts in other cultures may appear more patient in acquiring the background and context for recommendations based on research, no senior executive in any culture can afford to waste any time at all.

The CEO’s likely expectations from any research briefing are presented below:

- Remind me what this is about again.
- What did we agree you, the researcher, should do in our last communication?
- What decision should I make based on these research results?
- How confident are you in making the recommendations based on this research?
- What will be the impact on sales/profits or our workforce?
- OK, what were the most important numbers (results) I need to know – but give them to me in percents, so that I will be able to make comparisons with other information I have already in that form.

To answer of these thoughts and questions effectively, the researcher needs to apply powerful thinking about how the results of extensive analysis can be linked to the issues facing the CEO. Without such thinking, and reworking of ideas about the results of a research project, presentations will be too long, too tedious, and too detailed. Not surprisingly, research projects with such concluding presentations will simply remain unused. This is a tragedy, because the firm’s leaders will not be able to reduce their risk in decision making – the greatest benefit of using well-done research. As a result, the firm will carry a higher likelihood of executing wrong decisions or of missing valuable opportunities.

Two types of presentation styles are in use today in business. The first could be called the “European” style. Here, the parts of the presentation proceed from problem definition, through the remaining steps of the research process (developing an approach, designing the research, doing the fieldwork, analyzing the research, and reporting the results with clear recommendations to managers). In other words, this style uses the steps in the scientific process as its structure and proceeds paragraph by paragraph to the recommendations (Malhotra, 2004; Malhotra and Peterson, 2006).

Alternatively, the second research style could be called the “American” style. Here, the same order is used as in the European style – only the conclusions and recommendations portion is presented first. This allows the managers receiving the briefing to know where the remaining parts of the briefing will go. Not surprisingly, many of these sessions end with only the conclusions and recommendations being presented. The presentation of these recommendations will usually trigger discussion among other managers in the room. If needed, selected parts of the prepared briefing can then be shared – or the remainder of the entire presentation can be given.

One Fortune 500 telecommunications company researcher reports that a \$1.5 million research project about whether to spend \$3 billion to acquire telecommunications

companies in Brazil ended successfully after the first PowerPoint slide recommending a “Go” was presented by the research team. Short discussion ensued among the senior managers. Consensus was evident, and the CEO made the decision to “do it.” The rest of the presentation was never actually presented to the senior management group.

The experience of presenting in the American style for the first time requires fortitude and resolve because the research team has likely invested an enormous amount of time and effort in the entire project. With the European style of presenting, this investment in the research project will be readily evident. With the American style, the researchers will not be able to display their research acumen before the critical recommendations are rendered to managers. Here, the researchers must remind themselves of the relationship of trust they should have with managers to conduct quality research and richly think about this research. After a deep breath or two, the lead researcher should then go ahead and make the recommendations at the outset of the presentation. This will dramatically help the managers mentally process the body of the presentation because the managers now have an understanding of what is recommended (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001).

The American style calls upon the researchers to take a customer-orientation in the proceedings. The purpose of the presentation is not to profile the most enlightened researchers in the industry, but rather to enable the managers to quickly understand what must be done based on the evidence collected and the best thinking about this evidence. The role of the researchers in the client session is to serve the managers by sharing insights and by interacting with these managers in order to develop improved insights for all.

If the evidence is equivocal – not strongly suggesting one course of action over another – then this should be stated clearly. A recommendation must then be made by the researchers about whether to conduct more research, or to move on to other pressing issues facing the firm.

One of the biggest mistakes a researcher could make is to go to a presentation and in some way suggest the data or the data collection is flawed in some way. If there is a problem with the data, then it should have been corrected prior to any presentation. Deferring a presentation or simply informing the managers that the complete research project is not ready should be done in such cases where there is some doubt about the data. Improving the quality of marketing research data, indeed the entire marketing research process, is critical to the acceptance of marketing research by marketing managers and is discussed next.

