



To Google or Not to Google? A “How To” Primer for Market Research

“To Google or not to Google?” that is the question I ask of thee. As we all know, search engine research can be overwhelming. Just enter your word or phrase and off you go into the wild, wild digital quest. The amount of information is astounding if not intimidating.

So where does one start? If your small business or start up does not have the budget for proprietary and custom market research, how do you locate valid, public domain data on which to make decisions? Here are some tips to get you started.

Learn how to search

Go to Google’s “Web Search Help Center,” and you will find a wealth of information on how to maximize searches. Specifying exactly what you enter is key. For example, when searching for market research data, entering the date range may eliminate outdated information.

Adding a simple “2010” to your search phrase will often bring up forecasted data. For example, if my company sells iPod accessories and I was looking for forecasted iPod sales, I might type the following:

“iPOD market forecast and 2010.”
You could also use “2011 or 2015” to see the if there are even longer-range forecasts in available articles.

Boolean language, using “and” or “or” is helpful (yes, pun intended). One simple trick in an article search is to include the phrase “iPOD sales” to find articles with the words “iPOD and sales” in their titles. This method allows you to narrow down your searches since laser-fine accuracy helps in research. The internet’s wealth of information is both a blessing and a curse. The sooner you narrow your search with the correct syntax, the faster you will locate some golden public domain nuggets helpful to your cause.

Understand primary versus secondary source research

There are two kinds of sources for market research: primary and secondary. Primary takes you directly to the source. For example, let’s say you wanted to research the life of Abraham Lincoln or Bill Gates, using quotations from actual letters written by both men. That would be considered primary source data. If you quoted or sourced from

articles or biographies that were written about Bill or Abe, then the source would be secondary or indirect. Primary source information comes from the horse's mouth; secondary source comes from the horse's friend or cousin. This is not to say the secondary is unusable; but it still must be tested by primary and other trustworthy sources. In short, the closer you get to the actual person, topic or event, the closer you are to accuracy.

If you are doing market research for a specific product, then quotes from the company CEO regarding revenue performance and future market plans are more valuable than an analyst saying "I think..." about this company. Furthermore, hard unit, sales-out data from research companies like NPD or IDC may also be considered primary source data, since the numbers may track actual unit shipments specific to a product model or line. Companies like IDC and NPD often pay leading OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturer) and channel partners for unit and product specific data. Numbers don't lie if the source comes directly from the source. However, be prepared to pay if you really need the granularity of data required to make revenue changing decisions.

How far back do you go?

The key to understanding the future is often hidden in the past. When starting your market research quest you can sometimes find valuable data, concepts, facts and trends buried in the older material that is no

longer "confidential" or "proprietary." Those older articles, white papers and position papers are great training tools to learn about new concepts and industries.

For example, at one of my former employers, I was commissioned to study a new market in its infancy. I poured over tons of articles and materials I found on the internet to educate myself on terms, concepts, trends, mistakes and successes of the specific market segment. Once I knew the lingo and common place anachronisms I could "speak the language," which in turn helped my search for current and future findings.

Customer feedback

Don't discount an invaluable and often untapped source of research data: your customers. If you keep a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) database, putting together a simple five to ten question survey can provide key intelligence. Assign your sales reps or one of your "pleasant voice" personnel to call customers with questions. Or, have your tech support department field the questions at the end of calls.

Your web site can also become a great source for market research surveys. But remember: keep the questions short, simple, targeted, and closed-ended with no room for open ended comments. This way the info is targeted and specific. Once the survey is complete, some companies even share the results in a graphic format to inform customers of their findings.

This is not to discount the value of open-ended questions. The focus is to quantify and not qualify the data. Closed questions, such as, “On a scale of 1 to 5, rank our quality,” allow you to measure on a scale. Questions such as “How do you feel about our products,” leave no room for exact findings. Focus groups are more suited for the qualitative findings, but that’s another article!

Proprietary research

Companies often tell themselves, “We don’t need to pay for market research. We are the expert in our field and know our product better than any analyst.” Be careful if you’re thinking this way. You have to remember that market research analysts are paid to do one thing: market research. That’s all they do all day long. In most cases companies don’t have the time or staff for full-time research.

In addition, most research companies like IDC, Gartner, Forrester, Semco, Advanced Forecasting, etc., segment their analysts to cover specific industries. These analysts have a laser focus in that specific niche market segment and they also have an extensive network of contacts they speak with daily. They are guarded by NDAs and confidentiality agreements with accounts and clients, but they still have a daily pulse on the markets they cover.

Public domain information only goes so far. If you want the most detail, accuracy, relevancy and topic specific research, then there are few

substitutes for proprietary research reports and data. You will have to pay, and the cost can sometimes be substantial. However, the cost of bad research is often much greater than forking out the funds for the correct information. Research ROI (Return on Investment) is a factor. Don’t discount it.

Remember the purpose of research

Don’t research for research’s sake. The goal of all good market research should be two-fold: 1) To provide actionable intelligence, thus avoiding costly strategic mistakes down the road. 2) To increase sales through discovering new markets and market segments.

If you just want to tickle your ears and spend hours reading “interesting” facts, but do not want to apply what you learn, then don’t partake on a major travel to research land. Make sure your research produces results and not just reports. Reports have their place but the paper they are printed on must translate into green paper – that is: increased revenue!

Stuart Atkins, MBA, MA



www.atkinsmarketingsolutions.com

© 2008 H. Stuart Atkins