

Before You Make The Call How To Hire A Marketing Research Firm

By Garry Upton

If you need to hire a marketing research firm but have never done so, here are some tips to get you started.

Most marketing research firms are accustomed to working with professional researchers—or at least those who represent a company's marketing research business unit. But times are changing. In discussing requests for proposals (RFPs) with other marketing research suppliers, I find we all are receiving more calls from people with little research knowledge. Consequently, many are not prepared to make the call and don't enjoy the task.

After visiting with colleagues, I took a close look at the background of my company's customers and found that slightly more than half are representatives from corporate marketing research. The rest are corporate professionals (33%) or hired advisers (13%) who are not marketing researchers. Because we believe we understand some of the reasons for this trend, we expect it will remain a part of business for quite some time.

So for all of you untrained in the process of hiring a marketing research firm, this should

help you move through each step more confidently and efficiently.

Prepare For The Call

Once you have determined there is a need for research, the process should begin by finding out what other departments in your company are doing. Often your department is not the only one that needs the information you are about to request. Sharing knowledge of your pending research request with other departments can help the company avoid paying for separate but similar research.

To get started, build a request form for other potential stakeholders in the research project. Make sure you include the pertinent information you will need to help design your RFP.

That information should include:

1. Department name and contact.
2. Phone number, extension, email address.
3. Background of the department's needs.
4. Objectives to be fulfilled.
5. Possible data collection methods.
6. Research suppliers recommended by the department with background on why they were recommended.

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7. Actions already taken relating to the research.
8. List of persons within the department who will need to sign off on the study before the department will fund their share.

You may want to fill out the form yourself as you interview those in other departments, or you may want them to complete the form and send it back. Either way, make certain you establish communication procedures with partners that include a system for final approval of research requirements. If you include others in your decision on the research firm that should be selected, build and share a schedule for in-house input and stick to the schedule. Often projects are awarded so late that the supplier's initial schedule is no longer feasible.

If you are sending the RFP to more than one supplier, design a form that will compare each proposal with the others by section. Then, with your partners, analyze and share the differences you feel are important and make the final decision. Once the decision is made, notify the supplier as quickly as possible. Your chosen supplier cannot begin the process until it has been informed. It is almost equally important to contact suppliers who did not win the project to explain why someone else won the project. This can create a rapport with an elite group of suppliers that will lead to better future working relationships and better future projects.

Establish Objectives

Always make sure you understand the objective you and your partners have for the research. This will ensure you are ready for the research supplier's questions. If you are developing this project for another department, remember it needs to be as clear as possible about its requirements. But remember that this is a difficult task for nonresearchers to visualize. You can help yourself and your partners by having each write scenarios dictated by the possible research results.

What plans will you make if the results point in a negative direction for your products or services? What will you do

if the results are only marginally positive? Envisioning possible actions can be one of the best ways for all of you to understand the true objectives. Your chosen research supplier can work with objectives as well as with the action plan scenarios.

You may already have an idea of the type of methodology you want your research supplier to use in capturing information. Feel free to suggest a methodology but remain open to alternative techniques. Spend a few minutes discussing and better understanding ways in which the use of different methods will expand or reduce your overall use of the study. You need to make sure you understand why your contact is suggesting certain methods.

Many research companies have become specialists. In other words, they have developed an expertise in one or two types of research. You shouldn't automatically eliminate them from consideration. Just make sure that the research methodology suggested was selected because it best delivers the information you need, not because it's the only option. Keep in mind that for a man with only a hammer, every situation resembles a nail.

Making The Contact

Although a phone call isn't the only way to screen potential suppliers, making the first contact by phone often helps you better understand the supplier's overall capabilities and communication skills. Rest assured that the research professional at most supplier companies will be someone who is genuinely interested in your call.

At the same time, realize that most live inordinately harried lives, so you need to make sure you and the researcher are on the same page before you convey the request. To that end, here are a few tips—and while they seem like basic telephone courtesy for any type of supplier, it is amazing how often they are not followed.

1. Always take the time to introduce yourself. This will give both of you a minute to leave other tasks behind.

2. Take a few minutes to spell your name. That's important because many in the last 40 years have taken great pride in finding new and innovative ways to spell their children's names.
3. Also be sure to include your company's full name (e.g., Comwell, Consultants to Management, not simply Comwell). Without thinking, it is easy to slip into using an abbreviated name.
4. If you are leaving a message, always give your telephone and fax numbers and email address.
5. When applicable, include your company's website location. Many client service representatives are trained to search for additional information to build a better and stronger proposal before responding to a new prospect. Your assistance here will help shorten their discovery process.

The Right Information

Now that you and the supplier are focused on your needs, let's talk about the information you will want to share. The basic rule is to share only as much as you are comfortable sharing. But realize that the more you share, the better the proposal and subsequent research will be.

Begin by taking a few minutes to relate the background, (i.e., why you and your associates believe research is required). Try to share as much information as possible and, if necessary, ask the researcher to sign a nondisclosure agreement. When possible, you should list the departments with which you will be sharing the research results. This will significantly enhance the final product.

As you read from your form and describe your needs, share any information that might help the researcher build his proposal. For example, if the study needs to be conducted every year, make that clear. Frequency significantly affects research development. Specific questions not required for a one-time report but valuable for a study that will be fielded over and over again (tracking survey) can be added.

Unfortunately, having to build a benchmark the second year of a study, rather than the first, is all too common. Often a few alterations in the first year's study would have saved the corporation time and money.

Review other information that might be used in combination with the study. The additional information (internal data, earlier studies, etc.) will help your researcher design the data files and cross-tabulations produced for the analysis.

Revealing budgets is always an issue. However, being open about your budget helps researchers with the overall study design. Until you reach a point of trust where you feel you can share your budget with your supplier, you will need to be even more specific regarding the overall breadth of information required.

When doing this, make sure you don't ask for more than you can afford. That only wastes time. Remember, purchasing research is much like acquiring a new vehicle: A less expensive one might get you to your destination, but perhaps not as quickly, dependably, or comfortably.

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Be careful when trying to determine why costs vary among research firms. A particular methodology delivered within a certain time frame can be more costly for one firm than another. That may be due to some very real hidden benefits.

Here are some examples:

- The research firm is vertically integrated and uses extra checks to ensure your decisions are built on correct data input.
- The research firm has chosen to use more qualified research technicians within every department. More qualified technicians are paid more for their expertise.
- The client-service department includes experiential (client side and supplier side) as well as academic backgrounds, which produce more succinct, action-oriented conclusions and recommendations.

Added Tips

Don't automatically discard a company from future surveys because it cannot meet your current deadlines. A good research firm will tell you if it cannot meet your schedule, a courtesy that should keep it on your list for future studies.

If your study requires a final report and the cost for a personal presentation is reasonable, always include it. You may want the audience to be your department only, or you may wish to open the presentation to your partners and others at your company. Either way, it is simply human nature for a supplier to take more time in analyzing the data when she has been requested to present it. You may even find the analysis to be more comprehensive and useful than you thought it could be.

In short, remember that nothing substitutes for professional marketing research. Entering the process blindly, however, can cause problems for you and your research contact. To protect your budget and receive the best possible research, always take time to prepare yourself.

About Decision Analyst

Decision Analyst is a global marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new products research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.



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