Data Integration ~ Combining Qualitative And Quantitative Methods To Support Improved Business Decisions

By Michael Lieberman and Ed Erickson

A well crafted research project is an exercise in reverse engineering. That is to say, it begins at the end by setting clear goals for the finished research product. Gaining a better understanding of consumers, identifying what drives their behaviors and purchasing decisions, evaluating a concept or brand position, testing a new product, determining product viability and updating previously generated data are research goals most sought by researchers.

Likewise, a well crafted research project begins with the end user in mind. For although the utility of data begins with the corporate researcher, utility ends with key decision makers up and down the corporate ladder. Quality research informs the corporate researcher, to be sure. But research is most valuable when used to shape business decisions throughout the corporation.

The beginning and the end of well crafted research is a deeper understanding of customers who live and work in an increasingly complex, information rich, and integrated global society. The complexity of daily life for consumers demands research generated data that is also more sophisticated and integrated.

The following discussion explains why data integration is important, what types of data may be included, some models of integrated research projects and finally, several case studies of hypothetical businesses and how they might use integrated data in decision making.
**Integrating Data Captures Change**

Data integration is important because, simply put, things change. The marketplace is in constant motion; consumer views evolve, costs of production and service may increase, the global economy reacts to the introduction of new technology. Emerging social, demographic and cultural trends may alter, reduce or increase the benefits of a product or service. Consumer decisions are not made in a vacuum. Surrounding the consumer and his decisions are a swarm of factors that traditional research may not identify and measure with sufficient sensitivity.

Integrated research seeks to capture complexity and change, providing superior category data and deeper consumer insights to help businesses refine its approach to the market place, retail positions and to provide direction to product research and development, inform market segmentation and even information on new technologies.

**Breaking Barriers Between Qualitative and Quantitative Data**

Traditionally, researchers viewed qualitative and quantitative as distinct and separate. Qualitative tools such as focus groups, in depth interviews, observation (ethnography) social networks and guided online chats were conducted to explore consumer relationships to products and companies, to develop the themes most valuable (traditional) to the creative team in developing advertising and design.

Quantitative research, on the other hand, was employed to confirm the consumers’ relationships and views of a product using surveys, tabulations, and multivariate analysis to develop numerical descriptions most valuable to identifying the key drivers motivating consumer behavior.

Qualitative data collection focused on the collection of textual/visual/oral material to support the inductive development of strategies and products by producing data for analysis in the form of memos and narratives. Quantitative data collection employs the prior development of brand measurements, quantitative and multivariate testing presented as numerically descriptive estimations of population variables and the conversion of textual findings into attribute arrays.

However, quantitative and qualitative techniques in combination may produce a set of integrated data to help researcher and corporate executives to improve business and marketing decisions.

**The Terminology of Data Integration**

Multimethod research is collected by two or more procedures (e.g. ethnography and case study) and quantitative study interspersed with on-line chat to give data depth. Mixed method designs use qualitative AND quantitative data collection/analysis techniques in parallel, but generally sequential phases of focus groups and standardized surveys. Mixing occurs in the methods section.

**The Utility of Data Integration**

Integrated data demonstrates that an array of variables will predict an outcome and answer exploratory questions about how that predicted relationship actually happens. During the qualitative phase a hypothesis is created of key drivers of consumer behavior. The quantitative
phase tests the hypothesis and identifies drivers of consumer behavior and established brand equity. A communications strategy can be developed for branding generally or by key segments with a test of fundamental principles.

Because methods are mixed in a way that complements the strengths of the other, there is no overlapping weakness. Clear and actionable ‘answers’ emerge. Mixed methods may include focus groups and follow-up phone surveys, online chats, and customer group discussion.

The strength of the integrated approach is that it provides data upon which to make stronger inferences by capturing and presenting a greater diversity of viewpoints. The integrated approach to research techniques can be modeled to achieve the desired research goal.

The best business insight comes from a holistic understanding of the market. Breaking down traditional barriers between research methods is a critical first step to providing the business decision-maker with the holistic understanding they need to make intelligent decisions. This is an approach to data gathering that most business decision-makers intuitively understand and employ regularly in most areas of the business.

As illustrated by the above case studies, integrated data can provide a deeper, richer and more comprehensive set of data to develop effective strategies to communicate brand equity, to identify and test the maximizing mix of purchase components to drive product maximization, and identify what customers value most in service and product in a competitive market segment.

Most importantly, using integrated research data recognizes:

- Markets are complex and must be studied from multiple perspectives to gain useful insight.
- All research is done in the service of the decision-maker, who requires a robust analysis of the situation to properly fulfill their responsibilities, which means exploring the issue from multiple angles.
- No single method can adequately capture an understanding of any market.

The past 10 years has seen a mind-boggling explosion in the quantity of data available to business decision-makers and the tools available to examine that data. The simple explanation for this explosion is technological advancement. Technology has facilitated this trend, to be sure, but it never would have become a trend if there wasn’t a desire for the benefits it could deliver.

As difficult as this may be for some researchers to admit, marketers have embraced many of the “DIY” data collection and analysis tools because researchers weren’t meeting their needs. Just like the consumers we spend so much time analyzing, marketers have been seeking out – and increasingly finding – tools that solve their problems better than the existing options.

Stronger, more regular integration of research methods is a first step to regaining relevance to business decision-makers. The examples we discussed in this article are simple steps, but steps that are taken by far too few researchers in practice. It’s time for researchers to break out of their self-imposed silos and look at research challenges from many angles, not simply through the lens.
of their particular specialty. This is the surest path to relevance within the organization and a seat at the table when decisions are made.

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