

A View from an Educator

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As marketers we learn that products must meet market needs; in education this means assuring our product (graduates) meet employer's needs. Success in Marketing Research requires a particular set of skills and competencies and to meet these needs educators construct a variety of learning experiences and programs to develop students' knowledge, skills, and experiences. This article seeks provide an overview of the structure of an introductory course in Marketing Research; I explore the frameworks and challenges of constructing a curriculum which provides students with the required knowledge and experiences.

Developing any curriculum can be a challenge, but the changing nature of Marketing Research, coupled with the dynamic advances in analysis tools, make this challenge even more complex - but not impossible. Fortunately, the fundamentals of Marketing Research are, well, fundamental which permits these core elements of marketing research to form the foundation of a curriculum in marketing research. However, to better match market demands, these fundamentals must be complemented with active learning experiences which allow students to experience the challenges and contributions of market research.

A Marketing Research course forms a core link in the Undergraduate Marketing Student experience; it is where data, analysis, insights, experiments, projections, and research methods and judgment converge. For many students, the Marketing Research class represents that critical moment in their education where theory meets practice.

To construct a successful learning experience there is often a focus on the framework provided by textbooks; these frameworks are often similar (especially at the Undergraduate Level) and provide a structured introduction into classic Marketing Research. Many texts break the Marketing Research activity into cleanly divisible tasks:

- Determining the Research Problem (never as easy as it sounds – often leading to extensive discussions about symptoms v. problems and determining the “value” of research in context of the scope of the problem)
- Selecting Appropriate Research Designs (making distinction between exploratory, descriptive, and causal designs; determining the role of primary and secondary data; assessing the need to balance quantitative with qualitative data, etc)
- Executing the Research Design (including the challenges of developing and using research instruments, choosing sampling plans and methods, applying a variety of analysis techniques, and drawing conclusions from the data)
- Communicating the Research Results (blending both numbers and words to communicate results which help inform management decisions)

While presenting this core content seems simple and straightforward, the reality is that teaching Marketing Research is more complicated than driving through “canned content”. Educators appreciate that a Marketing Research course is often the ONLY course in which

students are required to apply advanced quantitative techniques and methods in developing and proposing recommendations to managers.

Therefore, faculty seek to balance a core curriculum framework, which builds specific knowledge areas and skills in techniques, with experiences for students to apply critical thinking in Market Research. The challenge often begins by assuring Statistical Literacy in students; making sure they understand and can identify, describe, calculate and INTERPRET key statistical measures. This level of comfort with statistics is not often demonstrated by all students - which means a Marketing Research course often dedicates time to recapping key statistical concepts within the context of Marketing Research to refresh (or renew) the statistical literacy of students.

To add true value, the objective any substantive curriculum in Marketing Research should seek to prepare students to go *beyond* data and data analysis. Students must understand the impact of data insights on organizations and their operations so that they understand the role of Marketing Research in providing meaningful insights which inform management decision making.

One way to build upon this competency is to design a Marketing Research course which assures students demonstrate statistical literacy by *applying* concepts through reasoned argument. This objective involves utilizing data sets which provide for application of a variety of techniques and which challenge students to assess the impact of key decision points in the research process (such as sampling, tests for association and/or correlation). Dawn Dobni and Graham Links (*in Marketing Education Review*, Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2008 Pp61-64) have simplified this approach into three core competencies for students: Statistical Literacy, Statistical Reasoning and Statistical Thinking.

Perhaps another way of stating this is to design courses which assure students understand use of analytic tools and can turn this data into insight – regardless of the research question. To assure this level of proficiency it becomes necessary to construct classroom experiences and discussions, coupled with assessment (usually active learning) activities, which provide opportunity for deeper student learning.

It is also important that a curriculum complement the theoretical exploration of marketing research with statistical literacy as well as have students demonstrate these skills with practical application. At a basic level, this requires that students immerse themselves into the challenges of the design and execution of a real-life Marketing Research challenge.

These challenges can be projects – whether client-sponsored projects or fictitious, but which ideally involve some elements of exploratory research (completed with literature reviews, case analysis, or even expert interviews) and require more extensive descriptive studies to be conducted.

Schools are often approached to conduct small-scale (and sometimes not-so-small scale) projects which allow students to delve deeply into those fundamental research processes and to develop experiences applying statistical literacy. There are also a number of sponsored case competitions which requires students to engage in Marketing Research (AMA Collegiate Case Competition, Yellow Pages Competition, Google Challenge, EdVenture Partners, etc). It is often in this phase of active-engagement when great leaps in students' learning occur and when deep understanding and skills develop.

A Marketing Research project often means students are required to construct and deploy surveys, address sampling issues, clean and code data, and apply statistical analysis techniques. As educators we have learned that it is one thing to explain the critical nature of question formation (and related issues of wording, answer options, sequencing, skip-patterns, etc) to students and it is another for students to live through the challenges of doing this – and also having to live with the consequences of not doing it well!

Constructing a survey allows students to experiment with a variety of tools for collecting data online (Survey Monkey, Qualtrics, Zoomerang, etc) or to collect data in person. Some projects require students to develop and apply focus group techniques or in-depth interviewing; almost all projects require some aspect of secondary data review.

Real projects gets students to appreciate the challenges of Marketing Research in addition to developing insights into the power of insights; students learn to think critically about their questions and methods and to live with the consequences of their research design. Perhaps most valuable is that these projects allow students to realize the active nature of Marketing Research and how dynamic, and challenging, the Marketing Research Process can become.

Finally, while projects allow for experiences which lead deeper understanding, students also require interaction with practitioners in marketing research who are willing to share their experiences (as case studies) in Marketing research with the students. This interaction allows students to appreciate the process of applying research to support decisions can be a powerful tool in permitting these students to consider the career options in marketing research.

As an educator, I thank the Philadelphia Marketing Research Association for asking me to share some insights on how we view the challenge of teaching Marketing Research. I welcome feedback and questions (mconran@temple.edu). I also ask that MRA Members consider offering their expertise and experiences to area universities. MRA Members can offer to share case studies of projects which provide students with an opportunity to gain insights into the Marketing Research process, but ever more valuable, to understand how marketing research helps organizations meet their goals. Contact your local university or college's Marketing Department for opportunities to provide your expertise so that they can be assured they are training their students in the skills you seek in your organization.

