

The quest for the ideal marketing researcher

Wanted: a good communicator with a healthy curiosity

Over the years, I have hired many marketing researchers as employees, contractors and vendors. Learning from my successes and failures, I have developed a profile of the desired education, experience, skills and other characteristics of the ideal marketing researcher.

Some of these characteristics, which I outline below, may be identified through resumes, individual and group interviews, references and research papers written by the candidates. However, some may emerge only through working side by side with a person. The best approach is to hire part-timers or contractors who have the potential to be hired full-time later on. This method works as a way to observe and test researchers' abilities, many of which cannot be predicted.

Both halves

Brain theory says that the left brain is more logical, linear, inductive and analytical, while the right brain is more visual, intuitive, creative and imaginative. The market research profession requires both talents, so the best researchers utilize both halves of their brains. After sifting through mounds of data, an ideal marketing researcher will report insights and meaning derived from the data rather than just summarizing the data.

To gauge a potential hire's abilities, I recommend looking for evidence based on education, abilities and interests. For the left-brain side, look for quantitative and logical coursework; for the right-brain side, look for literature, languages, visual arts and music. Some of my most successful hires had degrees in literature or languages, followed by a business education.

Advanced degree

To me, the best educational background for a marketing researcher is an advanced degree in the social sciences, particularly cultural anthropology, ethnography, sociology or psychology and at least basic statistics. Additional subjects of value are marketing, marketing research, communications, business strategy, geography, foreign cultures and languages.

Market research techniques originate from the social science disciplines. In social sciences courses, students learn a variety of information-gathering methods, particularly surveys, interviewing and observation, as well as various analytic methods. By the

snapshot

Looking to enter the marketing research field? Make sure you have a varied educational background, an ongoing love of learning and a flexible nature. Oh, and don't forget to use both sides of your brain.



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time they have an advanced degree in one of these subjects, they have learned to be proficient in searching for published research and writing research reports. Basic writing skills are essential; a manager certainly does not want to have to correct grammar and sentence structure.

Interpret findings

Marketing researchers with psychology training can interpret findings in light of underlying human needs. For example, in a study of international banking, business respondents listed many problems, questions and grievances concerning their foreign banking transactions. These businesspeople needed daily communication about what was happening with their foreign transactions. We all heard the same words, but the researcher, a psychologist, was able to see underneath the complaints to the underlying psychology and to describe the respondents' feelings of insecurity regarding foreign languages, currencies and measurement matters.

Lifelong learners

The best researchers are avid readers, travelers, online searchers or news junkies – in short, lifelong learners. Their accumulated knowledge and skills are often applied in surprising ways. For example, analogies from evolutionary biology can help explain the competitive situation in a market.

Researchers are curious people. They want to know about human behavior, attitudes and opinions and their underlying reasons and motivations. A curious person asks questions, listens carefully to the answers and probes for more information from respondents.

One test for curiosity in the hiring process is to observe how many questions the candidate asks in the interview, particularly questions on subjects other than compensation. However, watching a candidate conduct a research interview or focus group is the better test.

In addition to a healthy curiosity, a researcher also needs to be able to communicate through multiple channels (detailed reports, recordings, visual presentations, etc.) to enable

disparate audiences to understand the findings. Whatever it takes, the researcher must stay focused on the objectives and use the processed information to produce, communicate and interpret findings so they are clear, concise, interesting and actionable.

The best marketing researchers are those who understand qualitative and quantitative methods and can explain them in simple terms to audiences of all educational backgrounds. For example, not everyone understands statistical terminology, so results need to be expressed in plain English. At minimum, when presenting percentages, the researcher should say percentage of what. Researchers should also be prepared to explain what certain terms mean, such as statistical significance, sample size, correlation, confidence interval, sampling error and the like.

In the hiring process, it is important to ask for a research paper, perhaps an academic one, not just a writing sample, and review it for clarity and logic. In the interview, ask the candidate to explain some complex subject about which they have knowledge to see if they can do so in simple terms.

Adapted easily

In addition to a decorated academic background, successful hires must be able to adapt easily and grasp that brevity is prized in the business world. New researchers have to get used to corporate deadlines and move faster, sometimes sacrificing methodological precision, and sometimes arriving at conclusions with less-than-perfect data.

In addition to a broad educational background, I advise new entrants to get experience as an interviewer. There is no substitute for the learning you acquire from actually conducting an interview. It informs your ability to write a real-life questionnaire that respondents will be willing to answer.

Act as a partner

The in-house researcher is not just a messenger between corporate management and an outside vendor. Ideally, a researcher should act as a partner with the strategist or decision maker. He or she must under-

stand the context and information needs of the business and, based on management's research objectives, help create questions and then collect data to answer the questions. Thus, every researcher should take advantage of opportunities for education and training offered by their organization to obtain the business knowledge necessary for context.

Code of ethics

Marketing researchers should be guided by a code of ethics, such as the CASRO (Council of American Survey Research Consultants) Code of Standards and Ethics for Survey Research (www.casro.org/codeofstandards.cfm), which spells out a researcher's responsibilities to respondents, clients, the public, contractors and interviewers.

Examples of situations testing a marketing researcher's ethics might include demands from managers or clients to alter findings or reveal information from an individual respondent. In certain situations, a researcher might have to put his or her job or client relationship on the line to maintain ethical behavior. As in any such dilemma, the best course is to establish and maintain a reputation for honesty, integrity and trustworthiness. It is difficult to find out about a candidate's ethics during the hiring process, but you may be able to use certain hypothetical situations in the interview.

Only conduit

Marketing researchers provide a valuable service to consumers by communicating their unfulfilled needs and dissatisfactions to the corporate world. As advocates for the consumer, researchers may often be the only conduit between the consumer and the manufacturer, particularly in cases where the buyer is different from the user. Whether we are reporting on health plans or dog food, ultimately someone may benefit from the knowledge we have gained and communicated upward. Hopefully, this knowledge leads to a better product or service. At minimum, we know we have sent the message to the person who has the power to make improvements. | Q