

# 10 Costly Marketing Research Mistakes (and How to Avoid Making Them)



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When faced with an important marketing decision, companies instinctively know to conduct marketing research. However, the results of their marketing research are often useless because the research process was fraught with errors from inception to conclusion. This report discusses 10 of the costliest marketing research mistakes companies make while conducting marketing research and explains how to avoid them.

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## Introduction

When crucial marketing decisions need to be made, many companies know enough to conduct marketing research; however, the results they obtain are often useless because the process was fraught with errors from beginning to end. Hence, companies waste money, time, personnel, and other resources and are no closer to solving their business problem than they were before the research.

Ten of the costliest marketing research mistakes companies make are:

1. Performing unnecessary marketing research;
2. Failing to establish a clear purpose for performing marketing research;
3. Performing research for the wrong reasons;
4. Having no designated “owner” of the research effort;
5. Choosing the wrong marketing research vendor;
6. Scrimping on the research budget;
7. Using the wrong data collection methods;
8. Researching the wrong population;
9. Asking the wrong questions; and
10. Having no plan to act on the research results.

I will discuss each of these costly marketing research mistakes in detail and provide some suggestions for how to avoid making them. As you read, you will realize that making any one of the above mistakes can trigger any or all of the others.

### **Mistake #1: Performing unnecessary marketing research**

Many companies automatically assume they need a marketing research study each time they are faced with a marketing problem or opportunity that must be addressed. Fear of failure, exacerbated by the way many companies incentivize and measure employee performance, drives much of the unneeded marketing research performed today. Making the wrong decision could cost a marketing manager a raise, promotion, bonus, or even his or her job. Hence, commissioning a marketing research study allows the marketing manager to postpone decision-making; use the results as a scapegoat when his/her decision proves wrong; and appear to have performed “due-diligence” when making his/her decision.



Doing unnecessary research is expensive, not only because of the money, time, and resources needed to execute it, but also because of its opportunity cost. A seemingly great marketing opportunity can evaporate quickly – or a serious marketing threat can intensify greatly – during the time it takes to study it with marketing research. Moreover, conducting marketing research on a business problem whose solution adds little value to the organization reduces funds available to study a problem whose solution *does* add value. Also, marketing research expenditures come right off the company's bottom line, and chronic unnecessary research may lead upper management to discount the value of marketing research altogether.

Generally, elaborate marketing research is unneeded if you already have information available (it's amazing how many companies do research, unaware that the information they need already resides somewhere within their organization), your company lacks the time, money, or other resources needed to conduct it, and the value of the research doesn't justify the cost.

### **How to avoid conducting unnecessary marketing research**

One of the best ways to avoid an unneeded marketing research project is to have an ongoing system of monitoring your company's business environment. Someone should be designated to track trends and changes within the company's industry, competition, and customer base. Having such a system in place will make it much easier to detect problems that can be effectively addressed with the help of marketing research.

Continuous information-sharing within the organization is crucial to the effectiveness of this monitoring system. When departments work in isolation or hoard information, they risk duplicating effort. As a marketing researcher, you should meet regularly with people in sales, advertising, product development, and other departments that interface with your company's stakeholders. This way, you don't reinvent the wheel; you save the company time, money, and resources; you identify the right business problems; and you help make your company more nimble in addressing those problems. Most times, you will find this monitoring system to be the only marketing research you need to do.



Finally, when you are unsure if marketing research needs to be performed, ask yourself the following questions:

1. *What is my main reason for doing this research?*
2. *What information do I need to make the right decision, which I cannot get elsewhere?*
3. *Are the consequences of making the wrong decision – or the benefits of making the right decision – large enough to the company to justify using marketing research to aid my judgment?*
4. *What will I do with the results of the marketing research once I have them?*

## **Mistake #2: Doing marketing research with no clear purpose**

To get the most useful results from your marketing research efforts, you need to define the exact problem that is compelling you to do the research in the first place. This is the single most important step in the entire marketing research process. Making a mistake here will almost certainly generate mistakes throughout the remainder of the project.

