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Qualitatively Speaking

"Sample selection as self-fulfilling prophecy"

By Nino DeNicola

Pardon my whining, but can we at least agree on this: In marketing research, sample definition should reflect the market for the sponsoring company's existing or planned product or service. OK? Fine.

Reasonable people — and you, reader, seem reasonable enough (so far) — might further agree that, unless we're talking, consciously and for cause, about a specifically targeted sub-segment, the "market" consists of all those individuals who use, or plausibly could use, the product or service at issue. OK? Fine.

Accordingly, in recruiting, say, a series of focus groups, once past the standard exclusions for security/confidentiality and recent past participation, the principal objective is to ensure that candidates are in fact present or potential users of the subject offering. Subsequent screening questions might fine-tune the groups' composition on a number of relevant secondary variables — age, gender, region, use-frequency, brand preference, etc. OK? Fine.

Why is it, then, that all of us qualitative research practitioners have found our-selves on any number of occasions harangued by client observers of focus groups or depth interviews, complaining about screening and sample selection on the grounds that the respondents failed to react favorably to the test stimulus — product, concept, advertisement, whatever.

A case in point.

In a study having to do with a well-known clothing brand's potential extension into men's ready-made suits, one participant after another rejected the offering, clearly and for cause. In each case, the "point man" among the client observers remarked, "That's not our target customer," and scoured the individual's screener in (futile) search of a rationale. Finally, one participant allowed as how it wasn't such a bad idea, and that, with certain provisos, he might even consider trying one of the suits. "There!" exclaimed the client, "That's our customer!" Since there were no meaningful screening differences between this marginal acceptor and all the rejectors, it's difficult to escape the conclusion that the client was defining his target market as "those consumers who approve of my offering." In this way, it's possible for a manager to claim 100 percent market acceptance of an offering headed for certain failure.

From the standpoint of strategic business growth planning, the circular logic described above is wrongheaded in two major ways:

- Wasted effort. First, if an offering is intrinsically unpromising — that is, fundamentally flawed in one or another way; a "bad idea" — then the deter mined cherry-picking of the relatively few and scattered acceptors while discounting the legions of rejectors-for-cause, could obscure the basic unviability of the enterprise until well along in the development process, after a sizable (and unwise investment of resources.

- Lost opportunity. Second, and perhaps even more important in today's competitive environment, is the lost opportunity. Let's say the offering is intrinsically sound — that is, potentially appealing to a target market which, as described at the out set of this article, is properly defined as the entire universe of people who already do or plausibly could use the product or service at issue. Failure to engage this larger population— on its own terms — is to turn one's back on a ready-made opportunity for business growth.

A Second case in point.

In this connection, a recent study dealt with a particular electronic instrument commonly found on the benches or nearby equipment racks of R & D and manufacturing test engineers. Focus groups were conducted to obtain this population's reactions to, and development directions for, a rather advanced new version of the instrument, intended as a replacement for the existing flagship model.

Client observers grew increasingly restive as the great majority of participants evidenced indifference, confusion, or even anxiety regarding the offering. Again the refrain: "That's not our customer!" The client had anticipated that the market consisted mainly of "power users" who would easily relate to and appreciate the new features and elegant engineering of the new instrument. But it turned out that by far the bulk of the market consists of people whose infrequent use and comparative unfamiliarity with the product led them to favor older, simpler models that require less relearning each time.

"That's not our customer"? Excuse me.

Now, there may well be a niche opportunity for the advanced instrument among the small minority of sophisticated users; but that's a separate and different issue from the one addressed by the research. Remember, the new offering was conceived as a replacement for the company's main entry in the product class, intended to appeal to the broadest user population. In that context, wouldn't the client have been well advised to focus on the unanticipated finding that the mainstream market's level of familiarity, comfort, and confidence regarding this tool was very low? Indeed, users suspected — quite rightly — that even their current models had greater capability/more features than they knew what to do with.

No great conceptual leap was required to see the business planning implications here: Quite apart from more modest technological guidelines for new product development, there was unmistakable potential for increasing sales of the company's current offerings — through information-and-education oriented marketing communications aimed at countering the uncertainty and timidity surrounding use of the product. The icing on the cake of this opportunity was that, because of the market's sporadic use and comparative unfamiliarity with this product, price, per se, was not nearly as important a purchase criterion as it was for many other instruments.

"That's not our customer"?? Please. Hold the tail still while I wag the damn dog." ■

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