

Fresh vs. Stale Thinking: How Surveys and Research Projects Can Drive Your Sales to the Top

By Ken Lizotte CMC

Every day of every work week, your business needs to keep winning new customers, holding on to current ones, winning back old ones and effectively driving sales campaigns and revenue goals. Beating out the competition is part of it and continuously offering high value all of it.

Most firms however go about this in less-than-optimal ways by relying only on knowledge about their products or services that they learned months and years ago, much of it outdated or lacking in recent customer feedback. Selling means pushing the same info time after time, never questioning it, never reassessing, never searching for ways to make it more relevant to its intended market.

True leaders of any field however do not think this way. Instead, the true leaders are exactly that because they constantly strive to, well, to lead. They believe in stretching their thinking in new and original directions by learning more about

what their customers might want and need here and now, or in the very near-future. Thus they continuously open their minds to “fresh thinking.” Since most of their competitors will typically engage in the opposite—stale thinking—this forward-thinking approach reaps them huge benefits in terms of health, wealth and a market position way out ahead of the pack.

Shelley Hall, President of Catalytic Management Group, a sales effectiveness consulting firm, puts it this way: “What do you do to maintain excitement in your company? How do you stay not only relevant but essential to your customers? How can you know if you are still delivering real value to them? The answer is quite easy: you ask them. When you encounter flat sales and high customer churn, you’ve probably lost touch with your customers. So just ask them and they’ll tell you exactly what they want. Survey them, talk to them, let them tell you how to sell to them. Your customers know perfectly well



Ken Lizotte is Chief Imaginative Officer (CIO) of emerson consulting group inc. (Concord MA), a consulting firm that transforms business experts and companies into “thoughtleaders.” Author of “The Expert’s Edge: Become the Go-To Authority People Turn to Every Time” (McGraw Hill), he is a professional speaker at major business events and ongoing seminar leader at Harvard University. Visit his website www.thoughtleading.com

how you can reinvent your company to meet their needs.”

Michael Norris, senior analyst at Simba Information, agrees, citing three major benefits that conducting such surveys and original research will invariably deliver:

1. Long-Term Value: “Part of the reason a lot of companies and consultants don’t bother conducting original research,” Norris says, “is that they are deterred by the amount of time and money involved up front.

Even a modest research study can raise the specter of an enormous interruption in day-to-day business flow. Yet research projects can pay great dividends for months or even years after completion. Though the life expectancy of information can be relatively short, the attention a new study can attract may be both priceless at the beginning and capable of contributing residual effects way down the road.”

2. No One Else Has It: Since so few individuals and firms go this extra step, your reputation as a fresh thinker will surely drive your attractiveness up a notch or two. Though you may already be the “go-to authority” in your area of expertise, the fact of your research component will help you stand out even more. “Not only will you know what you’re talking about,” Norris says, “you will also have information that even competing experts do not have. You become the expert that people would be crazy not to turn to every time!”

3. It’s Thoughtleading Money in the Bank. Once you’ve amassed original data on a topic, its possibilities for expanding your reputation as an industry or professional “thought leader” are endless. Norris offers a few examples:

- Your fresh data can be spotlighted your website and other marketing collateral
- You can strategically incorporate your unique data fresh into sales calls and prospect presentations
- You can build a book and a series of articles around your findings

- You can deliver speaking presentations based on your findings
- You can distribute summaries of your finding to media and industry analysts
- You can sell your research as a product, charging a hefty fee for the executive summary and/or the entire study
- You can create new products or services!

You can see from this list of benefits how an investment of time, energy and money in “fresh thinking” research can return multiple dividends. True thought leaders will recognize this as their competition hangs back, frets and doubts, procrastinates and generally keeps doing the same-old/same-old, blissfully unaware of research’s obvious benefits.

Carol Bergeron, Founder/President of Bergeron Associates, a human capital management and organizational performance improvement firm, understands the difference. In 2006, Bergeron partnered with Insight Management Group, a project and change management consulting firm, to conduct a study of C-level executive using both a web based survey and one-on-one interviews. Over 100 executives participated, from 20 US states, and 3 countries, responding to survey questions that examined their views and practices on enterprise performance.

“It was an effective way of building professional relationships with a broader group of CEOs,” Bergeron recalls. “And publishing and disseminating our research results

helped with building our brand. It established my firm as a credible, visible source of valuable insight in the business community.”

She warns however that committing to a “fresh thinking” project should not be equated with the proverbial bed of roses. Conducting research can indeed be “very time consuming” plus it “tapped into every skill and competence I had (and didn’t have!).” Though definitely a taxing process, Bergeron nevertheless feels the resulting notoriety among businesses she surveyed, as well as among readers of publications that ran articles about her survey, greatly expanded her company’s reach, making it well worth it.

Getting Started

Once you decide to desert the ranks of “stale thinking” and embark on a fresh research project, you’ll want to ensure your success by learning from veterans of the field. Leonard Fuld, author of *Competitive Intelligence: How to Get It, How to Use It*, insists that four qualities stand highest on the list:

- **Insight.** “Know your sources before beginning the assignment,” Fuld writes. “Understand which sources might help or speed up the research process...Insight allows you to save time and begin probing ...almost immediately, without wasting time.” By “sources,” Fuld refers to the various individuals from whom you will seek information.