Problem definition can be challenging. Quite often, you will know that something is wrong, but not sure exactly what. It is also very likely that what you think is the problem may in fact be but a *symptom* of a deeper problem.

For example, you might find that sales have been declining for several consecutive months. Your sales force might be quick to tell you that those falling sales are a problem. After all, your sales force is likely making their living on commissions, so declining sales is definitely a problem to them! But do not accept their statements at face value. As the researcher, you need to ask: “Why are sales declining?” Is it just your company’s sales that are falling, or are sales for most of the industry also declining? Was there a change in marketing strategy prior to the start of the decline? Are the sales declines driven mostly by a particular region or product line? Has your company experienced any bad press or a surge in customer complaints? Is the economy experiencing a downturn?



## How to define the business problem effectively

A good market monitoring system, as described earlier, will help you define the problem. When defining the problem, it helps to list all the symptoms you are noticing; brainstorm possible causes of those symptoms with the company's experts; review the company's activities leading up to the onset of the symptoms; and then identify possible solutions.

Be leery of top people in your firm, an external marketing research vendor, or some other self-anointed "expert" who immediately suggests a course of action on the basis of symptoms alone. As any physician knows, "prescription before diagnosis is malpractice." If someone tells you that offering a special discount will reverse a sales slump, you must inform him or her that the company must first determine whether the current price is indeed the cause of the sales decline. After all, if price is *not* the problem, you risk giving a discount to the very people who would have bought your product anyway!

## Mistake #3: Doing marketing research for the wrong reasons

This mistake is similar to the first two mistakes, but is not exactly the same. Indeed, this mistake often results from making the first two mistakes. You will know if your company is performing marketing research for the wrong reasons if you ask why it's being done and you hear any of the following:

*"We've always done this research."* (The research has taken on a life of its own; this particular project has continued for years and nobody questioned whether it was still relevant.)

*"Everyone's doing this research."* (Their competitors are doing it, and they're afraid they'll lose competitive advantage if they don't; yet no one asks what value the research is creating.)

*"The findings are nice to know."* (Great - spend a lot of money to create a wealth of useless information! If the information is nice to know, but you can't do anything with it, you're wasting money.)



*“If our strategy fails, having done the research will show that we made our best educated guess.”* (They’re covering their butts. If things go wrong, they can blame the findings, or the researcher. But if the research process was flawed from the get-go, they didn’t make their best educated guess after all.)

*“We need to study the problem thoroughly before we decide on a course of action.”* (They’re afraid of making a tough decision. Conducting marketing research is a good way to delay the inevitable. In the meantime, the problem gets bigger, or the window of opportunity closes. How much is “thoroughly?” How much information do you need?)

*“The research will show that our latest ad campaign was effective.”* (They’re using marketing research to justify past decisions. Rarely should marketing research be done after the fact. Research mechanisms should be proactive; they should be built into all marketing efforts so that their success can be tracked objectively and thoroughly as they progress.)

### **You know you’re doing marketing research for the *right* reasons when:**

1. It enables you to make strategic decisions about your product, pricing, promotion, or positioning;
2. It gives you necessary information you cannot get from any other source, so that you can make a critical decision;
3. It helps you attack the root problem of the symptoms your company is experiencing; and
4. It leads you to a course of action resulting in significant, positive outcomes for your company.

### **Mistake #4: Having no designated “owner” of the research effort**

When conducting marketing research, whether in-house or using an external marketing research firm, companies should assign responsibility for the research project to someone internally. Frequently, nobody owns the marketing research role, dooming the research project from the beginning. No designated owner ensures that research won’t be taken seriously relative to the employees’ other responsibilities; it almost guarantees that problem definition and project execution will be inadequate; it allows everyone to



evade accountability; and it can lead to duplication of effort, as many departments may commission their own research.

The duplication of research efforts is arguably the most expensive result of not having a dedicated research owner, and the obvious waste of time and money is not the half of it. Imagine this scenario: The marketing department wants to measure customer satisfaction and the customer service department wants to understand what is driving customer complaints and explore ways to reduce them. If the departments don't consult each other and each conducts its own survey, it's very likely they will be calling on the same customers and asking similar questions. Now imagine you, as the customer, receiving both surveys. What opinions do you form about this company?

