

Chapter 11

Professional Development and the Market Research Industry

Introduction

In this chapter you will learn about:

- The work carried out by market research executives, data analysts and interviewers.
- The professional bodies that represent the market research industry.
- The structure and organisation of market research agencies and suppliers.

The work of market researchers

There are three broad groups of people involved in market research work:

- professional level staff
- support staff
- interviewers or fieldworkers.

Market research executives are the professional staff of the industry and are responsible for all aspects of research design, management and interpretation of market research findings. In the case of qualitative research, the market research executives are closely involved in all aspects of the survey as they moderate focus groups and carry

out depth interviews. Desk research can also be part of the market research professional's work.

A fundamental requirement of all market researchers is that they should be natural Nosey Parkers. It is healthy to want to know what is going on and be curious about what makes people tick. In addition to their curiosity, the researcher needs to be able to read and digest considerable amounts of information and be able to distil this to an essence which can be clearly communicated to the research sponsor.

Researchers may work for research agencies – or they may work for the clients who commission research. Client-side researchers work in companies or organisations which commission research or which use the results of research to support their business decisions. The role of the client-side researcher is to provide research support inside the company or organisation. They may devise and carry out programmes of research (often secondary research) as well as preparing research briefs and advising on the strengths of proposals submitted by research agencies in response to the research brief.

Client-side researchers often begin as research executives in research agencies then move to the client side once they have gained sufficient experience. Alternatively, the research role in a client company or organisation may develop within the marketing department, and a member of the marketing team may train in research skills.

The researcher must be able to source and identify relevant documents, and focus constantly to avoid being distracted by side issues. They must build up a wide knowledge of what sources of information could be used in a project because not everything is solved by 1,000 interviews with the general public. This means that they need to know what trade associations and official bodies to ask for information and this is knowledge and expertise that builds up over time through working in different areas.

Every researcher needs to be able to organise and analyse material effectively. They should be able to understand and interpret numerical and qualitative data. Most importantly, researchers need to be able to decide how important each bit of information they collect is, in the context of the whole research project. They must also be able to identify and summarise trends and facts, briefly and simply because their job is to cut through the fog.

Researchers never stop learning. There are always new techniques being tried and tested, and industry standards are constantly evol-

ing to protect both the researcher and the respondents. As a result the work is full of variety and never boring. The industry recognizes two levels of researcher – the junior and the senior research executive.

Junior research executives are generally graduates drawn from a wide range of disciplines. Most research agencies will provide their own training programmes for new executives. However, they will look for people with excellent communication skills (both written and oral) and good organisational skills. Depending on the type of research which the employer undertakes, research executives may need to demonstrate excellent interpersonal skills (eg for qualitative research) or analytical skills (eg for quantitative work). At junior level, research executives will share responsibility for a limited number of tasks within the design and development process.

Key point

Good researchers must have an unerring interest in finding out the truth.

With 1 to 3 years' experience in a research role, executives may be able to take on a senior role. Senior research executives generally take a greater role in the design of research projects and may be responsible for managing some or the entire research project. In smaller organisations, research executives may be responsible for all aspects of a research project while in larger organisations, they may have the opportunity to specialise in one type of research.

Because market research is not a fully regulated profession, it is difficult to estimate the numbers of professional level staff involved in the industry though there are likely to be 10-15,000 occupied in this role in the UK. The *Market Research Society (MRS)* has 7,000 members and represents these professionals, organising training, education, conferences and producing the ethical guidelines for the industry though a code of conduct.

Support staff in market research agencies includes technical specialists such as people who prepare the data analysis and statistics. They, like the market research executives, are nearly all graduates with a background in science, maths or IT. Data analysis requires good numeracy skills and an understanding of statistical processes. As much of the analysis of data is done using specialised software packages, data analysts also need to be effective users of IT.