For example, you might be researching the furniture industry

to learn about upcoming new product designs. Who in that industry would best help you “speed up” the process? If you are trying to learn more about novel furniture products being developed for sale within the coming year, you might want to be contacting marketing and sales reps who might have the best technical handle on these “coming-soon products. If your aim was to learn about products five years down the road, the industry's designers and engineers might be the best targets. They might be experimenting with new product models that even the CEO or other top managers would not be fully aware of. Thus, the better you understand which sources will most likely possess precisely the kind of information you are seeking, the faster and more efficiently you may acquire the precisely right answers.

- **Creativity.** When basic sources fail, Fuld says, the smart researcher “will uncover new sources to address the problem.” Use your imagination and keep looking for someone who can answer all your questions, such as (to continue the furniture research example above) “What kind of products are being planned for your customers in the next 12 months?” or “How do new designs originate?” or “Are your new ideas ever tested with your customer base, and how?”
- **Strategy.** To save precious time, especially with a fast-approaching deadline, “the astute researcher will devise a plan of attack, a

means to efficiently find the vital intelligence. Random research means wasted time, lost dollars, and failure to meet deadlines.”

Our furniture researchers, for example, would want to pinpoint the leading furniture manufacturers to approach, rather than going willy-nilly to a furniture store or picking a company name virtually out of the phone book. Doing some initial research on who are the leaders in the industry would go a long way toward devising an effective plan of attack. It would also be wise to ask a few questions up front so that objectives are clear for your plan, such as “Do we want to know about home furniture or office furniture or both?” and “Into what time frame do we want our survey to project: one year? Five years? Ten years?” and “How much detail do we want report about how new products are developed?” Such questions will offer your research a focused “plan of attack.”

- **Persistence.** “Where all else fails, keep trying.” All too often, Fuld explains, someone will tell you that no one has that information (which adequately answers your questions). Just as often, he says, “you can bet that someone surely does. Countless projects were solved because the researcher tried just one more contact, made just one additional phone call.” In other words, if you keep running up against brick walls with your targeted sources because they offer you only limited answers to your

questions or none at all (“I really don't know why we do it that way!”), then keep digging.

Someone who has meaty answers to your questions, Fuld insists from his years of personal experience, will always be out there!

Armed with these powerful qualities in the big question next facing you may be the most obvious one: what are your objectives? Simba's Michael Norris advises clarifying these by answering three crucial questions:

1. What do you want to know?
2. What do you want to ask?
3. Where do you want to look for the answers?

The first two questions must be answered internally, it being entirely up to you to decide the focus of the knowledge that your research will pursue and the right questions to get you there.

The third question involves external sources, derived partly from secondary sources such as books and articles and heavily from such primary sources as knowledgeable individuals intimately involved with the issues being scrutinized. One way to find such interviewees is to ask around through an often forgotten way is to approach a professional association that represents your target respondents.

The Survey Itself

In terms of the survey itself, the trick will be to implement it in a manner that collects the opinions you need without alienating your surveyees. Brian Henderson, a marketing

consultant with Prezza Technologies, explains, “We’ve all been on the receiving end of far too many poorly constructed surveys that required too much time and energy simply to share our thoughts.”

To avoid doing the same, Henderson cites such professional best practices as keeping a questionnaire short and sweet (“Make it take five or even two minutes or less, if you can,” he says), keeping language simple (“Don’t use jargon and don’t make your questions too long or complex”), keeping it specific (“Don’t ask open-ended questions that will leave you with too wide a range of answers”) and keeping it consistent (“If the first question asks your respondents to rate your customer service on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being highly satisfactory, make sure that in subsequent questions 5 always corresponds to being highly satisfactory.”).

Last, but not least, remember to share the results with your customers and let them know what action you plan to take. If you need more information from them, do follow-up surveys, Henderson says, but also remember that you’re requesting precious time from these individuals, so be careful not to abuse such a relationship.

One final point about surveys involves methodology. Positioning and branding expert Michael Antman, president of McSweeney & Antman, suggests that face-to-face or voice-to-voice interviews should be included as well. That’s because the most-effective research “isn’t necessarily the most rigidly designed,” he says. “In fact, a so-called loosely designed program—whether qualitative or quantitative—may not appear very scientific at first glance, yet sometimes it will reveal more real truths than the most carefully crafted and comprehensive research programs.”

Since fresh thinking research is about both information gathering and insight gathering, Antman explains that hearing data you already know can be eye- and ear-opening. That’s because you can often learn about something in a new way or acquire a quote that says something more authentically than you ever could. In such ways, personal interviews can augment a less personal poll’s final value.

When all is said and done, fresh thinking research can separate you from your competition in such a way that your competition all but fades away. If you take care to prepare well and do things right, it’s a marketing/product development strategy that can prove extremely beneficial to your bottom line, as well as open whole new dimensions for your business to explore and exploit. By turning age-old notions on their ear, examining them from previously unexplored angles, you’ll discover brand-new value propositions, more powerful ways to solidify your customer relationships and a means of renewing your business and insuring its growth year after year after year.