



Pitfalls in Marketing Research

Taking Findings at Face Value Does Not Reveal Consumers' True Motivations and Behaviors

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Abstract: *Marketing research may sometimes collect invalid data, especially when interpreting the work of focus groups, assessing consumers' preferences or predicting consumers' future behavior. In such cases, caution is needed to use appropriate research methods and to carefully interpret the data.*

Challenges of Market Research

Research in the shopping-center field usually falls into three major categories: (1) real estate investment, (2) site location and (3) marketing. By far, the vast majority of research projects are about marketing: studies designed to collect data about consumers—both customers and non-customers—in their day-to-day interactions with the mall.

Marketing directors usually face tough issues: correctly positioning the shopping center in the market space, keeping customers satisfied, putting the right focus on advertising efforts and many other important challenges that are vital to the success of the center. Whereas many consumer characteristics—such as frequency of mall visits, total spending and demographic profiles—are easily assessable, many other characteristics of interest are intangible constructs involving complex measurements. Some of the most important aspects of consumer behavior cannot be directly measured. Direct, clear-cut questions may not yield valid answers in all situations.

Despite the high risk of invalidity, managers may accept any information at face value simply because it was obtained through marketing research that they commissioned. The purpose of this article is to identify a few pitfalls in marketing research projects. It focuses on three validity-threatening factors that are often overlooked: (1) the illusion of seeing consumers' "reality" through research; (2) the belief that consumers are able to accurately tell what they want; and (3) the belief that consumers are able to accurately predict their future behavior.

Illusions of Seeing

Most marketing issues usually involve a high level of ambiguity. Issues are often laden with doubt and controversy: which promotional campaign is best, what themes the center ought to pursue, what the "right" positioning would be, and so many other issues to which

there are no clear answers. Management, retailers, owners, advertising agencies and all others involved may have very different opinions on what to do. This great state of ambiguity is especially keen when the center is underperforming and everyone claims to have the right formula to get it back on track.

Very often the role of marketing research is to cut through the ambiguity so that plans can be made and a course of action can be taken. The greater the ambiguity, the greater the preference for methods allowing us to "see" reality, usually focus groups. Focus groups are vivid representations of customers, and they are observable. Among other benefits, focus groups are believed to allow all those involved to gain a direct impression of customers' opinions, feelings, intentions: in other words, to "see" the customers' view of reality.

Unfortunately, this vividness may be the major flaw of focus groups—or any other research technique allowing managers to "see." There is a very high risk that what management sees is that which is already lodged in their memories and preferences. Seeing the customer only reinforces the existing bias: guesses become real after seeing consumers, and most people in the observation room are just waiting for somebody in the group to say what they want to hear.

This process of perceiving reality as it fits our preconceptions is a natural human process. As psychologist Daniel Gilbert puts it, "We cook the facts. The brain and the eye have a contractual relationship in which the brain has agreed to believe what the eyes see, but the eye has agreed to look for what the brain wants."¹ It seems that focus groups, with all their vivid ritual and opportunity to "observe" consumers, provide the environment that allows this illusion to occur and flourish.

So are focus groups dead as a research technique? In recent years there has been an increasing amount of evidence regarding the significant limitations of their possible uses. Focus groups are often overused and

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¹ Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*. New York, Vintage Books, 2007, p. 183.



misused. Nevertheless, they are still useful in the following situations: (1) for idea generation, (2) as an initial research step to allow management to ask better questions, and (3) to learn the consumers' language (how consumers describe and talk about a product, a shopping center, buying experiences).

The bottom line is that we must be aware of what groups can and cannot do. Groups are essentially an exploratory research technique; nothing seen in a group can lead to any conclusions. What comes out of a group is not the reality. By allowing ourselves to conclude anything from these tiny pieces of information, we may be creating an illusion that may be very costly when we face the realities of the market.

Tell Me What You Want

Marketing people have always known that marketing is essentially the business of satisfying consumers' wants and needs. Therefore, it is natural to ask consumers what those wants and needs are. When a new advertising agency or new shopping-center manager is hired, the first question that comes to his or her mind is, "What do the customers of this center want?" And then a research project is launched to elicit customers' desires and needs.

The answer to this legitimate question may be troublesome, depending on the research methods and objectives. The assumption is that, when asked, consumers are able to faithfully report their desires, emotions, motivations, shopping experiences and other marketing concepts in which marketers are interested.

