

6 Ways to Get the Best “Bang” for your Research “Buck”

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If you're like most of us, you have probably heard the phrase “times are tough” more than you care to, but facts are facts, and we are working in times of unprecedented economic conditions. As we all know, when companies are looking to tighten their belts, market research departments are often one of the first on the chopping block. In fact, the 2009 Annual Survey of Market Research Professionals, conducted by MarketResearchCareers.com, found that:

“Market research professionals are expecting 2009 to be a brutal year. Driven by slowing demand, shrinking resources, and ‘clients who want more and more deliverables for less and less money,’ 80% of market research professionals (up from 64% in 2008) believe their job will be more difficult in 2009...Overall, buyers of market research services expect their 2009 budgets to decrease by 9.5% over 2008 -- reversing a 20 year trend of annual spending increases.”

Maybe you will be one of the lucky research departments whose budget stays the same or even increases, but if not (or even if you are!), we have a few simple suggestions for getting the most for your research dollar.

1. Methodology: Find the intersection between appropriate and cost effective.

Quantitative

Check to see if the population you are considering can be found online first – the availability of Internet sample is ever-expanding and includes many specialty panels (e.g., physicians, teachers, benefit managers). You may also want to consider initiatives to develop your customer database to include emails; client sponsored Internet studies often have very high response rates and offer a substantial cost advantage.

For low incidence populations or hard to reach respondents, Internet surveys may not work, but when surveying broader populations, customers, or certain specialty populations, the Web is both viable and less expensive (it can also be more timely and give you more options in terms of visuals and complex designs).

Qualitative

While many of us are accustomed to gathering qualitative data using traditional focus groups, there are several other options that can provide the same or better information and provide a cost savings. Teleconferences, phone in-depth interviews (IDIs), and online Bulletin Boards (BBFGs) work very well for gathering qualitative data, and they provide the cost savings that comes by eliminating travel expenses. They also keep the benefits of focus groups (participant interaction, displaying materials, live client monitoring) while providing the enhanced features of national vs. regional data collection, reducing influence or posturing (IDIs), including hard-to-reach or high-level participants, and a fluid topic guide that can be changed mid-stream (BBFGs).

2. Don't Overdesign: Sometimes less is more.

Quantitative

If you are like many of our clients, you are always looking for the elusive “magic number” in terms of sample size. What we have found is that many times our clients insist on large sample sizes (500, 1000, or more; at least 100 per subgroup) without an appropriate rationale. Key factors in determining appropriate sample size are acceptable margin of error, sufficient sample for subgroup analyses, and the size of your population, but it is also important to consider practical concerns such as budget. In most situations, a sample size of 50 per key subgroup (and even as little as 30 for less important subgroups), can go a long way toward saving money while maintaining statistically valid sample sizes and enabling rich analyses.

Qualitative

Don't forget that qualitative is just that, a *qualitative* read on your data. It is not usually necessary or helpful to conduct 50+ in-depth interviews, with 5 or 10 per subgroup. In most cases, the story does not change after the first 10-12 interviews. Stay in contact with your research vendor, and ask for a summary of findings after the first 8-10 interviews; you may find that the story is 90% complete, and that you are seeing diminishing returns with additional interviews.

3. Increasing Response Rates: The better the participation, the lower the cost

You can reduce your costs dramatically by increasing the number of respondents who want to take your survey or participate in your focus group. The best way to do this, especially with customers or those with whom you have a relationship, is by sponsoring the research with your company name whenever doing so will not bias your results. We see response rates of 50% and above when the research is client-sponsored (vs. 5-10% when it is not). In addition, if you send out an advance letter or email to your respondents telling them you are conducting research and asking for their participation (and preferably signed by someone senior in your organization), response rates can be boosted even further.

Of course, you can also offer incentives to respondents, but be creative with them – offering cash is not always the most effective incentive. Consider drawings for larger prizes, donations to charity, and with certain business to business studies, offering a brief summary of the research findings can often be a great way to increase participation.

4. Reduce Cost at the Margin: A little can go a long way

Quantitative

Try reducing the number of open-ended questions you have in a survey; often, there is a great deal of overlap in different open-ends, and one may do the trick, particularly in online surveys, as participants frequently give minimal answers to subsequent open-ends. This can reduce length and save on coding costs. Or, in a telephone survey, ask a question as an open-end, but have pre-coded responses that are not read to respondents and an “other specify” to capture responses that don’t fit the pre-codes. This is especially effective on a tracking survey; you may choose to ask an open-end in the first wave and then use those responses to “close up” the question for subsequent waves.

Qualitative

There are many little ways to reduce qualitative study costs. Recruit 10 instead of 12 for focus groups; show rates tend to be higher during times of economic difficulty, so you will likely have full groups and save on recruiting and incentive costs. Consider quality over quantity: recruit smaller groups but use a screener that identifies the most articulate participants who are more likely to add value to the discussion. Use real-time video streaming services such as Focus Vision or Active Group to watch the focus groups and reduce travel costs. If you are paying for transcripts, consider summary transcripts which are less expensive and eliminate any non-relevant discussion from the groups.

5. Alternative Sources: Sometimes what you need is already out there

Often the answers to your questions already exist in some form and using these resources, even if they are not customized to your needs, can bring a huge cost savings. Perhaps someone in another part of your organization has done this research before, or at least enough of it that you can shorten your questionnaire. Or you can do a secondary search (or have a research vendor do a secondary search) to see what already exists through publicly available sources. Alternatively, consider syndicated or multi-sponsor studies that may be less costly, especially if you have only a few questions that can be asked of the general population. Finally, if you do need a custom study, maybe you can outsource only part of the process and keep some of the project in-house to save money. Most research vendors will be happy to do just a piece of the process: data collection, questionnaire design, reporting, etc.

6. Smaller Research Companies: Partnering to maximize your research dollars

Finally, while the five suggestions above can help reduce your research costs on a project by project basis, overall, you may want to consider using a more cost-effective research vendor. Of course, quality of research and actionable insights into your findings are most important, but oftentimes, a smaller, more nimble firm can offer those things at a substantial savings. If you are buying a specialized technique or product, are conducting thousands upon thousands of interviews, or need a recognizable name for a public-release study, you may still need one of the big firms, but for 99% of your research needs, a well-respected, experienced, small firm will deliver quality research, a valuable partnership, and do so at a considerably lower cost.

For more information regarding this methodology and/or Zeldis Research Associates, Inc. please look for us online at www.zeldisresearch.com or call us at 609-737-7223.