### **Improving data collection and fieldwork**

More and more marketing research is conducted online (Birnbaum, 2004; Miller, 2001; Ray and Tabor, 2003) and the web-based surveys fare well against more traditional means such as mail and fax (Cobanoglu *et al.*, 2001; Cook *et al.*, 2000; Grossnickle and Raskin, 2000; Malhotra, 2004). According to a recent survey, obtaining a representative sample was reported as a challenge by 63 percent of market researchers regardless of the medium used (Rodeghier and Thaker, 2005). While we cannot deny that the average internet user and the average citizen are not the same in terms of demographics, they increasingly look alike. As more and more of the consumers gain internet access many firms realize that the demographics of internet users resemble that of their customers. For example, for firms targeting the high-end of the market

(e.g. BMW) consumers with broadband connectivity (as opposed to dial-up) may look a lot like their targeted consumer profile.

Pre-recruited panels and web site interceptions (similar to mall interceptions) have been proposed to be effective in obtaining desirable samples (Wyner, 2004). Indeed, with its potential for matched control, and implicit and explicit experimental groups, online marketing research has been proposed to be the future for fast, systematic, and efficient marketing research (Agrawal *et al.*, 2004; Kim and Malhotra, 2005; Malhotra *et al.*, 2004).

The advantages of utilizing the internet extend to marketing research education as well (Malhotra, 2002; Malhotra *et al.*, 2002). Online research cannot only serve as a systematic and cost effective marketing research tool but also a very effective targeting mechanism. The consumers make/imply decisions and volunteer information daily as they browse from page to page of a company's web site (Wyner, 2000). This information is invaluable itself. For example, Amazon.com is already making recommendations based on previous browsing patterns and time spent on different categories/items. The consumer can rate/embrace/discard the recommendations, and based on this feedback the company can improve the quality of the algorithm over time. This information also allows Amazon to form meaningful customer clusters. It has also been suggested that the use of hybrid modes by combining the internet and phone can result in better cost effectiveness, speed and representativeness (Willems and Oosterveld, 2003). It has been suggested that the additional/dual use of traditional surveys along with web-based surveys may correct for potential bias in an online effort (Ray and Tabor, 2003).

In a parallel way, sampling bias is not inevitable in traditional studies. With planning and vigorous execution in the field, representative samples can be obtained. TecMRKT Works, a research agency with offices in Wisconsin and Virginia provides an enlightening example of how thoughtful planning and collaboration with community-based organizations (CBOs) resulted in a 94 percent completion rate for field work in the demanding environment of poor neighborhoods in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Hall and Reed, 1994).

TecMRKT Works elected to hire neighborhood residents to compose the field staff in conducting door-to-door interviews with a selected sample of 600 customers living in the targeted neighborhoods for an electrical energy demand study. To obtain field staff, TecMRKT Works contacted CBOs, such as church groups. The executive officers of the CBOs reported they could recruit suitable residents from these neighborhoods for training in survey research. In this way, the field staff-workers would be identified as locals to the area, and would be those who were "street wise."

During the training of field staff-workers, the survey was reviewed question-by-question. The instructor read each question aloud and described the importance of the question, presented possible responses to the question and described how the information would be used in the evaluation. This allowed each trainee to hear the question, understand its importance and be ready to respond to customer questions.

Because of the sensitivity of neighborhood residents to strangers and because of a need to obtain high response values and because of security reasons, three different pre-survey customer notification contacts were used to inform the customer that a surveyor would be coming to their door to conduct the survey. First, a letter was sent



informing each respondent that a surveyor would be coming to the door, and that a member of the household would earn a voucher for \$10.00 for participation in the survey. This voucher could be cashed at a local bank. Second, a flyer was mailed reminding the household that a surveyor would be coming that week. Third, a phone call was made three days prior to the arrival of the surveyor.

