

TEACHING MARKETING RESEARCH: PREACHING WHAT WE PRACTICE

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Abstract

The teaching of Marketing Research, like many marketing courses, has generally followed the linear process as presented in many popular texts in this area. This paper proposes that the marketing research process should be presented and taught as it is applied in practice, that is, as a reiterative process of refinement and development during the discovery and analysis of the information relevant to management decision making. In making this argument, current models of the marketing research process are reviewed and an alternative marketing research process model is presented. Academics and practitioner alike can use this alternative model in the application and teaching of marketing research.

Introduction

A key objective of marketing research courses is to introduce students to the research process and develop basic research skills. Many courses in marketing research are structured around the marketing research process, which is generally presented as a linear series of steps (Burns & Bush 1998; Malhotra 1996; Zikmund 1997; Sekaran 1992). However, this linear process is not representative of current industry practice as evidenced in current, marketing research development programs, presented by the Market Research Society of Australia.

The purpose of this paper is to present an alternative model and approach to the marketing research process that better reflects current practice. This model presents the research process as a cyclical process with feedback loops at each stage which impact on other stages of the process. This model differs from most other models presented in the literature in that the feedback loops occur at all stages of the research process and not just at the end of the research process. This model was based on the authors' practical experience as marketing researchers and as academics teaching marketing research methods and supervising marketing research projects. To set the scene for the discussion of the marketing research process and to develop the foundation for discussion, the next section reviews current literature on the process of marketing research. Following this, our alternative model is presented and the implications of this alternative model for students and practitioners are discussed.

Review of existing model

The marketing research process adopted by various authors in their texts on market research is summarised in table 1. The table also reviews these models in terms of, the nature and components of the presented models, and how they are used throughout the text.

From this review, it is clear that all authors referred to have presented the marketing research process as a linear model. Further, only one (Aaker, Kumar & Day, 1998) has taken a more practical stance with their model by including a feedback loop but have only done so in the

conclusions and recommendations of the report as a checking mechanism with the management decision at hand. In addition, only one author (Burns & Bush, 1998) highlighted the model of the research process at the beginning of each chapter.

Table 1 - Summary of current approaches to the marketing research process

Author	Nature and components of model	How model is used
Zikmund (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linear model with six stages - No feedback loops - Problem definition and research design expanded upon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduced in chapter 3 - Book follows structure of marketing research process but the model only appears once
Aaker, Kumar & Day (1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Three major stages with sub-steps - Some feedback loops provided from conclusions to the decision process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Model clearly identified on the inside of the front cover for easy reference - Introduced in chapter 3 - Book follows structure of marketing research process
Burns & Bush (1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linear model with eleven stages - No feedback loops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduced in chapter 3 - Book follows the structure of marketing research process - beginning of each chapter presents the marketing research model
McDaniel & Gates (1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linear model with eight stages - No feedback loops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduced in chapter 2 - Book follows structure of marketing research process but the model only appears once
Churchill (1996)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linear model with seven stages - No feedback loops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduced in chapter 3 - Book follows structure of marketing research process but the model only appears once
Malhotra (1996)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No graphic model is given but six linear steps are discussed - No feedback loops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduced in chapter 1 - Not clearly embedded into each chapter
Kinney, Taylor, Johnson & Armstrong (1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linear model with nine stages - No feedback loops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduced in chapter 1 but explained in chapter 3 - Book follows structure of marketing research process but the model only appears once
Sekaran (1992)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linear model - One feedback loop - Link between stages 2 and three missing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction in chapter 2 - Book follows structure of marketing research process but the model only appears once
Boyd, Westfall & Stasch (1989)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No graphic model but seven major steps are presented - No feedback loops - Linear process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduced in chapter 2 - Book follows structure of marketing research process but this process not clearly embedded into

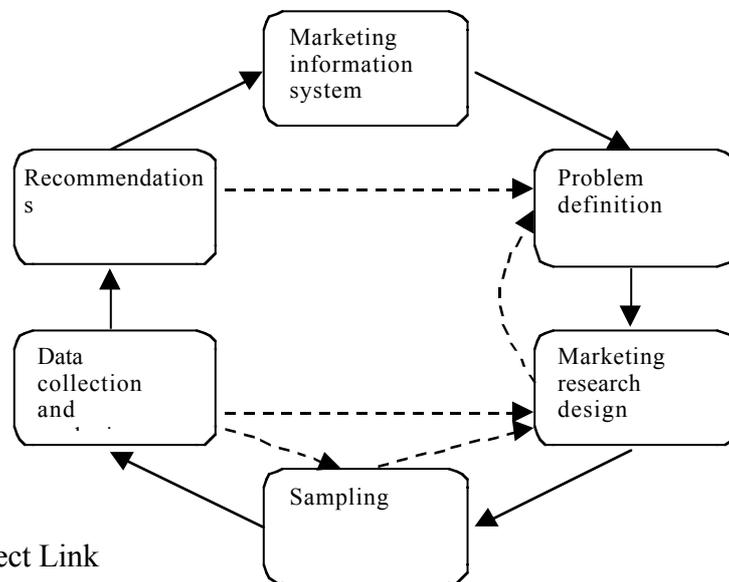
		each chapter.
Luck & Rubin (1987)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Graphic model with seven major steps presented - No feedback loops - Linear model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduced in chapter 1 - Book follows structure of marketing research process but this process not clearly embedded into each chapter.

