

Business

IN THE HEART OF FLORIDA

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GATOR DOMINO'S INNOVATIVE NEW ALL-DIGITAL PIZZA THEATRE STORE

RUNNING THE FAMILY VS.
THE FAMILY BUSINESS

ONLINE REVIEWS:
MAKING & BREAKING SMALL BUSINESS

Research on a Shoestring



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Most organization leaders find themselves in need of information that is best obtained from a quality research process, rather than an informed guess. While some organizations routinely budget 25 percent of their marketing, sales or development budgets for research, many organizations find themselves in need of information without a budget to sustain it. Here are some helpful approaches for getting information without breaking the budget.

PARE IT DOWN

Determining what you need to know, versus everything you might ever want to know, is the best place to start.

If you can't figure out what you would do with the information once you answer the question or you don't have the resources of budget, staff, etc., to implement what you learn, then you probably don't need to prioritize getting that information right at this moment. Start by answering the question, "What do I need to collect in a practical, focused and concise manner in order to make the best decision possible?"

Sometimes, it helps to start with why you think you need research? Some questions to ask yourself and your team are:

- What do we already know about our audience?
- What do we know about what they buy — why, how and when they buy it?
- How well are we reaching them and satisfying them?
- How could we increase their loyalty and commitment to us?
- How can we find more of the same kind of customers who love us?
- What else would they buy from us if we offered it? At what price point?
- Does it vary by demographics? (Longevity?)
- Descriptive information (demographics of those buying or taking actions such as how many, with what attitudes, how people learned about you, what features and benefits are important — e.g., how are certain types of customers gravitating to certain products?)
- Predictive information (if we did x action, what might customers do, e.g., if we lower the price, will more people buy, or will current customers buy more; if we want to add key features, will those matter or how much will customers be willing to pay for those?)

Do you need primary research (information you specifically gather for your own purposes), or will secondary information provide some information? Secondary research is information gathered by others about trends, existing census or demographic data, psychographic data, etc. Sources for secondary research include U.S. Census data, media data, information from foundations and professional peer review journals, books, periodicals, etc.

Before you launch the process, think about what type of responses you want to get from the selected audience to participate in the research.

- Analytical information (how and why decisions or actions are made)
- Trend and tracking information (for how long, affected by what factors, how many return, how often, is satisfaction decreasing? Increasing?)

Cost is mainly affected by the method of research you deploy and the level of confidence you need in the research. For decisions of reputation, new markets, new products, etc., many organizational leaders take the plunge and invest in quantitative information executed by an outsider. That information provides a firm statistical validity, reliability and replication to provide you with a more solid sense of confidence. But, you can often get a glimpse on your own if you think through the opportunities to do so.

Qualitative research (not statistically valid) is often a very powerful tool when the topics are more opinion or reaction oriented. The ability to see and hear the reactions in focus groups, in-person interviews, and intercept methods provides a strong opportunity for

■ GETTING STARTED

Figuring out what you need to know and how to best gather it requires some free brain time and space to consider all the possibilities as well as the pros and cons of each. Brainstorm a giant list, and then pare it down to the three to five most important things to know. Ask yourself, "If I get an answer to this question, do I have the resources to act upon it?" If the answer is no, then maybe now is not the right time to get that information.

Evaluate the resources you have in house or that are available based on your budget to determine what data gathering, analysis, and reporting you can do on your own or where you think you might benefit from outside help.

Visit the local public library, in person or online. Libraries have robust research tools that search journals, periodicals, books and more. The library has experts available to assist you in determining how to approach your research needs, and their suggestions can save you a great deal of time. Plus, you can check out books for free to read up on how to do a good job of conducting your research!

"The Alachua County Library can help local businesses through our many different online resources. We offer A to Z and Demographics Now eSources that can be used by businesses for research on competitor and demographic information for over 30 million businesses. Another on reference library that can be used for technology, business digital medial books and videos is our Safari Tech and Business Books. For small businesses, we of an eSource call the Small Business Resources Center, which provides information on business plans, articles, overviews, directories and websites for businesses such as child care services, coffeehouses, beauty salons and law firms. In addition to these numerous resources, we have staff available to assist those in our community looking for information regarding their business need."

SHANEY T. LIVINGSTON, MLIS
LIBRARY DIRECTOR

Consider working with a Ph.D. intern or paying a graduate student who has done similar research projects. The student will get a great project for his or her portfolio and experience, and you will get a more cost-effective execution. Or, approach a

professional market research consultant and see if you can do a trade for services or get a reduction in fees based on pieces that can be executed by your own team. Consider if there are peer organizations that can share the cost load with you – they might need to know related but different information from audiences you might share in common.

Check with your professional association to see if it provides sample surveys or discounts with preferred vendors who execute research within your professional sector.

