SERVING THE NEEDS OF THE USER

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Various research methods are discussed in terms of evaluating government programs and meeting the needs of users in the private sector. A brief evaluation of social trend studies is given, as well as a description of problems associated with consumer research.

This paper addresses itself to answering the problem of serving the needs of the users as defined by Peter Hicks, and T.S. Thompson from Statistics Canada, and our colleague from Scott Paper, Robert Stewart.

Basically, I see the objectives of my talk as being to illustrate the contributions that can be made by survey research in terms of"

1. The evaluation of government programs
2. Meeting the needs of users in the private sector

1. THE EVALUATION OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

In his paper, Peter Hicks defined the stages in the life of a policy or a program as being four-fold: planning, designing, administering and controlling. Although Peter commented on various techniques, I propose to review the four stages, suggesting additional research methods which could be used with the full realization that one would not use all of them in any given study.

1.1 Planning Government Programs

The first objective in forming a government program or policy is one which was not identified yesterday, namely to correctly identify an issue or problem. Of the issues which are addressed by various government departments, I wonder how

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many are examined to evaluate their relevance to the public. Government departments might serve the public better by determining whether or not the issues or problems they are addressing are important, and whether or not they are fleeting or permanent issues.

First, let us examine the various stages of the development of an issue. Centre de Recherches Contemporaines Limitée has done some work recently on trying to trace the development of an issue. Our findings indicate there are four stages which are illustrated below:

Table 1.1.1

Development of an Issue

1. The fostering of an issue, usually by academics or individuals outside the main stream

2. The acceleration of an issue by the media

3. The adoption of an issue most likely by special interest groups

4. Keeping an issue alive regionally or nationally

I would like to give you an example of a problem we have worked on recently which was the development of the budworm issue in New Brunswick. It started as an obscure paper published by an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Dalhousie. This article indicated a possible connection between Reyes Syndrome and an emulsifier which was used in a spraying campaign to eradicate the budworm problem. The article was picked up by the press. It was seen by concerned groups in New Brunswick. Their subsequent actions resulted in further press coverage, and the enlistment of a segment of the general public to its cause. The issue is now beating its full fury, to the extent that it has a large corporation thinking twice about its next move.

The budworm issue is an important one; it concerns the public. Before committing public funds to a government program, it would be important to determine the importance of the issue addressed by the program to the general public. There are various methodologies which are applicable. The first is Content Analysis. This is a form of research which is now available in Canada and has been available in the U.S. for some time. It is provided by Canadian Trend Report. I believe a lot of members of the audience, particularly in the public sector, will be familiar with this methodology. Basically, it consists of tracking what is published in the press in every daily and weekly across Canada. This study traces the development of an issue in the press. It also measures its staying power.

The second methodology is Social Research. Yvan Corbeil mentioned various tools currently available, such as the CROP Report and the Monitor. These tools can measure the public's awareness of an issue over time. However, they have some disadvantages which I will discuss in a few minutes. The third methodology consists of Ad Hoc Consumer Surveys. These can determine how deeply an issue affects the public, as well as what segments of the population are affected by this issue.

There are limitations to each of these three methodologies. Content Analysis cannot measure the penetration of an issue in the public awareness. It is limited to an analysis of the press coverage. The Social Monitors do not determine the depth to which an issue affects the public. That is, they do not prioritize the various issues. The users of Ad Hoc Surveys, on the other hand, must beware of generalized importance scales, which are often used in attitude studies. We had a very good example of this in a previous paper when we were shown that, in general, the acceleration of a car was of no importance. However, if we examined the two poles of the scale, it was found there were two segments: those who considered acceleration "very important", and those who considered it "not important at all".

One solution to the problem of imperfect methodologies would be a multidisciplinary approach. Another would be to avoid motherhood statements when measuring the importance of an issue. We have seen many surveys which have statements such as "the energy problem is important, do you agree or disagree?" Questions such as these beg an answer. Another solution would be to determine the priorities, rather than measure the relative importance. If you ask consumers to evaluate various issues on a "very important" to "not important at all" scale, most everything will be important. It would be more useful to rank the various items to be evaluated.

