

Learning to improve

Each year I have the opportunity to interact with thousands of research professionals across a wide range of industries. I hear their stories, we discuss their needs and I read their feedback. What I have discovered is that many researchers are being thrown into the fray, forced to learn as they go. On-the-job training can be one of the best learning tools if we are aware when we make mistakes and know how to correct them, but all too often we transition from one project to the next without any feedback or critical review of the project completed.

Moreover, learning is often passed on from one researcher to the next by telling them to review old reports, projects and questionnaires for use on future studies, not realizing that errors made in the past are now being repeated over and over. The cycle of reproducing the same errors continues until someone within the organization takes a stand and challenges the status quo. For example, we asked one of our pharmaceutical clients why they asked the following question in this particular way, "Doctor, what percent of your time do you spend in a hospital?" The answer was, "We phrase the question this way because it has always been asked this way." What the original designer hadn't realized is that there are a number of problems with this question. Take the perspective of the doctor trying to answer the question. What is meant by spending time in the hospital? Is this time visiting with patients,

in surgery, meetings, consultation time? The other issue with this question is asking the survey respondent to figure out a percentage, which means they have to know what goes into the numerator and denominator. In this question, how should the denominator be calculated? Is it a 40-, 50- or 60-hour week? Should on-call time be included?

Well-designed questions should eliminate ambiguity and provide a consistent frame of reference for

each survey respondent. A simple solution would be to ask the question like this, "Approximately how many patients did you see in a hospital during the last seven days?" Based on tracking doctors' response to this question and comparing the results to their actual behavior, we have found that the doctors can provide a relatively accurate approximation that we can use during the analysis phase. This particular example is one of many marketing research-related errors that occur too frequently across our industry on both the supplier and client side.



By Jim Berling

Continuous marketing research education benefits the entire industry

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Failing as an industry

Let's look at some of the topics being discussed at marketing research conferences, such as panel quality, mitigating risks and improving accountability. Part of the reason these issues are so prevalent is because we are failing as an industry to provide the necessary foundation of well-educated, fundamentally-sound research professionals. Each year, both new and seasoned marketing research professionals go untrained, even though there are corporate directives and individual goals to enhance their overall skill sets.

When asked why corporations or individuals are not pursuing the myriad of training options available to them, I hear the same old issues, such as budget constraints, travel limitations and not enough time. With today's education and training options these excuses should no longer be acceptable answers to why we can't improve the overall of quality of research across the industry.

The following training and educational breakdown includes some of the latest advancements in the industry as well as a few of the more tried-and-true options.

Distance learning. Distance learning allows students to engage in independent learning activities from a remote source, usually combining a textbook with online discussion groups. The benefits include flexibility in scheduling, the ability to participate in training from a remote location, limited or no travel requirements and the student's ability to progress at their own pace.

The main concerns with distance learning involve the lack of direct face-to-face interaction with fellow students and the course instructor, the inability to ask questions and get answers in real-time and a learning pace extended over a longer period of time compared to traditional face-to-face education. The most highly-regarded program is the Principles of Marketing Research Program sponsored by Marketing Research Institute International (MRII) and the University of Georgia.

Webcasts. A Webcast offers students the ability to listen to a live or

prerecorded training session while they are viewing an online presentation. Usually a Q&A session is available at the end of the presentation. Benefits include the ability to participate in training from a remote location, limited or no travel requirements and the ability to ask questions as they arise if it is a live session. However, sessions typically run for only an hour or less, so topics have to be very narrowly focused. In addition, with no in-person or face-to-face contact, it is difficult to directly engage and motivate attendees or work in small teams. Most of the larger research supplier firms have produced Webcasts with content about current issues or specific protocols the firms use and sell.

On-site custom courses. On-site custom courses let organizations design a program that best meets the needs of their target audience. The educational content can be delivered either in-person or via Webcast. The benefits of these programs include lower per-person cost of training compared to attending public sessions. Content can be customized and adapted to address the particular needs of the company. Proprietary examples and upcoming projects can also be discussed without the possible presence of competitors.

Drawbacks to this method are that the training typically requires at least five or more people to be cost-effective, and customization is limited to the expertise and breadth of offerings of the educational provider. Most training and education providers can offer on-site custom courses. One provider of onsite custom programs is Burke Institute.

Podcasts. Podcasts are typically prerecorded training sessions that consist of audio files or audio and video files that can be downloaded from the Internet. The files can then be played using a computer or any device that can access the audio or video file formats. A podcast can also be subscribed to and downloaded automatically when new content is added.

On the downside, podcasts are one-way communication tools. Individuals only receive informa-

tion, they cannot interact directly with the training leader nor can they ask questions or get clarification on the content.

Professional certification. The Marketing Research Association (MRA) has taken the lead to develop a professional certification process for the marketing research industry. An ongoing certification process, the Professional Researcher Certification (PRC) designation is designed to, as described on the MRA Web site, "encourage high standards within the profession to raise competency, establish an objective measure of an individual's knowledge and proficiency and to encourage continued professional development." There are currently 1,035 professional certified researchers listed on the MRA Web site (www.mra-net.org).

In addition to the professional certification process, there are other educational programs that offer tangible recognition for marketing research professionals. Some of the other well-known and highly-respected programs include the masters of marketing research (MMR) program from the Terry College of Business, University of Georgia; the MMR program from Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville; the master of science in marketing research from the University of Texas at Arlington; the marketing research MBA from the A.C. Nielsen Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; Riva's Master Moderator program and the Burke Institute's certificate of proficiency programs.

Improve the quality

With all of these training tools at our disposal, we are well-equipped to improve the quality of marketing research across the industry. Take time to review your professional development goals and those of your company and determine how to balance the multitude of education and training options while continuing to pursue those on-the-job learning opportunities. The reputation and long-term viability of our profession depend upon it. | Q