*The moral:* Assign the research role to a qualified internal person, who is charged with communicating with the different departments and outside research vendors and maintaining the monitoring system.

## **Mistake #5: Choosing the wrong marketing research vendor**

Often, companies decide to hire a marketing research supplier when they either lack the expertise, time, or personnel to conduct the project internally, or the business problem has serious political consequences within the organization, requiring research to be performed by an objective third-party. Especially in the latter case, hiring the right marketing research vendor is crucial.

Some companies, when having to hire a marketing research firm for the first time, select the first one they find or hear about, whether or not it has expertise in the type of research they need. At the other extreme, some companies that have worked extensively with outside marketing research firms may become "lazy" and select a firm simply out of familiarity, regardless of its experience in the type of research needed.

Another pitfall is hiring a marketing research firm solely on the basis of cost. You get what you pay for. If the amount a supplier bids for your business comes in much lower than most other bids submitted, beware! It's very likely the scope of the project outlined in that supplier's proposal is much smaller than in those submitted by other suppliers. The much lower bid can also suggest that that supplier may be inexperienced in the type of research you need. Hiring an inexperienced research supplier can cost you time due to mistakes and rework, and produce results you can't do anything with.



Some companies also hire a marketing research firm solely on the basis of reputation or size. While all of us would certainly love to have a big name marketing research firm executing our research project, it's not always practical. These firms will charge a premium because of their specialized expertise. In addition, their large size almost always means more bureaucracy and higher cost structures, and therefore higher fees. And the larger the vendor, the greater likelihood your point of contact will be an account manager, and not the actual researcher. And if they judge the scope of your project to be too small, these firms might actually turn you away.

### **Selecting the right research vendor for your project**

If you have your market monitoring system in place, and you've established the need for marketing research and properly defined your business problem, selecting the right research vendor is pretty straightforward. You'll know at this point the type of research you need, and you'll be able to shop more intelligently for a research vendor. *Quirk's Marketing Research Review Magazine* and the American Marketing Association's *Marketing News* each publish directories of various research suppliers and their areas of expertise. Knowing what you need from a vendor, you can call on prospective vendors you find from these sources and solicit bids. Also, reach out to your network and ask for referrals.

Just to clarify, there is absolutely nothing wrong with accepting the lowest bid on a research project, as long as the vendor is experienced in the type of research you need, and the scope the vendor proposes matches that scope you require. After all, why pay extra for additional information you won't use?

### **Mistake #6: Scrimping on the research budget**

There's no question marketing research can be expensive. Even if your company is doing it in-house, marketing research still requires time and staff. Even if the research is entirely secondary, and can be found in libraries or on the Internet, someone has to collect the information. There is considerable opportunity cost to conducting marketing research in-house, as the time an employee spends compiling, summarizing, analyzing, and presenting information, cannot be dedicated to other projects. Yet, budget constraints often dictate tradeoffs that must be made for marketing research projects, and often these tradeoffs are made carelessly.

So far, we've identified two ways companies scrimp on their research budgets: selecting a vendor solely on the basis of cost and deciding to perform the research in-house. Companies also make tradeoffs by using smaller sample sizes for surveys, choosing



nonprobability over probability sampling methods, or opting for secondary over primary research, among others.

None of these tradeoffs is inherently bad. Indeed, when budgets are scarce, you may need to make several in order to balance the scope of your project against your budget constraints. A decision based on a little good marketing research is still more solid compared to totally unaided judgment. But the key word here is “good.” When cost becomes the overriding constraint for marketing research, companies run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

### **Pitfalls of in-house research using inexpensive survey tools**

Generally, when conducting a survey, you want to choose a sample that adequately represents the population in which you’re interested. If your company is marketing a product or service to low-income Hispanics, conducting an inexpensive online survey is either going to result in several respondents who don’t fit that demographic, or so few responses, as many low-income Hispanics are unlikely to have Internet access. Yet many companies make use of inexpensive online survey tools like SurveyMonkey for the very reason that it is inexpensive, and the results they obtain are useless because either the wrong people or too few of the right people respond.