It is also important to determine which remedial actions consumers plan to take. This will determine the seriousness of the problem from their point of view. For example, the energy problem has been discussed for years, however, have we ever asked consumers specifically how they will act to save energy? Will they turn off the lights, lower the thermostat, buy a small car or will they actually take the bus? Chances are very few that they will go to the latter extreme, yet many a government program in North America is designed to promote mass transit.

1.2 Designing Government Programs

The second point in the stage of government policy/program as outlined by Peter Hicks yesterday is the design. The objective of this stage is to determine the acceptability of the program, both to the general public, as well as to the audience towards which the program would be targeted. Cost shared studies such as the various Omnibus vehicles which exist today would allow one to ask questions of the public at large at a fairly low cost. Mail panels could also provide reliable data. In terms of determining the reaction of the target audience to the various programs, qualitative techniques such as focus group discussions or in-depth interviews could be useful. However, I agree with Chuck Mayer that focus group discussions can be dangerous tools, not for the researcher, but rather for the user. The latter will often use the results of a few focus groups to evaluate the situation, and although the supplier might caution the user, both verbally, as well as in print in the report, the user will inevitably use the results of a few group discussions to make vital decisions.

1.3 Administering Government Programs

The objectives of the administration stage are to determine the attitude of employees attached to the program, as well as ensuring the full use of the program. The methodology best suited to evaluating whether or not these objectives are met is the employee survey. Peter Hicks seemed to say there were a lot of employee surveys which have been administered by nonprofessionals. I would make a plea to use professionals when designing employees' surveys, in order to obtain a true evaluation of the reaction of those who administer the program. The main objective of an employee survey is to elicit in-depth reactions from employees concerning the program itself, its administration, as well as those who benefit from it. For example, what is the attitude of public service employees towards those for whom the programs are designed? We have done surveys for a number of departments where we found that the government employees felt the people at the receiving end were not really worthy. This can create serious problems. An excellent program poorly administered or poorly run by its employees is doomed to failure.

Suggestions for improvement should be elicited from employees. Furthermore, this should be done in such a way that confidentiality is insured. The results should be published as an aggregate, rather than as individual results from a particular department or section.

Other useful tools are surveys among target audiences to determine the awareness of the program, their attitude towards it, their experience with it, as well as their suggestions. Therefore, it is advisable to survey both employees, as well as the people for whom the program is designed. Self-administered surveys can also be used. Participants in a program could fill out certain forms which woulc be conditional to participating in the program. These could be designed to gather information on the program and its progress.

1.4 Controlling Government Programs

The fourth and final point in Peter,s paper was controlling government programs. The objectives were determining the attitude of both users and nonusers toward the program during various stages. User surveys could consist of mail surveys, as well as telephone follow-up surveys. The telephone follow-up is an interesting tool which is being used more and more. It is used particularly to track down users who have not answered mail questionnaires, which are a favourite tool of the government departments. As we were told yesterday, 37% of government surveys are mail surveys.

Centre de Recherches Contemporaines Limitee did a telephone follow-up study recently for a government department, where we tried to track down the people who didn't answer a mail questionnaire. The purpose was to determine whether there was a difference between those who didn't answer the mail questionnaire and those who did. Results from this study showed those who answered the mail questionnaire tended to be more upscale and more educated. Those who did not answer, i.e., those we finally reached by phone, tended to be less mobile and less educated. Regardless of this, there were no significant differences in the answers of respondents and nonrespondents on the main questionnaire. However, this is but one survey. You may want to examine your own programs to see if there are any differences.

It would also be interesting to survey the nonusers of a program. Telephone surveys could be used to determine their attitudes toward the pro-ram and the reason they did not use it. Perhaps it was not well designed, perhaps it was poorly targeted. There may be certain prejudices in terms of that particular audience which prevents them from using the program. It might also be useful to periodically re-evaluate the effectiveness of the program by using a fixed set of questions. These could also be used to determine whether or not certain benchmarks in the program had been reached. For example, if a program is designed to train people in acquiring new career skills, it could be decided beforehand how many people should be trained in a given time period. These goals could then be monitored.