Source: Developed for this paper

Alternative model

The model presented in figure 1 is an alternative approach to the marketing research process that more accurately reflects how marketing research is carried out in practice and hence provides a more realistic framework for teaching marketing research methods. When teaching marketing research using this alternative model, each topic addressed should begin with a review of the model, highlighting the stages in the process being addressed and how each stage links to both previous and later stages of the research process. The major distinction from this alternate model and those presented by other authors is the development of feedback loops between each of the stages as shown as dotted lines in figure 1. While other models have some form of feedback loop, no other model sourced from the literature explains how the gathering of knowledge along the research path influences and refines the marketing research process. Each component of the model will now be briefly reviewed.

Figure 1 – Marketing research process model



Legend: — Direct Link
 - - - - Feedback loop

Source: Developed for this paper

To briefly review then, the box at the centre top of figure 1 illustrates the link between the marketing process and the marketing research process and should be the starting point of the marketing research model. This box represents the *marketing information system* (MIS) which provides information to assist in decision making and strategy formulation for all aspects of the marketing process. Marketing research is only one part of this MIS. This also illustrates the function of marketing research to provide information to decision-makers, that

is, researchers do not make decisions, they simply provide information to assist in this process. This clear link between marketing research and the marketing function does not appear in any of the models previously reviewed.

The **problem definition** stage is the first step in the marketing research process and is perhaps the most critical. If this stage is not properly conducted, the entire research process will fail. The problem definition stage consists of identifying a management problem, research problem, objectives and hypotheses. Once this has been done, the value of the information to be obtained should be estimated to ensure the research is cost effective. Preparing a research proposal, which sets out a plan (or design) for the entire process, usually finishes the problem definition stage. The nature of the research problem will directly influence the nature of the research design. The problem definition stage is common to all models reviewed, however the feedback loops from other stages to problem definition are not common.

Research design includes the areas of secondary data, research techniques, measurement and scaling, and questionnaire design. Research design is driven by the nature of the problem, with three basic designs, exploratory, descriptive and causal. A research design should meet the objectives established in the problem definition stage. Information obtained through secondary data or through exploratory research may cause the problem definition to be revised. This feedback loop from design to problem definition is not clearly articulated in other models reviewed.

Sampling considered the issues of who to get information from, how many subjects to get information from and how to select these subjects. The sampling process consists of five major stages; firstly, defining the population; selecting the frame of the population; deciding on a sampling method (probability or non-probability); determining sample size and finally deciding how to select respondents. Strategies used in sampling are influenced and indeed determined by the previous stages in the process. For example, in research requiring a questionnaire to be administered, decisions regarding the choice of communication method require knowledge of the population and sampling frame to be used. Again these feedback loops are not articulated in the models reviewed.

Data analysis is driven by the objectives of the research. For data analysis to be effective, it must meet the research objectives, the data has to be collected in a form suitable for analysis, and the sample size has to be adequate for the proposed analysis. Again the links between data analysis and earlier stages of the research process are not articulated in other models of the research process.

As stated earlier, a researcher does not make decisions. He/she simply provides information for others to make decisions with. Once data has been analysed, the final task of the researcher is to present the results of the data analysis in a manner that will be easily understood by management. In other words, a researcher does not simply hand a bundle of 'computer printouts' to management. This data needs to be interpreted and related back to the original management problem. **Recommendations** are then fed back into the MIS for use by management. This link between results and problem definition was highlighted in only one of the models reviewed.

Implications of the alternative model

The alternative model addresses several of the limitations of the commonly used linear models by offering something new to the delivery and teaching of marketing research. Indeed, it provides both instructor and student with a model of reality and shows that the first understanding may not be accurate or relevant to the problem at hand. It suggests the research is a reiterative process that is continually changing and adapting as information is gathered and refined. The alternative model also highlights the importance of understanding all stages of the research process and that each stage is both dependent on and determined by other stages of the research process.

However, the development of an alternative research model must meet the principle goal of providing marketing students with basic skills that can be used practice. Accordingly, we will now discuss how this model has been used in teaching research methods, supervising applied research, and in a professional development program for practitioners.

Table 2 - Feedback from users of the models

Teaching format	Feedback
Marketing research methods (2 nd year undergraduate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Logical to follow - Demonstrated relevance
Marketing research project (Undergraduate capstone unit)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Made connection with this subject and other subjects - I've learnt the basics of marketing research process
Professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'The model is elegant' - ... easy to follow ... - Same process as work

Source: Developed for this paper from participant comments at undergraduate and four fellow marketing research lecturers at other universities.

From table 2, it is clear that both marketing research students and practitioners find different aspects of this alternative research process model helpful in the development of their skills.

Conclusions

The alternative marketing research process model has been used as the framework for teaching marketing research for the past three years in academia and in a practitioner arena. The strength of this model is its depiction of the marketing research process as a series of logical steps that are influenced and determined by other steps in the process. We believe this addresses the limitations of the linear process, notably the lack of flexibility and adaptability. It contributes to the body of knowledge by developing a model that replicates reality and provides students with practical tools that are transferable to the real world. We acknowledge any model can be improved, however, the essence of this model is the recognition that marketing models need to be driven by the marketplace and not by the sensibility and ease of presenting material in a linear process.

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