

Planning and Prioritizing Your Marketing Research

Incorporating Marketing Research into Your Decision Systems

Well-run organizations will typically have comprehensive, detailed and long-term marketing plans in place to guide them on what is often a complicated, detail-heavy and extremely important operational undertaking. The marketing plan guides the marketing activities of a company for a certain timeframe, typically a year, but often for a longer time period. The structure of this plan is similar across industries, and is well-known to marketers. The marketing plan determines objectives, sets the metrics that determine success, and details the strategies and tactics to be used to reach the objectives.

There is a typical cycle involved in the marketing process, with specific actions, or steps, taken along the way. These four steps are: 1) Market assessment and opportunity identification; 2) Planning and development; 3) Execution, and; 4) Evaluation. At each of these four steps in the cycle, marketing research should be a critical element.

Below are the types of research often conducted at each of these four steps along the way:

Market Assessment and Opportunity Identification

Positioning/Competitive analysis studies

This research identifies areas in a market that can be exploited based on product features and benefits, pricing and/or service elements. With this information, an organization can begin development or modification of a product that will fill an identified opportunity in the market, further strengthen current competitive advantages, or shore up weaknesses. Product positioning studies are also conducted in the evaluation stage of the cycle, in order to assess the how well the product has achieved the positioning goal.

New product concept development studies

This research is typically carried out through the use of qualitative research with a representative set of targeted market segments and expert panels. The nature of this type of research is essentially "brainstorming," in order to capture any pent up product needs of the market that haven't yet been addressed, or to refine a broad product/service concept into a workable prototype.

Market segmentation studies

Once a product or service is closer to final development stage, a market segmentation study can help to refine the primary and secondary markets, and how best to target these markets. As with positioning studies, these can also be used as an evaluative tool, in this case to assess how customers are using the product/service.

Planning and Development

Brand Identity Development/Re-development Research

The goal of a corporate brand identity is to optimize the associations customers have with your brand so that they think of the top purchase drivers most strongly when they think of your brand rather than when they think of competitor brands. Ideally, you want customers to think of what they want from the brand (i.e., the benefits, tangible or emotional, or both) and then associate those attributes with your brand name.

Most organizations don't know what the most important purchase drivers are for their product or service category. In brand identity research, these purchase drivers identified and their relative strengths determined. This research also determines the strength of the different brand associations (e.g., reliability, ease of use, customer service) of the competitor brands in order to assess product/service positioning and then develop brand strategies. Also, importantly, brand awareness and the top-of-mind brand associations of the main competitive brands are determined.

Brand identity research also includes testing such brand components as positioning statements, category descriptors, organizational values, and design elements and hot button words/phrases that will best evoke the types of emotions that are in line with what the brand is about.

Advertising concept testing

Advertising concepts can be evaluated using qualitative and/or quantitative methodologies - focus groups or one-on-one interviews, as well as online surveys - to determine strengths and weaknesses of a set of ad concepts, and/or to provide input for ways to best achieve awareness and interest from an ad in a particular product market.

Name testing

Focus group discussions or one-on-one interviews can help in choosing the right name for a product.

Execution

Awareness and attitude studies

A periodic series of quantitative studies can help in assessing how well the product is doing in the market in terms of awareness and perception, and to determine problem areas and remedies for fixing.

Customer satisfaction monitors

A periodic series of quantitative and qualitative studies can measure customer satisfaction and gather feedback to determine how products and services can be improved.

Evaluation

This is the point in the cycle where all the information gathered is assessed and the success of the marketing plan and its execution is determined. Changes and remedies are decided upon and incorporated into the next cycle.

The Planning Process

The section above outlines a typical marketing process and how research can assist at each of the four steps along the way. So how do you plan and budget for that research? The following gives a step-by-step process for planning your research:

1. Review your marketing plan for the upcoming year and list all the critical decisions to be made.
2. Based on this list of decisions, determine the information necessary to make those decisions.
3. Based on the informational needs of each decision, determine which decisions require research.
4. As a check, circulate among product managers a list of decisions they feel may need research.
5. Prioritize the research studies based on the importance of the decisions to be made.
6. Develop budgets for research based on a hierarchy of research priorities.
7. Develop timelines for the research based on marketing decision deadlines, and detail exactly how the research information will be used in the marketing decision.
8. Develop a short list of 3 - 4 research firms from which you will request RFP's for research in the upcoming year.

Categorizing and Prioritizing Research Studies

In order to prioritize your research studies, they should be categorized first according to which area of the overall marketing plan they fall: Strategy or tactics. Many marketers break this out further, into long-run strategy, short-run strategy and short-run tactics. Some break this analysis out even further. For the purposes of this paper, however, we'll break it out into general strategy and tactics.

Strategy here refers to those marketing decisions to be made approximately within the year, with many then continued as an ongoing process. This would include assessing and developing the market position of current or future products, analyzing and developing plans for different segments of the market, new product development, creating a general communications strategy, and planning a distribution network. Included in any company's research, and which falls into strategy (since an ultimate goal is to attract and keep customers), is some type of customer satisfaction monitoring.

Tactics are those activities that support the strategy, and include advertising, product pricing and promotion, and quick adjustments in distribution channels to better match the dynamics of the market. Within these two areas of the marketing plan - strategy and tactics - research studies can be prioritized, according to the importance of the information to your decisions, as critical, high, medium or low, as follows.

- Critical:** Studies deemed absolutely essential in helping carry out marketing strategies or tactics, and which merit specific funding.
- High:** Studies deemed as important, but not so critical that they merit immediate funding. These studies are viewed as high on the want list, and for which you will be lobbying or looking for funds throughout the year.
- Medium:** Studies deemed as "nice to have," but ones for which such information could be obtained through alternative, lower-cost methods. If funds become available, however, these studies are important enough for you to carry them out.
- Low:** Studies to be done only if a windfall of funds becomes available after funds for higher priority studies have been allocated.

Following is an example of how a product or marketing manager might categorize and prioritize all the potential research studies for the upcoming year.

Strategy

Study	Priority			
	Critical	High	Medium	Low
Customer satisfaction monitor	✓			
New product concept test	✓			
Positioning analysis		✓		
Attitude and awareness study			✓	
Segmentation study			✓	

Tactics

Study	Priority			
	Critical	High	Medium	Low
Advertising concept testing	✓			
Distribution channel study	✓			
Pricing/Promotion study		✓		

Conclusion

The process outlined in this paper can be very effective for many organizations, at least as a basic template. Every organization and industry is different, so this process will need to be tailored according to the particulars of the organization and dynamics of its industry.

In a followup paper, we will outline a somewhat different approach, one that is based on more of a continuous process and improvement orientation.