### **Pitfalls of using nonprobability samples over probability samples**

Companies have also tried to cut marketing research costs by substituting nonprobability for probability samples. Respondents in a nonprobability sample are chosen solely on the basis of judgment, unlike probability samples, which are chosen at random with each member of the population having an equal chance of selection. When someone at a shopping mall or on the street asks you to take a survey, you’re being selected for a nonprobability sample.

There is nothing wrong with using nonprobability samples; surveys using such samples can be executed rather quickly if time is an issue. Furthermore, researching populations that are quite small and scattered (e.g., recruiting persons with a rare disease for a clinical trial) or where few published directories – the sample frame – about its members exists (e.g., medical coding professionals), can make probability sampling cost-prohibitive and unfeasible. However, generalizing results from a survey administered to a nonprobability sample to the true population can be difficult and highly error prone. As long as you understand this drawback and make allowances for it, you will be OK.



## **Pitfalls of using smaller sample sizes**

Sample size is another popular way companies attempt to cut marketing research costs. Assume that a local pizzeria wants to explore the feasibility of offering delivery. The pizzeria needs to estimate the amount a household within its ZIP code spends on a typical pizza delivery order, and randomly selects 100 households from within the ZIP code for a survey. Further assume the pizzeria wants a five percent margin of error. The survey is executed and the pizzeria finds that the average household surveyed spends \$15 on a pizza delivery. Figure in the plus or minus five percent, and the estimated average is between \$14.25 and \$15.75.

The problem emerges when the pizzeria tries to generalize this average delivery order to all households within that ZIP code. A sample size of 100 with a five percent margin of error is barely a 65% confidence interval. This means that if this survey was conducted 100 times (with different people sampled each time), the pizzeria could be confident that the true average pizza delivery order will fall between \$14.25 and \$15.75 in approximately 65 of those surveys. If the pizzeria concludes, based on this low confidence interval, that that order size is too small to justify offering delivery, when in fact the true average turns out to be well above that range, the pizzeria has left money on the table. On the other hand, if the pizzeria concludes that the order size is large enough to justify offering delivery, but the true average falls below that range, it risks adding an unprofitable service.

The optimal sample size is the one that gives you the highest level of confidence and the most tolerable error margin required for you to make an objective marketing decision.

## **How to keep marketing research costs low while keeping quality high**

When it comes to getting the most bang for your research buck, use the Pareto Principle as a starting point. The Pareto Principle, also known as the 80/20 rule, states that about 80% of your results will come from roughly 20% of your efforts. So, 80% of the information you need to make your decision will come from just 20% of the research questions you ask. Find out what those questions are and be sure they are asked. This process alone will help optimize the scope and cost of your research project.

Also, decide how much confidence you need and how much error you'll tolerate. Some decisions require more accuracy and/or confidence than others. But your sample size changes in proportion to these accuracy and confidence needs. The best way to start is by asking, "How much precision would I gain using a 95% vs. 90% confidence interval,



and would that precision justify the extra cost to get it?” A 95% confidence interval with a five percent error margin requires a sample of 384 people, while a 90% confidence interval with the same margin of error requires a sample of just 271. Surveying those additional 113 people can add a couple thousand dollars to the cost of your project. Is the gain in precision worth that additional cost?

Also, does your project really need a probability sample? Not every research project does. If the purpose of your research is exploratory, you generally need neither a large sample nor a randomly generated sample. If you sell healthy meal solutions and want to understand issues busy moms face when trying preparing to prepare healthy meals for their children, you might simply run an ad in a local paper to recruit maybe 10 or 15 of those moms to either participate in a focus group or an in-depth interview. This qualitative information can be sufficient on its own, or can lay the groundwork for a future larger, quantitative (not to mention probability sample) study.

