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**Avoiding Research Reports That
Collect Dust**

Robert J. Kaden

Author of “Guerrilla Marketing Research”

*If you think research reports do nothing but collect dust,
the blame game just ended*

It never ceases to amaze me how companies can spend \$25,000, \$50,000 or \$100,000 plus on a research study only to give the results a cursory glance before relegating it to the “I’ll get to that later,” pile.

Many companies fail to optimize their research dollars because they don’t have a process in place for getting the most out of their studies. Certainly there are many research studies that are **tactical** or **limited** in nature. The results point to a clear course of action and there is little to communicate or mull over. Action steps jump from the pages of the report and marketing programs are changed or enhanced as a result. All that the research has to offer is quickly realized.

Conversely, though, there are research studies that are more **strategic** or **far-reaching** in nature. That is, results can be viewed from any number of perspectives and there is no crystal clear path to follow. When faced with such complexity, many marketing people take the lazy way out by labeling the research as vague, unclear or poorly conducted. In doing so, they have the excuse they need to send a potentially valuable study to the proverbial dust bin rather than think through what the research is really saying.

There are many reasons that research studies gather dust instead of being used to their fullest. Here are just some:

1. When the research fails to surface “silver bullet” answers, it’s easy to regard the questions asked as being the wrong ones.
2. When faced with data that casts doubt on the status quo, it’s easy to regard the people who were interviewed as being the wrong target.
3. When there is no research champion, or person who takes responsibility for making sure the research is used to its fullest, it’s easy for the research to fade in oblivion.
4. When the researcher conducting the study fails to make action-oriented recommendations that everyone likes, it’s easy to assume other alternatives don’t exist and to cast the research aside.

5. When the research has been presented or reviewed after first completed, there is the perception that it is no longer relevant months later.
6. When those who hold the marketing budget fail to take an active role using research results, it's easy for the research to become an academic exercise because recommendations are often viewed as unaffordable.

To get research used to the fullest, try the following:

- a. **Put together a list of key people who have the power to implement research results.** Get agreement from each person that they will participate in a "Research Optimization" process once the study is completed.
- b. **Once completed, circulate the research report to your key people only when you have everyone's agreement on a date for attending a presentation of results and discussing the findings.** It is one thing to circulate a research report and quite another to motivate people to read and study it. There is no doubt that you will get more out of both if your key people know they are expected to react to the research findings at a particular time and place
- c. **Circulate a proposed action sheet.** Attach a proposed action sheet when you circulate the report and tell people they will be referring to their action sheets throughout the presentation and discussion. Check with everybody one day prior to the meeting to make sure their action sheet is completed. **If not, reschedule the meeting after everyone indicates they have completed their action sheets.**

Use the following format for the action sheet that you circulate:

1a. Research finding (write out):

1b. Action idea (write out)

Repeat the above format for five research finding/action ideas

- d. **Use the presentation and discussion to kick off action plans.** Immediately following the discussion or presentation, optimally the same day, have people go over their action sheet suggestions again. **Write the ideas on an easel.** Brainstorm new ideas as you go. Rank

the idea as: **a)** Let's get started on that one; **b)** Ideas with merit but needs greater thought...revisit in one month; **c)** Longer term good ideas...also revisit in three months.

- e. **Champion the process.** Completing the above steps is a great start, but if responsibility for action is in several hands, someone must take sole responsibility for continuing to champion the research.

Even the best laid action plans bog down. And often actions have a way of morphing into something that wasn't suggested by the research in the first place. At realistic intervals, the study champion should meet personally with the action takers. The relevant findings and action plans should be reviewed to determine if they are still on target and going forward.

- f. **Revisit ideas with merit in one month.** Good ideas are often lost because there is no set procedure for their review. Always set aside time for your key people to review good ideas and determine if they continue to merit consideration and action.
- g. **Review the research in its entirety three months later.** Most research does not lose its value for many months or even many years after being initially conducted. This is especially true for studies that have strategic and course-changing implications or for ideas deemed to have longer-term possibilities

Time has a way of altering perspective. Revisiting the results will suggest changes to actions not yet implemented. It will also suggest new and better actions not previously conceptualized. Invariably, it is worth the effort for everyone to reconvene and view the research results again. If the only thing accomplished is to reinforce actions that have been taken previously, there will be satisfaction in knowing that the research made a valuable contribution. But I would almost guarantee that you'll be amazed at the new actions you generate by reviewing the research again in six months or even a year later.

Research studies usually collect dust because they fail to get the attention they deserve in the kind of format that leads to action. But don't just take my word for it. Take one of your old research reports and dust it off. Follow steps **a. through f.** above and then judge whether you got everything out of that report that's you thought was possible. And, if you have minute, let me know what happened.

Bob Kaden is President of The Kaden Company, a research supplier specializing in attitude research and new product development. He can be reached at thekadecompany@sbcglobal.net