2. EVALUATION OF SOCIAL TREND STUDIES

Our colleague, Yvan Corbeil, discussed the advantages of social trend studies such as the Monitor and the CROP Report. Although we agree there are advantages to such studies, we would like to point out that some disadvantages also exist.

The advantages of social trend studies are the following"

- Monitor public reaction to a series of issues over time
- Give a global view of the social climate of the country
- Allow governments and private industry to make better decisions based on a fundamentalist approach

One of the major strong points of social trend studies is that they are a time series. This type of information is very valuable both to private industry, as well as to government. It allows them to measure an issue over time, and to determine whether it is increasing or decreasing in importance.

The second advantage, which is providing a global view of the social climate of a country is essential in the decision-making process of the public, as well as the private sector. Furthermore, the fundamentalist aspect of the questions included in social monitors are such that they provide a much better data base on which to make decisions.

The disadvantages of social trend studies are the following"

- Offer a macro definition of the social climate
- Cannot be tailor-made to a micro situation, such as the needs of a particular government department or a particular private company

This is particularly true of the American social trend monitors. For example, the Yankelovitch Monitor in the U.S. does not allow a subscriber to add on questions that are germane to his particular segment of the industry. Furthermore, it is very difficult for such a generalist tool to produce an analysis based on the needs of one section of the industry. However, the Canadian social monitors now offer the possibility of including questions which are specific to an industry. Given this feature, they can be very useful tools. However, the user must know how and when to use them.

3. THE NEEDS OF THE USER IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The following is a brief comment on a section in Robert T. Stewart,s paper, namely "Available methods in advertising research". Research suppliers are often called to pretest advertising campaigns either by advertising agencies, or their clients. The most popular forms of pretesting are the focus group discussion, which consists of a qualitative evaluation of consumers' reactions to various elements of a campaign, as well as in-depth interviews. The latter provide the same qualitative evaluation as focus group discussions, however, without the synergy generated by group interaction.

The major flaw in this type of research is not the research itself but rather the importance it is given when making decisions. Qualitative methods, such as focus group discussions and a limited number of in-depth interviews do not allow a quantitative evaluation of an advertising campaign. As such, they should not be sufficient to decide whether or not a campaign should be adopted or rejected. Focus group discussions are but an exploratory tool, which generate hypotheses which should be tested by quantitative research. Unfortunately, this does not take into account both the tight schedules and the nonexistent research budget of the majority of advertising campaigns.

There are solutions to this dilemma, however. Some work is being done in the U.S. which might prove useful, in terms of measuring advertising effectiveness. The most promising body of work consists of setting up an extensive set of scales which is administered to fairly large samples in mall intercept situations. The objective is to determine the attention-getting effectiveness of a commercial, its ability to be retained, as well as its ability to promote attitude change. This tool can be used to measure the advertising effectiveness of a campaign, whether it be at the concept stage, the story board stage or the final product stage.

Other techniques based on nonverbal response have also been used to measure advertising effectiveness. A popular technique currently being used determines advertising effectiveness by measuring the voice pitch of a respondent when answering questions pertaining to the campaign. The effectiveness of this particular technique needs to be proven through repeated usage.

Other nonverbal techniques include measuring eye movement and pupil dilation when presented with advertising stimuli. This is particularly popular for measuring the effectiveness of print campaigns.

4. METHODOLOGY OR MYTHOLOGY
PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH CONSUMER RESEARCH

I would like to close this paper with an auto-critique of survey research. Although research suppliers, as well as research buyers often tend to tout their various methodologies as being the be-all and end-all, we must remember that the techniques currently available to us are not without fault. There are limitations to survey research.