## **Mistake #7: Using the wrong data collection methods**

When many companies decide to do research, they automatically assume they need to use the most popular data collection technique(s) available. Often, they use surveys. Yet, surveys aren't always the best research tool for obtaining the information a company needs. Much of the time, companies have some form of the information they need residing within their walls.

If you want to understand why sales of Widget A are declining, surveying purchasers (based on warranty card registrations) is premature. Your company should have all kinds of information about Widget A already available – sales by region, defect rates, returns, customer complaints, advertisement and promotional history. This internal secondary research is relatively quick and inexpensive to compile, can assist problem definition, and may even help detect solutions.

Often, companies jump the gun and go straight to conducting expensive primary research when much less expensive secondary research may suffice. If, immediately, your company had begun surveying the registered owners of Widget A, it would have been costly and time consuming, and it might have been directed at the wrong people. Consumers who fill out warranty cards are likely to be loyal customers of your company, who will tell you what you want, rather than need, to hear. In addition, overuse of surveys creates survey fatigue among respondents, resulting in lower response rates



and higher incidences of incomplete surveys in the future, all of which reduce the reliability of survey research.

## **Making sure you choose the right research method**

Knowing the right research method for your project begins goes back to the stages of establishing the need for research and defining the problem. When you're trying to establish the need for marketing research and you're asking what information you need to make your decision, also ask yourself if you can find it internally. Find out who in your company has access to that information and seek out him or her. If the information is not available internally, determine how easily and inexpensively it can be obtained through secondary sources. Marketing research should be conducted to find crucial information you do not have that *cannot* be obtained from less expensive means.

In defining your problem, you will undoubtedly understand the nature of the research you require – exploratory, descriptive, or causal. This will lead you to the most appropriate data collection method. If your goal is to gain background information, form hypotheses, and/or establish research priorities (exploratory), then secondary research, focus groups and 1-on-1 interviews may be appropriate techniques. If you're trying to understand who buys your product, how often they buy it, and/or where they buy it (descriptive), surveys may be most appropriate. If you're trying to determine how much the placement of your product within the supermarket affects its sales (causal) then an in-store test may be the best technique.

## **Mistake #8: Researching the wrong population**

One would think that once a company knows its target audience – the population it serves – that it would have no trouble sampling from that population and surveying it. Think again! Many manufacturers do not sell directly to their products' end users. There's often a wholesaler and a retailer in-between the manufacturer and the consumer. Many times, manufacturers must rely upon warranty registrations, sweepstakes entry forms, purchased lists, and other means of obtaining consumer names in order to do consumer research. But what if the end user is a business? The person who fills out the warranty card might be the company's purchasing manager, and not the employee using the product. The purchasing manager may know nothing about the product except where to obtain it and how much it costs. Sending a survey to the person on the warranty can easily be a wasted effort.



The converse problem is having information about your end user, when you need to survey the one who actually makes the purchase decision. This is especially true with business-to-business selling, children's products, and gift items.

### **Making sure you research the right population**

Ensuring that you can research the right people can be time-consuming. The best way would be to have a proactive system in place for capturing names from the population of interest. If you sell a software package for use in the accounting department, try to offer end users a complimentary subscription to a newsletter on how to get the most out of the software. They fill out an information card, and you have all kinds of information about them. If you see patterns in job titles for the users of the software you might be able to purchase lists of other persons in that profession for research. Also, you could get a good list of end users from troubleshooting and technical support calls.

Another way to reach the right population would be to work with your company's trade associations and intermediaries to obtain lists of end users or purchase decision-makers to get the names you need.

If finding members of that population is just difficult, consider drawing the sample from a pre-recruited panel (if available from a marketing research firm), or using a nonprobability sampling method, such as referral sampling. Drawing a sample from a panel can be very expensive, however, and panels do not exist for every population. If members of a population are virtually impossible to find, you might start with what few population members you do know of, and offer an incentive to them to refer others like them. You might also run a newspaper ad or use other outreach methods.

