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Selection and Formulation of a Research Problem

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Abstract:
There is no short cut to research. One has to go through every phase of it in detail. Often, student-researchers hastily skip the stage of choosing and formulating a research problem by borrowing or imitating a title which is wrongly presumed to be a research problem and then face difficulties later. Here are some tips to select and formulate a research problem.

Keywords: *Formulation, Research problem, Selection of the problem*

1. Research Problem: 5 Ways to Formulate the Research Problem

1. Specify the Research Objectives

A clear statement of objectives will help you develop *effective research.*
It will help the decision makers evaluate your project. It's critical that you have manageable objectives. (Two or three clear goals will help to keep your research project focused and relevant.)

2. Review the Environment or Context of the Research Problem

As a marketing researcher, you must work closely with your team. This will help you determine whether the findings of your project will produce enough information to be worth the cost.
In order to do this, you have to identify the environmental variables that will affect the research project.

3. Explore the Nature of the Problem

Research problems range from simple to complex, depending on the number of variables and the nature of their relationship.
If you understand the nature of the *problem as a researcher*, you will be able to better develop a solution for the problem.

To help you understand all dimensions, you might want to consider focus groups of consumers, sales people, managers, or professionals to provide what is sometimes much needed insight.

4. Define the Variable Relationships

Marketing plans often focus on creating a sequence of behaviours that occur over time, as in the adoption of a new package design, or the introduction of a new product.
Such programs create a commitment to follow some behavioural pattern in the future.
Studying such a process involves:

- Determining which variables affect the solution to the problem.
- Determining the degree to which each variable can be controlled.
- Determining the functional relationships between the variables and which variables are critical to the solution of the problem.

During the **problem formulation** stage, you will want to generate and consider as many courses of action and variable relationships as possible.

5. The Consequences of Alternative Courses of Action

There are always consequences to any course of action. Anticipating and communicating the possible outcomes of various courses of action is a primary responsibility in the research process.

A research problem cannot be borrowed; a researcher has to find his own problem; a guide can only help in choosing a broad subject or topic.

- Right questions must be addressed; having a topic to read about is different from having a problem to solve; a topic to read leads to aimless and endless gathering of data and there is no way of ascertaining when we have enough to start. Further, this can also lead to a struggle to decide what to incorporate in the report.
- Have an unbiased and unattached approach; No matter how complex it is, be objective
- Be uncommitted before selection
- Have more than one problem to ponder over, i.e., keep alternatives
- Never settle on a particular approach at the first instance; the decision on methodology should not precede problem selection
- Interact with experts and practitioners
- Avoid superficial and obvious problems as well as overdone and controversial subjects
- Avoid too narrow or too vague problems (settling on a broad topic with four or five words is risky.)
- Have a preliminary 'quick and dirty' study and / or a brief feasibility study
- Problems should suit your interest, competence and ability
- Identifying gaps through literature surveys throw up new problems
- Check the availability of the required data and co-operation of people concerned
- The problem should be novel, significant and useful to practitioners; the utility of the expected findings should be judged
- Spend a lot of time writing and note taking to understand the problem
- Make preliminary outlines, disagree with what is read, draw diagrams to connect disparate/ disconnected facts, summarise sources, record random thoughts, which can be discarded later if necessary. Start writing at the very beginning in order to encourage critical thinking, to understand sources better and to draft more effectively.

2. Conclusion

Some important sources for research problems include reading, academic/ or other daily work experience, exposure to field situations, consultations, brainstorming, past research and intuition. Discussing how to select and define a project, Catherine Dawson in Practical Research Methods (2002) summarises the questions to be raised and answered by a research student.

- Why have I decided to do some research?
- What personal characteristics do I have which might help me to complete my research?
- What skills and experience do I have which might help me in my research?
- The five 'Ws': What is my research?; Why do I want to do this research?; Who are my research participants?; Where am I going to do the research?; When am I going to do the research?
- You must take time to think about your research as this will save you problems later.
- When you're thinking about your research, keep asking yourself questions
- Sum up your research project in one sentence
- Discuss your sentence with your tutor or boss and revise if there is any confusion.

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