



Irrelevant Questions, Meaningless Answers

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There are no bad questions, only irrelevant ones

After conducting thousands of marketing research studies and asking hundreds of thousands of questions, it has become painfully clear that the majority of questions asked are irrelevant. **That is, they don't result in answers that lead to actions.**

Marketing research has only one purpose: **To provide marketers information that leads to actions that, in turn, leads to making more money.** While information that is interesting might be food for the intellect, it is usually a brutal waste of money unless it leads to action. The challenge in getting the absolute most out your marketing research dollars, therefore, is in asking questions relating to areas where action is possible. The trick, of course, is knowing what questions to ask.

Here are six steps to take that will put you on track to finding the right questions:

1. **Don't be lazy.** Marketers are amazingly lazy when it comes to marketing research. They find it less mind-numbing to ask lots and lots of questions in the hope that at least some will be the right ones than to struggle through a winnowing process to determine which ones are pivotal. Long, rambling, expensive questionnaires feed the common wisdom that asking every possible question means asking at least some that are relevant.

Getting lots of answers isn't itself the problem. Rather, the trick is knowing the ones on which to hang your marketing dollars—and maybe even your job. **An ounce of anticipation when planning your research projects will produce far fewer and far more meaningful questions.**

2. **Understand leverage.** Leverage speaks to the essence of meaningful research. Is your greatest opportunity for growth in selling more to current customers? Trying to recapture lost customers? Attracting new ones? Is it in energizing your current sales people or enlarging the sales force? Is it in adding new products or services?

Many marketers will cop out by saying all these leverage points are important. And who could argue with the fact that they are. But unless you have a Microsoft or General Foods research budget, it's likely you don't have the funds available to address them all at once with results that are meaningful for any one of them. **The most actionable research should focus on the one or two leverage points that will produce the most immediate sales results.**

3. **KISS (you know what that means).** Archimedes said, "Give me the right place to stand and I'll move the world." **Asking the right questions only happens when you know where action is possible.** It's pointless to ask questions about customer service if you are not ready to make improvements to the service that you provide. It's pointless to know that your product no longer meets the needs of the marketplace, unless you're willing to change it.

Many marketers think that knowing such things might let them face the future on a more informed basis. Maybe so—but so what?! They have simply uncovered information they can't use **now** to improve their business.

If you get the answer to just one question where you can and will immediately take action to improve your business, all you need to do is ask that one question. If there are two or more questions with results that will move you to action, ask those. If you want to cloud the issue by asking a bunch of other questions just in case you don't like the answers you get to the relevant ones, you always have that choice. But it's a cowardly way out.

One of the biggest reasons companies fail to get everything they can from marketing research is because they are frozen to inaction by too much information.

4. **Anticipate answers, anticipate actions.** It takes time and often mind-numbing work to anticipate the actions you'd take as a result of research. For example:

-If your intention is that your advertising communicates your product as high quality and research shows that 33% of your prospects feel that is, in fact, what is being communicated is this good enough? **If not, what would you do?**

-If you find out that 80% of your prospects buy from your main competitor because they have after-the-sale support that you don't offer, are you happy with the 20% share you are getting or are you

wiling to offer the same services to meet your competitor head on?
If not, what would you do?

-If your research shows 20% of your customers rate your sales or customer service people as **excellent**, but 50% rate them only as **good**, what do you do with that information? **If you are not willing to take action that moves customers from a very good to an excellent rating, what would you do?**

In each of these examples, you will likely waste your research dollars if you fail to anticipate action steps before the research results are available. **It's far too easy to rationalize your way inaction when you haven't set pre-determined action steps.**

5. **Anticipate economic realities.** Over and over again companies will collect research data under the false assumption that data will dictate action. Think about the marketing director who says, *"How can I know what I'll do with the information until I see it? Once the data is available, then I'll know how much I can afford spend to address the situation."*

This mind-set is self-defeating. There is simply no point in collecting data without a nod to at least minimal economic realities. The company that learns they lose customers because their telephone sales operation is too slow, but can't afford to hire additional sales people has wasted their research dollars. The food company that can't afford to extend their product line to address consumer flavor preferences has wasted their money by learning the current product line-up is limiting their growth. And, clearly, other examples here are limitless

6. **Asking the right questions.** Here is where the rubber meets the road. At the outset, the more you know about your customers and prospects, the better sense you'll have where information will lead to action. When there is little information to help frame the questions, it is doubly important to anticipate possible actions. Whether you are swimming in past research or starting from scratch, try the following exercise when planning your next research project:

1. If you had the answer to one question that would grow your business in the next six months, what would that be?
2. What are the potential answer(s) that you might get from research into question 1.
3. Write down three actions that you could afford to take for each answer you listed in question 2.

4. Show what you have written for points 1, 2 and 3 to a business associate and ask that person to re-phrase your question. That is, ask them to state your question another way, from their point of view, using different wording.
5. Have your associate write down the potential answer(s) that he or she might get from research into question 4.
6. Then referring to point 5, you write down three actions that you could afford to take based on the questions and answers your associate created.
7. Repeat this process with other associates until you are crystal clear that the question (s) being asked are the right ones, what the potential answers might be and in what areas you can afford to take action.

This simple process will allow you to view your question from various points of view and to look at action steps from various questioning perspectives. **Realize that is it normal to ask a series of questions to generate information that will lead to action.** The point is you should be narrowing your questions to the point where the answers do, in fact, lead to clear actions that you are willing to take.

A word of warning. Inevitably answers to one set of questions will lead to another set of questions. **Some information always creates the need for more information.** Even if the questions asked are the right ones, know that there is the terrible tendency for marketers **NOT** to take actions that they had planned beforehand. Rather, they are lulled into conducting additional research to address the new questions that are raised. This is called research for the sake of research, and the research suppliers are the only ones who make any money.

Conducting research and then being wishy-washy about what you learned is self-defeating and a waste of your time. Either be prepared to take action from the results you get, or give yourself a raise with the money you've ear marked for research. If you take a raise, at least you might have something to show for the money.

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