



How to Develop a Research Plan

Published by All About Audiences

2012

An introductory step by step guideline on the marketing research planning process, aimed at those working in arts organisations who have little experience of conducting market research. With tips on how to focus on what it is you want to find out, with suggestions for which methodologies will best enable you to achieve your goals.

The Audience Agency is a not-for-profit organisation created out of the merger between All About Audiences and Audiences London Plus in 2012.



Marketing Research: developing a research plan

What does this guide cover?

This guide provides a general non-technical introduction to the marketing research planning process for staff within arts organisations. It covers a number of questions that need to be answered when putting together a research plan.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is aimed at those people who work within arts organisations who have limited experience in conducting marketing research and who want to gain a general overview of the planning process.

Who to contact to find out more

For further information about the topics covered in this guide, please contact the Evidence & Engagement team at All About Audiences.

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What is Marketing Research?

In practice, the terms Market Research and Marketing Research are often interchanged and used as substitutes for one another. However, there is a technical difference between the two terms insofar as Market Research is concerned specifically with research about markets (e.g. audiences, suppliers, competitors), whereas, Marketing Research covers a much broader range of activities and is concerned with research into the marketing process (communications activity, branding, pricing, retail and/or exhibitions and events programmes as well as audience trends).

Market Research and Marketing Research - is there a difference?

Basically, Marketing Research should be thought of as the systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and presenting objective, useful marketing information to assist management in decision-making. It should help marketers to identify, service, and satisfy the needs and desires of their audiences and will cover information collected from sources both inside and outside the organisation.

Developing the Research Plan

Before conducting any research, you should develop a research plan. The research plan should include the overall purpose of the research and how the outputs will be used and communicated; the types and sources of data needed (including any secondary sources and definitions of the subjects of the research); the means by which the data will be collected and analysed; the scale of research (i.e. the numbers and spread of the research subjects and the populations you want to draw conclusions about); the resources available (including time); and, a clear indication of the stakeholders in the process. Basically, the research plan should provide answers to the following questions.

What are you trying to find out?

Be clear about what it is you want the research to do. Is there a gap in current knowledge that needs to be filled in order to inform a marketing decision? Do you need to test or evaluate a specific activity or event, or gain a deeper understanding of a potential audience's needs? Be as specific as you can about the overall purpose of the research, what you intend to do with the information, who needs to receive it, when, why, and in what format they will need the information? Whilst it is very tempting to try and use the research to find out about a diverse range of issues, this can often result in the process becoming overly complicated and ineffective. So the more focused you can be from the start in defining your research objectives, the more useful your research is likely to be.

Who or what are you interested in?

Be clear about the subjects of your research and be as specific as you can about the types of people they may be. For example, if you intend to research current attenders, are you interested in those who attend frequently or first time attenders; those who attend in groups or on their own; or, those who attend for specific purposes? If you want to find out about those who currently don't attend, try to define what types of people you are particularly interested in (e.g. those who live within a specified drive time or who have a specific socio-economic status). The more specific you can be in defining the types of people you want to research and draw conclusions about, the easier it will be to ensure the research is effective and provides the information you need.

Is the information already available?

Before embarking on your own research, try to find out whether some or all the information you need is available from other sources. These days a significant amount of research is available free of charge from a number of industry websites and library sources. Whilst this research may not answer all your needs, it may help to inform your ideas and give you an indication of what methodologies have proved successful elsewhere.

Where is the best place to obtain the information?

Marketing Research does not necessarily have to be sourced from outside your organisation. It may well be the case that depending on your research objectives, the information you need can be obtained from others within your organisation. Ensure you have systems in place to extract and put to good use the knowledge that your own people have, encourage feedback, ideas and suggestions. Even if your own staff cannot provide you with all the information you need, the knowledge they hold may well help to shape your research plan. Other internal sources of knowledge include box office or retail sales data.

Often those people who interface with visitors as part of their everyday jobs prove to be a valuable knowledge source that too often remains

Other questions that need to be answered

In addition to those questions above, you need to identify who needs to be involved in the research process, what resources will be available and when the research results are needed.

Involving those people who will use the findings of the research process should help to build buy-in and ensure that results are relevant and usable.

What type of research do you need to conduct?

Before deciding on a research method you need to establish whether the research will be exploratory, descriptive or causal, or a mixture of these.

Exploratory research involves gaining greater insight or understanding about an issue or issues. It often precedes more descriptive research and should be used to drill down, clarify and formulate hypothesis rather than test them. As such, exploratory research does not necessarily need you to obtain representative samples. Literature searches, depth interviews, focus groups and case studies are all common ways of conducting exploratory research. In simple terms, if you need to clarify any of the who, what, when, where and particularly the why referred to above, you should consider conducting exploratory research.

Descriptive research is not as flexible as exploratory research and can be used to describe current and potential audience markets, test hypotheses and track market changes over time. Before conducting descriptive research you need to ensure that you have defined the who, what, where, when, why and how aspects of your research needs, not least because descriptive research tends to be more costly than exploratory research.

Causal research is used to explore the relationships between variables. This type of research is very complex and it can be difficult to be certain that other factors have not influenced the relationship, particularly when researching people's attitudes and motivations.

Which method: Qualitative or Quantitative?

Whilst not a hard and fast rule, it is generally the case that quantitative research methods are more suitable to descriptive and causal research. Such methods tend to be used to classify features, count them, and construct statistical models in an attempt to explain what is observed and they include omnibus surveys, questionnaires, rating scales and controlled investigations.

"There's no such thing as qualitative data. Everything is either 1 or 0" Fred Kerlinger

"All research ultimately has a qualitative grounding" Donald Campbell

Similarly, qualitative research methods are generally more suitable when conducting exploratory research. These methods tend to require a higher level of involvement from the researcher and include such methods as depth interviews, focus groups and behaviour observation.

As indicated previously, the two methods can be used together, for example using qualitative methods to understand visitor or audience behaviours or motivations and then using quantitative studies to test or validate the findings. You should also note that the two methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that on occasion more quantitative research methods may be used for exploratory purposes.

It is important to choose an appropriate method for each of your research objectives and to have a clear idea of how the information collected will be analyzed and translated into meaningful and practical information. Further guidance on the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods will be available from the AAM website in the near future.

"...A research method for a given problem is not like the solution to a problem in algebra. It is more like a recipe for beef stroganoff, there is no one best recipe." Julian Simon, Basic Research Methods in Social Science

The next steps...

Once you have drafted your research plan, defined the sorts of information you need and when you have some initial ideas on how this information might be collected, you need to make a decision as to whether to outsource some or all of the work or to do it in-house. This decision is likely to be heavily influenced by the skills and resource you have available internally as well as the scope and complexity of the research required. You will also need to take into account the potential value and the risks associated with making business decisions based on the research outputs.

Contact us to discuss how All About Audiences can help you implement your research plan:

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