Other support staff in the agencies are responsible for managing interviewers (field management). The field manager/supervisor is

responsible for the support of new recruits to interviewing. They also act as an intermediary between the researchers who have designed the questionnaire and the interviewers who have to use it. Field managers or supervisors are generally responsible for briefing interviewers before they begin work on a project to ensure that they are aware of any requirements which the researcher may have. The majority of field managers started working in market research as interviewers. The role of field manager allows the individual to develop new skills, including management and training skills.

Research agencies also, of course, employ a range of staff who have counterparts in most other businesses – administration, secretarial work and finance.

The largest group of workers in market research is, however, interviewers or fieldworkers. It is they who carry out the interviews or recruit people to attend focus groups. Large numbers of interviewers work out in the “field” carrying out face to face interviews, but in recent years there has been a growth in phone interviewing carried out from central locations – phone unit offices. There are maybe about 15-20,000 market research interviewers, some working full time and others working part time for the research agencies that have field departments.

Most face-to-face interviewers work part-time or occasionally, depending on the range of projects available in their area. As this work involves approaching the public to ask if they will participate in the research project, face-to-face interviewers tend to be confident and outgoing. Much of their work may also involve travel within their region. Telephone interviewers tend to work from a central location and are more likely to be employed on a full-time or shift basis. An engaging, professional telephone manner and excellent organisational skills are pre-requisites for this type of field work.

Research agencies are responsible for training their own ‘field force’, or groups of interviewers. There are no formal qualifications needed to become an interviewer beyond a reasonable level of secondary education. Many agencies now participate in the MRS’s Accredited Interviewer Training Scheme, which enables interviewers to achieve MRS-accredited status. Training of interviewers from scratch, typically involves two or three days in the “classroom” with on the job support afterwards. The interviewer’s role is largely a matter of administering a pre-designed structured questionnaire and the training focuses on this and associated requirements. The real skill, in interviewing is, however, successfully obtaining the cooperation of respondents (no

mean task), with interviews taking up to an hour or even longer and with very little reward to offer. Research agencies recruit, train, organise and control their interviewing forces through local supervisors.

Market research agencies also employ part time workers in data processing including home workers and with conditions of employment comparable to interviewers. The data processor is responsible for coding and entering data into the project or agency data base to allow it to be analysed appropriately. Data processors require effective and accurate IT skills and an eye for detail.

Think about

Make a list of all the skills you think are required by someone in your job, particularly the market research skills? How would you score your competence on these skills on a scale from 1 to 10? What can you do to improve? Set yourself goals for making improvements over the next twelve months.

The professional bodies

Key point

The UK has one of the most developed market research industries in the world and the Market Research Society is the largest membership organisation for market researchers in the world.

By far the largest professional body in UK market research is the *Market Research Society (MRS)*. This has a membership of around 7,000 and a full time staff based at offices in London. Most professional level staff belong to the MRS. The range of activities are diverse and include setting and enforcing a code of practice, taking initiatives to develop and advance techniques of market research, providing a forum for members (with an annual conference as a main event), acting as a pressure group in relation to market research industry concerns and running an extensive education and training programme. The Society also produces publications including *Research* (monthly) and the *Market Research Journal* (quarterly).

ESOMAR (European Society of Opinion and Market Research) is based in Holland and brings together 4,000 members (both clients and providers of market research) in over 100 countries. It offers seminars and conferences, professional publications on aspects of opinion and marketing research, and training and education via workshops and

distance learning. The site lists 1,600 market research agencies throughout the world and has details of their codes of professional and ethical conduct and guidelines of best practice.

The *Association Of European Market Research Institutes (AEMRI)* looks after the interests of interests of independent research agencies. The *AEMRI* was founded in Bruges in 1991 and today has around 100 members in 36 countries.

There are a number of groups devoted to particular specialisations in market research eg; the *Association for Qualitative Research (AQR)* and the *Social Research Association (SRA)*. Most members of these bodies also belong to the *Market Research Society*. Finally there are some international organisations based on individual membership including the broadly based *European Society For Opinion And Marketing Research (ESOMAR)*.