### **Mistake #9: Asking the wrong questions**

Companies further jeopardize the results they get by asking the wrong questions. Asking the wrong questions can take any number of forms. The company may do a superficial job of designing its questionnaire. This can lead to questions that are worded ambiguously and are misinterpreted by the respondent and/or the interviewer. An amateurish researcher may ask questions that are biased, loaded, leading, double-barreled, or manipulative, resulting in useless responses.

But the worst of the wrong questions are those that don't get at the heart of the business problem. Let's assume that a bank is concerned that customers wait in line too long to see a teller, and that their satisfaction with that particular banking experience is affected. The teller hands out a postcard questionnaire to the customer at the end of



the transaction. The first question will likely be, “How satisfied were you with your experience today?” That’s definitely the best question to start off a satisfaction survey. But all the questions after it will likely be flawed.

One of those questions will be something like, “Would you say the time you waited to see a teller was ‘too long,’ ‘very short,’ or ‘average?’” This question is horrible! Two customers who waited the exact same time to see the teller are likely to answer that question very differently. What’s more, depending on your schedule that day, a three minute wait could be too long or too short compared to the same three minute wait on another day!

### **Ask the smart questions!**

Instead, the bank should ask two specific questions: “Approximately how long did you wait to see a teller?,” and then provide some intervals in minutes. Another question can be a multi-part that reads “How important, on a scale from 1 to 10, are each of the following to you in ensuring a satisfying banking experience?,” and then make sure “waiting in line” is one of the parts. In this case, the bank will have an objective estimate of how long customers wait in line, as well as how important waiting is to satisfaction. The bank may even find that while average waiting time is a bit long, it’s actually insignificant to satisfaction. Courtesy of the teller, accuracy, and lobby hours may be more significant satisfiers.

The objective questions will give you the information you need to act.

### **Mistake #10: Having no plan to act on the research results**

The results are in. What will you do with them? Sadly, many companies spend thousands of dollars on marketing research, but the results end up sitting on some shelf, never to be seen again. Why did they do the study in the first place?

I once worked for a promotions firm that wanted to create a market research report detailing which promotional media was best suited to reaching a particular customer segment. The firm wanted to sell this report to its clients as secondary research. So my employer commissioned an expensive telephone survey, along with two focus groups. We wrote an elaborate report, complete with actionable recommendations. And nothing happened. The project died, and instead of making the forecasted \$100,000 from sales of the report, the firm spent \$50,000 for some “nice to know” information.



*The moral: Know what you're going to do with the research results before you commission the study!*

## **Conclusion**

You can get the most value from your marketing research efforts if you develop an ongoing monitoring system of your company's business environment; define the problem as clearly, accurately, and thoroughly as possible; and designate an internal professional for the research effort. While the marketing research process can be a minefield of costly errors, careful effort in those three areas alone can greatly reduce, if not eliminate, the likelihood of making expensive mistakes everywhere else in the research process. Well-thought out, well-executed marketing research projects will give your company the insights it needs to maximize its marketing performance.



## About Alex J. Caffarini

Alex J. Caffarini is the President and founder of Analysights, a marketing solutions firm that enables companies to generate the insights they need to maximize their marketing performance. Alex has more than 15 years of marketing research and data analysis experience, specializing in survey research, predictive modeling, and data analysis. Alex's experience spans several industries, including banking, insurance, retail, consumer packaged goods, and non-profit.

Prior to forming Analysights, Alex managed more than 150 survey research projects; authored several trend reports, including food industry consulting firm Willard Bishop's annual *Future of Food Retailing* report and NCH Marketing Services' annual *Worldwide Coupon Trend Report*, and also developed consumer response models for catalog retailer Hammacher Schlemmer.

Alex holds a B.B.A. in Economics and an M.B.A. in Marketing and Quantitative Methods, both from Loyola University Chicago.

## About Analysights

Analysights, LLC is a marketing solutions firm that helps companies use data for marketing success. We specialize in analyzing marketing and sales information to generate insights that enable companies to design marketing strategies that result in maximum marketing performance. For more information on how Analysights can help your company maximize its marketing performance, please visit our Web site at: [www.analysights.com](http://www.analysights.com), or call us at (847) 895-2565.