The field staff noticed that word spread rapidly within the community and that customers knew about the survey format, length and many of the questions when the survey taker visited their home. Survey workers wore orange vests or jackets to distinguish as being field staff-workers. Through these steps, the voices of customers unreachable or disregarded in other studies were heard.

### Improving research quality

The actual use of marketing research recommendations is most strongly related to the quality content of the research and the resulting information (Birgelen *et al.*, 2001; Deshpande and Zaltman, 1982; Malhotra *et al.*, 1999). According to a survey of Association of Users of Research Agencies, “the added value of the research report and presentation, thoughtful research design, listening to clients’ needs, attention to detail, and on-time delivery” were the most important dimensions of marketing research service quality (Donnelly *et al.*, 2000, p. 490).

One CEO of a large US electrical energy service company asserts that research quality is embodied in the researcher:

It is not data that is key, but the people between the data and the management decision maker. Senior managers will tend to work with those who make the managers more comfortable. Comfort is not increased by two-hour presentations which leave management saying to itself, “What are we going to do with that?” (Franklin, 1998).

In short, researchers need to synthesize knowledge and wisdom from data, and then communicate in a powerful way. Such skills can be developed through training and education. Over the past two decades, specialty masters degree programs have emerged and have contributed meaningfully to the professional stature of the marketing research field. One long-time leader in research, Terry Grapentine, has made the following observation:

Perhaps the greatest leap our industry has made in transforming itself into a true profession occurred in 1980 when the University of Georgia at Athens (UGA) established the first Master in Marketing Research program (Grapentine, 2005, p. 32).

Today, other top notch programs such as the University of Texas at Arlington, the University of Wisconsin and the Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville prepare future research leaders in marketing research.

A milestone achievement in developing formal education programs for working professionals in the marketing research industry is the Marketing Research Institute International (MRII) that was founded in 1995. Aligned with the University of Georgia’s Continuing Center for Education, the MRII offers its Principles of Marketing Research program to students around the world. The MRII has enrolled more than 3,000 students, and has graduated more than 1,000. Ford, IBM, Kraft, Nestle, ACNielsen, Asia Pacific, Synovate, JD Power and Associates are a few of the firms that have enrolled their employees in the Principles of Marketing Research program. This program is fast becoming a requirement for career advancement for marketing researchers in such client

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and supplier-side firms. Better training of marketing researchers is contributing to their increased understanding of marketing management.

### Marketing researcher or marketing manager?

For marketing researchers and marketing managers to be effective, the line of demarcation between the two should become thinner and thinner. To be a good marketing researcher, you have to be a good marketing manager, and vice versa. More than a decade ago, Malhotra (1992) coined the term “marketing research myopia,” as a too narrow definition of who in the organization does marketing research. Just as marketing researchers need to become more involved in marketing decision making, marketing managers need to become more involved in marketing research. The marketing research department within a company should be fluid with only a few core marketing researchers. Most of the members should be marketing managers who move in and out of the marketing research department on a rotation basis. Even the marketing research industry should employ a healthy mix of people with core marketing research background and people with core marketing management background. Thus, the answer to the question “marketing researcher or marketing manager?” is “marketing researcher and marketing manager,” with every person in the marketing department wearing both hats. Such an approach will truly lead to the integration of marketing research with marketing decision making.

### Conclusion

Successful researchers must resist the temptation of pursuing routine in their endeavors. Such researchers must increasingly think like managers, and strive for higher-level abstraction in their work that will allow insights about more important issues to the firm’s managers. Toward this end, researchers must never be satisfied with analysis ending at “trees” when managers need to understand where the tracts of “forests” are on the new landscapes the future brings in view. Marketing researchers should embrace the risks and challenges of being scouts – the “eyes and ears” of managers outside the firm. The line of demarcation between marketing researchers and marketing managers should become thinner and thinner until the distinction between the two becomes blurry at best. When these recommendations are put in place, we foresee marketing research earning its place at the table where managers and researchers make decisions.

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