Think about

Are you planning to take the *Market Research Society/City& Guilds Level 2 Certificate in Market & Social Research*? If you have read and absorbed this book you are well on the way to achieving this qualification.

Market research agencies

The total number of specialist UK market research agencies is uncertain but probably over 400. Market research agencies in the UK are looked after by the *British Market Research Association (BMRA)*. The association represents 200 member companies that are estimated to account for between 80% of the market research work carried out by agencies in the UK.

In addition there are several significant companies in this field who are members of neither association plus many very small operations, with an imprecise boundary between small agencies and freelance workers (of whom there are many at the professional level). There are various listings of market research companies including the membership directories of the *BMRA* and *ESOMAR*.

As might be expected, the *MRS* publish authoritative directories of market research organisations. The *MRS Yearbook* (annual) lists almost 500 organisations and around 140 individuals who offer every conceivable research service a decision-maker could possibly need. The *MRS Research Buyer's Guide* is a directory of over 750 mar-

ket research organisations throughout the UK and Ireland. It includes details of research markets, services, locations, senior contacts and an overview of each organisation's activities.

The market research industry provides services and is characterised by many small companies. Most of the market research companies in the UK have turnovers of below £10 million with only a dozen or so larger than this. The very largest have fuelled their growth through acquisition, often expanding into the large US market, the neighbouring European markets or the fast expanding Asian markets. Such connections make them well placed for carrying out international research projects.

Nearly all the medium and smaller companies (those with turnovers of under £3 million) are owner-managed. However, quite a few AMSO members, although operated as separate companies, are members of larger groups with business interests outside market research. The largest agencies are often part of media groups that include advertising agencies or database management.

Services carried out by market research agencies

The UK has one of the most developed market research industries in the world. The value of market research commissioned in the UK now exceeds £1 billion per year and is ahead of Germany, the closest contender in Europe. Between them, UK market research agencies carry out all types of market research, in every market where there is a demand for this type of service. Few if any agencies, including the largest, however, claim to be able to carry out every type of project; they specialise either in markets or techniques. Some (many of the smaller companies) for example are only involved in qualitative research. The services offered can usefully be classified under four main headings; ad hoc research, continuous studies, publishing market research and data collection and processing services.

Ad hoc research is the mainstay of the large majority of agencies. Projects are carried out for individual clients and designed as one-offs to meet specific needs and objectives and with an appropriate research design developed (although to some extent the specialisation of the agency is also a major determinant of the methods proposed). The normal commercial practice in ad hoc research is for the agency to discuss the requirement with a prospective client and then prepare a formal proposal. This includes a quotation and timetable for carrying out the work, but also details of the intended

research design – market research is one of the few activities where client design work is carried out (at no charge) before any commitment is made. The output of ad hoc research normally includes full interpretation of the data produced plus conclusions relevant to the marketing problem to be solved or decisions to be made; for this reason the term “full service” research is used. The delivery of this output is often in the form of a full narrative report although this may be backed or even replaced by a face to face presentation and increasingly suggests a recommended course of action for the research sponsor.

Anyone new to market research always wants to know what ad hoc research costs. Unfortunately, with such wide variation in the scope of projects, generalisation is impossible. However, as a very rough indication, the starting level for “complete” projects is about the £10,000 mark and can easily exceed six figures. However, most ad hoc projects are in the £15,000 – £50,000 range.

Continuous research programmes are, as the words suggest, those that are repeated over time and track responses to questions. Typically continuous research involves the provision of data from respondent panels and retail audits; Taylor Nelson Sofres and Nielsen are two large companies heavily involved in these areas. There is also the output from large continuous interviewing programmes covering consumption and media exposure patterns – eg the TGI service from BMRB⁷. Continuous research is mainly sold on a syndicated basis with a number of clients contributing towards what are very costly projects. The data may also be offered to anyone wishing to buy-into it. For most continuous research, charges are substantial even though the costs are shared.

