

When to outsource research

The decision on whether to outsource research depends on objectives and resources

Ideally, measurement should be built in to your strategic communication plan. However, adding measurement to the already long list of functions on your job description might not be easy in terms of finding the time and resources, not to mention the challenge of producing a product that's management credible.

Outsourcing some or all aspects of the research function may be the answer. But in many cases, you can gain the advantages of an outside adviser without actually going outside. To decide what aspects of measurement to outsource:

- consider your objectives for the research;
- identify available internal resources, both people and budget;
- outsource only those aspects of research that will give you the most value.

Using in-house resources

In many larger organizations, you may have skilled resources available in another department that can provide you with the advantages of outsourcing at less cost.

Objectivity. If you need an outsider's impartiality to conduct focus groups or executive interviews on communication, you may have individuals in the human resources or market research departments who are trained in this process.

Their lack of vested interest in the results of the research will help them to more accurately listen to what is being said and probe issues without emotional attachment to the answers. A facilitator without any responsibility for creating the communications being discussed also makes participants more comfortable talking about their perceptions about the communications.

Specialized skills. If you're conducting a survey, you'll need to involve an expert with

experience in designing questionnaires and selecting random samples. If you don't, your management may discount the findings because the results won't be statistically reliable. Many larger companies have individuals on staff, in market research or organizational development, who have been trained in survey research and can provide you with the help you need.

When you must go outside

In some instances, your best option is to bring in an outside consultant.

Low priority for in-house resources. You may have the skills available in your IT department to create an on-line survey, but they won't give your project priority. Your market research department may be happy to help with an internal survey, but you'll have to wait until April when they have a break in their schedule. In these instances, you may have to use outside resources or the project may never be completed.

Database comparison. If your management will want to know how your own organization's results compare with those at other companies, you'll need to have the project conducted by a consultant with sufficient experience to have built up a database. Questions will have to be asked in the same way as others in the database, using the same content and response scales.

Benchmarking. If you wish to conduct a benchmarking study to compare how other companies' best practices, staffing, budgets, etc. stack up against your own, you may need to use a consultant to encourage participation.

Many companies, especially those in your own industry, are willing to share data only if the findings are not connected with their company name in the report. Some will agree to participate only if your own company doesn't know that they participated. In this

case, you need to find a consultant with strong contacts throughout the communication industry and a reputation for discretion.

Keep it credible

Credibility with management. Many times when I present a report to a management team, they turn to my communication client and say, "I guess what you've been telling us all these years is true." An outside consultant, with a certifiably wide base of other companies' experiences to draw on, often provides the same advice with a more solid foundation of research.

Outsourcing in modules. If you decide you do need to work with an outside consultant and budgets are tight, you can be creative in finding ways to hand off only those elements of the research that require outside help and do everything else in-house.

Strategy versus implementation. You may bring in a consultant to help you develop a research strategy to identify what aspects of communication to measure and which tools to use for each one. Then you may conduct the measurements on your own.

Partnering throughout a project. You may conduct all the parts of a research project in-house that don't require outside expertise and might cost more money if done by consultants, such as printing surveys.

Repeated measurements. You may also use an outside consultant the first time you conduct a particular kind of research, and then bring much of the process in-house when you repeat the measurements.

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Angela Sinickas is senior communication consultant with William M. Mercer, Incorporated in Orange, Ca.

Next issue: Dr Andrew Brown talks about analysis of measurement data.

Angela Sinickas answers more measurement FAQs on www.melcrum.com

Contact

Angela Sinickas

William M. Mercer, Incorporated.

E-mail: angela.sinickas@us.wmmercercor.com