Evaluate some affordable online tools and see which might be a match for your budget and needs. Some online tools offer tutorials, sample surveys, case studies and more from which you can learn a great deal while establishing your own research.

Don't forget the local resources of the University of Florida's Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR). It has a treasure trove of research available that provides market context, demographics, societal trends and more.

"The Center has been around since 1929 and has for decades published data about Florida. As one of the oldest centers at the University of Florida, we compile and standardize data about Florida, and about four years ago, we realized we needed to invest in developing an online database for people to use, rather than printed publications. We're really proud of being the place anyone can go to get free aggregated demographic and economic data about Florida. For personal assistance, people can call 352-392-2908, extension 100."

CHRISTOPHER MCCARTY
DIRECTOR OF BUREAU OF ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS RESEARCH

National foundations and corporations often track trends and share that data. A good Google or Yahoo search might produce some excellent secondary research that gives a better glimpse at general information.

Check with your university alma mater for library access. Many universities provide donors with online access to their research library resources, which can provide an amazing amount of information.

pattern matching of language, filtering for emotions, perceiving language connotation and more. Experienced facilitators are adept at exploring attitudes and motivations as well as discerning reactions and opinions in focus group sessions, which usually have a small group of eight to 12 people and allow the facilitator to stimulate ideas, challenge assumptions, clarify any misinformation, and probe for a

response to current or new ideas and products. And, your customers might really appreciate being asked!

In-person interviews are a terrific opportunity for skilled listeners to more deeply explore on a face-to-face (or phone) basis a set of controlled questions and then provide more open-ended probing to learn attitudes, opinions, motivations and suggestions.

Surveys can be executed by phone, in hard copy, by mail, intercept or online. The method of surveys as an information-gathering tool is quite popular, and depending on the execution, surveys can provide either a good glimpse (qualitative) or statistically valid (quantitative) results. You can post your surveys on your website and invite people to take them or push them via email or in the mail to get responses.

Some old-school methods include simple handouts in seats or paper evaluations given at the point of service. Paper methods have to be entered into some type of analytic tool, but that can be as simple as an Excel spreadsheet when an organization is using basic analysis. Larger samples (audience size) or the length of a survey could require more detailed data input and add to the cost involved.

Telephone polls are still a reasonably reliable way to get a good sample, yet increasingly, as people delete their “hard lines” at home or at smaller entrepreneurial companies, cell phone numbers may be harder to obtain. Generally speaking, if you need a very large sample, an outside phone-polling firm may be a better investment for you, as interviewers need to be trained in order to get valid results. As always, the data is only going to be as good as the list of folks you are calling, so be sure to spend some time on the list acquisition process to identify the best characteristics possible before purchasing any outside lists. Typically speaking, statistically valid telephone polls are not a usual purchase for a shoestring budget organization.

Occasionally, a good method for qualitative input can be the use of an intercept survey. This method is exactly what it says — you are intercepting customers or potential customers to ask them their opinions. You want to have a short, well-written set of questions, as attention spans are short in an intercept survey venue. Also, be sure the venue you select for the intercept will provide you with a reliable control for the sample. In other words, if you need opinions from young mothers, make sure the place you decide to do the intercept is indeed one where young mothers congregate in large enough numbers so that you can intercept enough for a good evaluation of opinions. This can be a slower method, unless you can staff up for the intercept occasion.

When considering how to best gather information, take a look at where you have touch points with customers. Do you have the opportunity to gather a bit more information at the time of sale or



service delivery? If so, what information do you really need and what will be the best way to build a good database of that information in a standard and consistent way? Be sure that you trial run some reports before you get too far in the process to ensure that the data you are gathering is really the right information you need to know.

Those participating in research always appreciate incentives and appreciation tokens. Whether it's a coupon for a discount, a gift card, or a free future service, be sure to thank people for spending their time and energy to give you their candid thoughts. A random drawing for a great prize is a nice way to incentivize loyal customers to participate in a longer than usual information-gathering process.

in matching what you need to know to the most effective method for getting that information.

In particular, professional input to ensure you are asking the right questions to get the answers you need is always a smart decision.

The language of question writing often needs professional guidance to avoid “leading” questions that skew the responses. Also, experienced research providers know how to facilitate focus groups, both online and in person, in an engaging and provocative manner to get past basic responses. Generally speaking, the more complicated or sensitive the manner, the more likely you are to need professional advice. For simple matters, by all means, jump in and start asking — you will be amazed at what you learn! **B**

WHEN YOU NEED OUTSIDE HELP

It's important to know when you need to seek outside counsel, either to run the entire research project or to provide counsel and training to your team up front so you can conduct your own research effectively. The skills and abilities of professionals can be shared in a training session with your team from the board of directors or key staff members so you can conduct your own “field” research.

When in doubt, it is worth a consultation to make sure you are on the right track



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