Published research is usually carried out speculatively by a market research company and then offered to a wide market in a written report format. There are perhaps 50,000 titles available internationally covering virtually every market and subject. These can be located from a number of sources that can be accessed on-line from some of the sources listed in Chapter 4. These reports range in cost from a few hundred pounds up to several thousand pounds. However, much published research is modestly priced and can offer considerable savings over ad hoc research. Of course a published report may well not exactly match specific requirements but buying it may reduce the contribution required from far more expensive tailored studies. Locating and selecting published research reports merges into desk research activities.

All these services from market research agencies are aimed at the final user of research – marketing decision makers who need the findings to help in their decision making. The final type of services that are offered by agencies are aimed at other market research professionals who buy them as a cost effective methods of data collection and processing. There are two common services of this type; field and tab and omnibus surveys.

In field and tab research, the client is responsible for the research design including questionnaire drafting and defining the sampling method (field and tab is largely a quantitative research service) and at the other end of the process, interpreting the data and preparing a report. The agency carries out the labour intensive legwork in between; interviewing (either by phone or face to face) and data analysis (where access to software and computer resources are also important) with the output delivered as “tabs” – data tables. Field and tab services are also offered separately. The advantages of this type of service to clients is that they can carry out some parts of the work in-house and, therefore, save costs which would be incurred in full service ad hoc research. They can also have tighter control over some parts of the work. Such services are also bought by other research agencies to supplement their own resources. Providers of field and tab services include agencies which also offer full service research and a few companies specialising in this type of business.

Omnibus surveys are interviewing programmes carried out regularly (weekly, monthly etc) with specified and often large samples of respondents (including consumers in general, specialised subgroups and of business and professional sectors). In this case, however, the agency concerned has no questionnaire content of its “own” (apart from demographics) and instead offers space, on a question by question basis, to subscribers. This service is, therefore, ideal where only a limited range of data is sought either as a one-off or repeatedly as part of tracking research. The costs concerned are very much less than for a one-off survey (since no matter the length of an interview there is some fixed charge to cover) whilst the methodology including sample size is usually quite rigorous. Omnibus surveys can also be a cost effective way of locating minority samples – eg users of niche products; if necessary an adequate sample can be built up by buying into consecutive waves of the omnibus. The output of an omnibus is a tabulation of the question that has been posed cross analysed by the survey’s standard demographics. Omnibuses, therefore, are very useful tools but they have some limitations including in quality of response. Each questionnaire covers a range of unrelated topics (the questions of different

subscribers) and it has been argued that low respondent interest and possible confusion effects responses. Some, therefore, consider omnibuses only suitable for simple questions.

A final point to make about the services offered by market research agencies is that, with the internationalisation of business, the scope of research is also increasingly international and this applies to ad hoc and continuous research. It is estimated that a quarter of BMRA companies' turnover is derived from international research.

SCARY STORY

A few years ago I was cutting my lawn at the front of my house when a neighbour from down the road passed by. I didn't know the man but he knew me; at least he knew I was a market researcher. He explained that he had recently been made redundant from a middle management job in an engineering company and needed a job. He offered his services to me, not as an interviewer, but as a research executive.

Out of politeness I explained that I was not hiring or needing staff at the present. However, I remember brooding over this approach for a long time. It seemed to me that the work of market researchers is not fully understood and many people think of it as a job that anyone can do. Witness my helpful neighbour.

In fact, most of the work that is carried out by market research professionals is quite challenging. It is often logistically difficult to organize (as in large quantitative surveys), tricky to get to grips with (as in many qualitative surveys which examine motivations) or simply complicated (as in many industrial market surveys).

Of course I see these challenges positively. They have kept me interested in the 35 years I have been a market research practitioner, always presenting me with new research projects from which I learn as well as contributing to the deeper understanding of my clients.

There can be few more fascinating jobs in the world than that of a market researcher. This small book and the training that is offered by the Market Research Society will hopefully help the reader progress to a higher qualification in the subject and achieve professional status.