ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Versta Research:
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The first thing you should do before starting research is figure out what question your research must answer. It's not always easy. Most of us learn in school that we're supposed to answer questions, not ask them. In this newsletter we offer some tips about the art of asking questions to ensure that your research is a success.

The Art of Asking Questions

> *"If you do not ask the right questions, you do not get the right answers."*
> – Edward Hodnett, 20th century poet and writer

Somewhere along the way to research becoming central to how businesses learn about their customers, the art of asking questions was lost. As a result, there is a lot of research for research's sake, data in search of answers, and findings in search of questions. Occasionally an astute executive will ask "Why are we doing this?" If we struggle to find an answer, then chances are good that the research is off course and unlikely to provide insight. Good research is *always* designed to answer a central question, and every element of the research process, from beginning to end, must be focused on that question.

We recently provided counsel to a firm that was overhauling some of its key tracking research because it was getting poor data, service, and insight. Two vendors were pitching automated survey and analysis tools as a solution, and each offered some compelling features. We asked our client, "What is the question this research needs to answer? How might each tool deliver against the goal of answering that question?" It became clear that the client was three steps ahead of itself when they answered, "We need feedback so that we can continually improve." This is the right sentiment and potentially a good reason for doing research, but it is not a *question* that can guide research. We advised the client that without a clear question guiding their deliberations, a quick decision to implement either tool would yield more data in search of a question, and twelve months down the road they would again feel disillusioned for not getting the "actionable insight" that was promised.

If you really want to help your business with research that matters and that delivers insight, *ask and answer compelling questions*. Francis Bacon, an early philosopher of the scientific method, advised: "A prudent question is one half of wisdom." Likewise, a good question is one half of your research problem solved.

Five Types of Questions: An Easy Process

Usually your business partners or clients *have* substantive questions—they just need help formulating them. The key is to get them focused not on the research process and methods, but on the *business questions* around which research (if they really need research!) will be designed.

We recommend a simple focus group technique to do this. Get all stake-holders in the same room for an hour and a half. Ideally you will have day-to-day managers as well as the senior decision-makers involved. Give each person five sheets of paper. The first step is to have each person brainstorm silently, writing questions on each sheet of paper. Lead the team through the process as follows:

1. *The mission-critical questions.* On the first sheet of paper please formulate three questions you must

have answered by this research to make it worth investing time and money. Focus on your business, and what would help you grow your business or do it more effectively. Do not phrase these as survey questions or focus group questions, or something you would like to ask your customers. These are business questions that you need to have answered.

2. *The nice-to-know questions.* Now on the second sheet of paper write down three "nice-to-know" questions that you or other stakeholders might like this research to address. These are secondary questions that you are willing to forgo if time and budget become a constraint. These might be questions that others in the organization with alternative agendas will want to sneak into your research, or that somebody would say "While you're at it, why not explore the widget market?"

3. *The red-herring questions.* List three questions that that could lead us down the wrong path if we are not careful designing the research. These might be related to business ideas that you have already decided not to pursue. Or they might be questions with answers that provide no opportunity for you to address. Or they might be relevant and important issues, but not the focus for this research.

4. *The already-answered questions.* Sometimes organizations fail to take stock of what they already know, and launch research that arrives at an answer already discovered in the last study. Write out three important questions that are related to the current effort that you already know the answers to, but that we might end up re-answering if we are not careful in designing this research. These are questions that you would definitely want answered by this research if you didn't have the answers, and as such they are questions that people in the organization with only a partial view might be tempted to include.

5. *The look-elsewhere questions.* Finally, please list three questions that would be relevant and illuminating for us to pursue, but that could be answered by taking a second look at other research we've already done, or by analyzing other internal data.

Next, lead the group through a discussion. Some participants will not even realize their questions have already been answered by other research, and all will benefit from a collective understanding of what the research should be answering *and* what it should not be answering.

Will the Questions Have Useful Answers?

As the discussion unfolds and as each participant refines her or his list of mission-critical and nice-to-know questions, the final step is to ask them to formulate at least two possible or likely answers to the questions posed. If a question has only one likely answer, then consider the answer "known" and not worth pursuing. When each question has at least two likely and different outcomes, then proceed to a discussion of what action the organization would take based on each outcome. If you find outcomes leading to dead ends where not much can be done even if answers are known, then cross the question off the list.

Ultimately, you will want to synthesize the worksheets generated and the discussion into a short list of the mission-critical questions and the nice-to-know questions that will drive the design of your research.

As a way to wrap up the focus group session, I like to ask each person, "If you could ask every one of your customers *one* closed-ended question, what would it be? Think before you answer, because you have *one* shot. Don't waste it on something you already know, and don't waste it on something so general that you can't do anything with it." This an effective way to learn how each member of your team has synthesized the discussion into a single, critical issue they need to learn via research.

How to Add Value: Ask Good Questions

All phases of research—design, execution, analysis, and communication of findings—should revolve around the central motivating question of the research. It is one piece of how you turn data into stories that your internal clients and managers can use. Formulating and knowing the question will ensure that

your effort is on target, that it is incisive and relevant, and ultimately that the research is heard and used by your managers and their managers and their managers, and so on.

One of the best ways to truly add value to the research that you do is to listen carefully and formulate the right questions. Research is all about answering questions, which is, of course, all about asking questions. Building fancy statistical models is fun and brainy and definitely worth bragging about at your next party, but few people in your organization care much about models. They care about what answers those statistics provide to the fundamental business questions that keep them up at night.