But, there is episodic evidence that sometimes consumers' reports are flawed. Observational research findings are usually at odds with people's verbal reports. Paco Underhill, for example, found that people did not recall what they had done in the store, and that they did recall seeing signs that were not there. Underhill reports shopping situations where customers reduced their reported time in the store because of its unfriendly environment, and where they did not recall seeing signs and display merchandise located too close to the entrance—the so-called "transition zone."²

Back in the 1960s, Louis Cheskin, another "observational researcher", developed the concept of sensation transference and showed numerous cases in which consumers were not able to verbalize their needs, images or impressions, but changed their purchasing behavior when the product attributes (like color or packaging) changed. The influence of those attributes was captured by other means, not by verbal reports.³

On the scientific side, the evidence suggests that the validity of self-reports is indeed impaired in situations where consumers are asked for the explanation of their behavior or motivations, i.e. the "why" questions. Consumers reply to these questions with no difficulty, but the stated reasons differ from the true reasons for their behavior. The real reasons are often unconscious or hidden in automatic responses. Verbal reports of what causes behaviors and feelings are just rationalizations. There is now a strong consensus among psychologists that the so-called high-order cognitive processes (mainly explanations for behavior) are not accessible to the conscious mind. As psychologists Nisbett and Wilson put it when referring to these (high-order) verbal reports: "The accuracy of subjective reports is so poor as to suggest that any introspect access that may exist is not sufficient to produce generally correct or reliable reports."⁴

The bottom line is that open-ended self-report methods cannot reveal the reasons for behavior, the reasons for preferences, why consumers buy or why they behave in certain ways. To capture the true reasons, other research methods such as controlled observations and experiments ought to be used.

Tell Me What You Will Do

Marketing research is almost always interested in consumers' intentions, their future behavior. Will consumers buy a product? Would they be interested in a promotion? Will they attend an event? Would they switch brands? What product would they buy for this season? These are common marketing concerns that research may help clarify.

Intentions are generally measured in surveys where consumers are asked to indicate how likely they are to take a given action: definitely, probably, maybe or maybe not, probably not, definitely not. Intentions are good predictors of behavior—including purchasing behavior—but not without qualification. Managers' desires to grasp consumers' future behavior sometimes cause them to overlook the many factors that interfere with the accuracy of intentions as predictors of behavior.

Although, as a general rule, intentions are good predictors of future behavior, the accuracy of such predictions depends on the way we specify intentions and behavior in the research instruments. In general, intentions predict future behavior, so long as both indicators (intention and behavior) are specified at the same level; that is, same action, same context, and same time.

² Paco Underhill. *Why We Buy*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1999.

³ Louis Cheskin. *Secrets of Marketing Success*. New York, Trident Press, 1967.

⁴ Richard E. Nisbett and Timothy D. Wilson. "Telling More than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 84 (No.3), 1977, p. 233.



The first requirement that the intended behavior be the same basically boils down to an assumption that the behavior (say, product purchase or shopping center attendance) asked of the respondent is already in the consumer's repertoire of actions. Consumers previously familiar with a behavior will predict engaging in it in the future with greater accuracy. But this condition is not always met in the research settings, as very often the questions we ask consumers are related to new products or to changes in the marketing mix that introduce new, unexperienced behaviors. Therefore, these are unfamiliar actions, and, in these cases, it is doubtful that consumers' responses will accurately predict their future actions.

The second requirement has to do with the context. The behavior is known, but the circumstances change. If a purchasing behavior is subject to a different level of personal involvement, social approval, set of attributes or any other different circumstances, the context may have changed in such a way that consumers can no longer predict their future actions. The simple fact of answering the survey question on intent is enough to change consumers' future behavior. "Merely asking consumers purchase-intent questions has a significant impact on both their actual purchase incidence in the product category and their brand choice."⁵

The third component, time, is rather easy to grasp. The longer the time period that elapses between the survey and time of the action, the greater the inaccuracy of the survey measurement. That is another way of saying that research can be efficient to predict only soon-to-be-performed behavior.

The implications of these conditions can be exemplified in the usual survey that asks consumers what products they plan to buy "this holiday season."

This sort of question is likely to fail on any (or all) of the three conditions described above. It may be that consumers will actually buy things that they have never bought before, and thus would not be able to report it in the survey. Or the context of the purchase may be different from what it was in the past, and, if so, the survey may fail to predict behavior. Finally, the survey may fail because of the time frame: between the time when intentions were measured and the time when purchase occurs, intentions may change.

Thus, if we want to know what consumers will do, survey questions have to be capable of assessing consumers' intentions and behaviors at the same level of specificity as that of the action, context and time frame.

What Research Can Do

The three research pitfalls pointed out here (illusions of seeing, consumers' explaining their behavior and consumers' reporting their future behavior) may endanger rigorous thinking and rational business strategies. What these pitfalls have in common is that information, although disguised as research, is actually information taken at its face value: it lacks validity.

Before we jump to conclusions, before we commission potentially invalid research, we need to know what research can and cannot do. Marketing research can make a major contribution when asked to bring information about consumers' habits, preferences, opinions, images, satisfaction and current behaviors. But marketing research using open self-report methods cannot reveal the reasons for consumers' behaviors or predict future behavior. To ensure that marketing research is really useful, consumer data must be collected through appropriate methods and cannot be interpreted at face value.

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⁵ Vicki G. Morwitz. "Why Consumers Don't Always Accurately Predict Their Own Future Behavior," *Marketing Letters*, Vol. 8 (No.1), 1997, p. 59.