

Chapter 8

Analysing Blogs in Market Research

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ABSTRACT

There are many research methods available to market researchers. The most common methods are the use of survey questionnaires and interviews. However, these methods are dependent on respondents' ability to recall their experiences accurately. The use of diaries in market research has been argued to be a more valid research method. Respondents record their experiences almost immediately after an event, and the data is thus subjected to less distortion. In addition, diaries generate a regular stream of undirected data in chronological order, which allows for deeper insights into consumption patterns and changes in attitudes or behaviours. More recently, the development of blogs or electronic diaries opens new possibilities for researchers interested in the use of diaries as a research method. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the use of blogs as a market research tool. The chapter first reviews the arguments for using blogs in market research. This is followed by an examination of two case studies using blogs in market research and a discussion on how blogs can be used effectively in such studies.

INTRODUCTION

Companies conduct market research to collect information on their customers and their needs. The majority of market research methods require respondents to recall their experiences accurately. As such, the use of diaries has been argued to be a more valid research method as the data collected is subjected to less distortion, given that respondents record their experiences almost immediately after an event.

The difficulties associated with the use of diaries in research has unfortunately, prevented the method from being more popular despite its advantages over other methods. The development of blogs or electronic diaries opened up new possibilities for researchers interested in the use of diaries as a research method. Blogs are frequently updated websites where content including text, pictures and sound files are posted on a regular bases and displayed in reverse chronological order (Schmidt, 2007). This becomes a new source of data for researchers.

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As blogs are still relatively new, there is little in the literature on the use of blogs as a research method. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the use of blogs as a market research tool. While some of the issues related to the use of blogs will be similar to the use of diaries in research, there will be other issues specific to using data from blogs in research.

The first section of the chapter will examine the advantages and disadvantages of using diaries as a research method in general. It will also include a discussion specific to blogs, examining how the internet alters the way data is collected and the challenges associated with the research method. In particular, the discussion will focus on the issue of bias in sampling, challenges in analysing blog entries, validity of blog entries and ethical issues in accessing data from blogs. The second section will examine two research studies using blogs as a research method. The purpose of this section is to provide examples to illustrate the discussion in the first section and to propose how blogs can be used effectively in market research.

USING BLOGS IN RESEARCH

Questionnaires and in-depth interviews are commonly used in market research. These methods are used variously to collect information on customer profile, attitudes, behaviours and other variables of interest to marketers. However, such methods are dependent on the memory of respondents and unfortunately, respondents are unable to recall their experiences accurately all the time. More importantly, it has been shown that memories can be easily distorted by environmental factors (Zaltman, 2003). As such, especially in collecting data on customers' past experiences, the market researcher will need to be aware that the validity of the research depends to a large extent on the consumers' ability to recall information accurately.

Using diaries in research has been argued to be a more valid research method. Subjects record

their experiences much more immediately when compared to the other methods. As such, the information collected is subjected to less distortion (Alaszewski, 2006; Broderick, 2008; Brooks, 1987; Lines, 2007). More importantly, diaries generate a regular stream of undirected data in chronological order. It thus allow the researcher to analyse changes in attitudes or behaviour and gain deeper insights into consumption patterns (Broderick, 2008; Leigh, 1993; Lines, 2007; Zillinger, 2008).

The use of diaries as a research method is well established in the fields of history and medical studies. Diaries are useful in such fields as they are able to provide longitudinal data for analysis. This is important in these fields for researchers to examine changes over time. For example, in medical studies, the use of diaries allow researchers to examine the experience of patients over time and provide better medical assessments (Adams, 2010; Broderick, 2008). More recently, there has been an increase in interest in the use of diaries in other fields. For example, in the field of leisure and hospitality, several studies using diaries and blogs were conducted (Crotts, Mason, & Davis, 2009; Y. J. Lee & Gretzel, 2014; Magnini, Crotts, & Zehrer, 2011; Schiano, Elliott, & Bellotti, 2007; Zillinger, 2008).

Diaries can provide chronological data which allows researchers to determine the activities in different time periods and the duration of activities. In some studies, respondents are asked to indicate the activity that they were engaged in at regular intervals of time. Data analysis in such studies examine the type of activities in different time periods, the duration of each type of activities and the frequency of such activities across different groups. While this structured response can make data analysis easier, it disregards the real advantage of the diary method. Diaries can also provide for a more naturalistic and immediate sense of consumers' activities and experiences for analysis (Lines, 2007; Schiano, et al., 2007). As such, other studies have moved beyond analys-

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