For example, large scale surveys tend to ask too many questions. The general attitude often seems to be that given the high cost of locating respondents, it might prove to be more cost efficient if the questionnaire answered a greater number of questions. However, this philosophy does not take into account respondent fatigue. As a result, the cost benefit ratio is negative rather than positive in that the data which is gathered in of inferior quality. There is also the problem of increasingly high refusal rates, particularly for lengthy questionnaires. Dr. Wiseman of Northwestern University told us of the extent to which interviews were terminated in mid-stream. Suppliers knwo full well that an increasing number of respondents will hang up the phone or ask us to leave when we have gone beyond their limit of endurance, in terms of length of an interview. Ideally, a telephone interview should be 20 minutes and a personal in-home interview should not exceed 60 minutes. Of course, there are always those extra questions that must be put in and that is the problem!

Small scale studies are often misused. This has been said repeatedly. Unfortunately, the advice has not been heeded. It must be remembered that small scale studies consist of qualitative data only. The hypotheses generated by this type of research must be corroborated by in-depth research in order to be statistically significant.

I would also like to outline a few of the typical problems we often overlook by thinking that survey research can provide all the answers. Consumers are often presented with poorly defined concepts that do not allow them to understand the new product being evaluated. For example, draft beer in bottles, Tylenol, the nonaspirin aspirin or long-life milk products, which taste like fresh milk without the need to refrigerate them. The description of these concepts contains two contradictory elements. As such, consumers would find it very difficult to visualize them. As a result, their evaluation of these products could be erroneous.

Another problematic area is that products are often not discernible in consumers' minds. Product managers, as well as advertising agencies, often forget that consumers at large are not ultimately familiar with the various brands, as well as the different products available on the market. Although a brewmaster can differentiate one brand of beer versus another in a taste test, it can be very difficult for a consumer to do so. The same applies to differentiating between Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola. If you have ever tried each brand in a blindfolded test, you would know it is very difficult to tell the difference between the two products.

We also expect consumers to have a herculean ability to answer an average of up to one question every ten seconds. Furthermore, this must be done without faltering and without making a mistake. Of course, we expect them to give their true opinion, after having seriously reflected on the matter.

Furthermore, consumers are also expected to be able to provide extensive comments to open-ended questions such as, "What did you like about this brand of soft drink?" We must remember that consumers not only have not thought seriously about the texture or the taste of the different products they are currently using, but furthermore they most likely do not possess the extensive vocabulary that a creative director must have.

On the other hand, there is often a lack of sufficient in-depth probing in a one-to-one interview situation. For example, after a respondent says he liked the blue label on the bottle, we often times do not ask him why. Although we cannot expect him to go into great detail about his reasons, it would prove valuable to at least probe.

Consumers also have a lack of ability to remember the product attributes of the wide range of products they use. We often ask them questions pertaining to products from paint remover to fertilizer via frozen foods and paper products. Furthermore, we expect them to remember the elements which differentiate various products within a given product line.

There is often a tendency to use the same tools to measure different products. For example, if the same method were used to measure the task and frequency for products such as paper towels, facial tissues and toilet paper, respondents would have to tell us how often they use each of these products and for what reason!

On a more serious note, research techniques are often used improperly because they are currently fashionable. In the 1970's we saw many of the more popular techniques misused. Research buyers insisted on doing segmentation studies and conjoint analysis when they did not truly need them. However, those with large research budgets often felt it was necessary to use these techniques in order to be considered knowledgeable. Many expensive segmentation studies were put on the shelf because the creative department and the communications department did not have sufficient budgets to direct their advertising campaigns toward the five or six segments which surfaced in the segmentation study. Therefore, beware, although fashionable techniques can be interesting and valuable, they are not always actionable, either from a budgetary point of view or from a marketing point of view.

In conclusion then, I would like to say that marketing research is certainly a valuable tool if used properly. This paper has attempted to outline certain advantages and disadvantages inherent to the various marketing research techniques currently available. Let us hope they can be used appropriately and effectively.

RESUME

On examine diverses méthodes de recherche pour évaluer les programmes gouvernementaux et répondre aux besoins du secteur privé. Une évaluation sommaire des études sur les tendances sociales est présentée avec une description des problèmes liés à l'étude de consommation.