

TEACHING MARKETING RESEARCH USING THE INTERNET: A LIBRARIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has caused an explosion in the amount of data available for marketing research. Course-integrated instruction by a librarian is an excellent method for teaching students how to develop strategies for finding marketing research on the Internet. Techniques for conducting marketing research on the Internet are presented. Free and fee-based sources of marketing research are identified and critiqued. Methods for determining the authority of information retrieved and ways to mine the "invisible" Web are discussed.

The Internet has changed the face of marketing education. Students expect – as do the companies that will hire them – to have extensive training and experience in the use of the Internet. The challenge for marketing education is to teach students the current capabilities of marketing research on the Internet while acknowledging that these capabilities often change daily. Equally important is to teach what can not be had via the Internet, and how to find useful data on the unindexed, or "invisible" web. It is a rare university that can afford to purchase professionally produced market research reports, which often run into the tens of thousands of dollars per report. The alternative is to acquire marketing research from free sources like government agencies, free or fee-based databases available via the Internet, or traditional print resources which are widely available in university libraries. (Staninger, Goshorn, and Boettcher, 1998) Teaching strategies for retrieving relevant data from these sources is essential for effective marketing research. Integrating library instruction with marketing research is an effective way of teaching these vital skills.

As any Internet user knows, it is quite easy to retrieve mass quantities of information. The challenge lies in assessing quality and determining relevancy to the research project at hand. This is a frequently underemphasized research skill. Traditional marketing research methods courses focus on instructing the students how to retrieve data. With the Internet and several search engines of varying quality available, retrieving data is no longer a problem. The challenge lies in learning

how to focus searches so that relevant data is retrieved. Once assembled, this data must be assessed to determine its accuracy and relevancy to the project at hand. Internet resources are widely used in marketing education, but the focus is usually on interpreting the data found. (Siu and Chau, 1998) Instruction on strategies for finding quality marketing data and accurately assessing its authority is a vital - but seldom thoroughly taught - aspect of marketing education.

Even the best Internet search engines retrieve somewhat less than 40% of available web pages. (Sullivan, 2000) Web search engines index words found in HTML format. They usually index titles, but not content. Homepages of databases are found, but not the content contained in the database. These search engines also do not index any documents in PDF (Adobe's Portable Document Format), which is the format of many business related electronic publications. The result is that this often valuable information is "invisible" to popular web search engines. (Snow, 2000)

The chaos of the Internet is starting to be brought under control by search products that classify and catalog information like a traditional library. The most prominent of these is Intelliseek's *Invisible Web* [<http://www.invisibweb.com>]. Invisible Web lists over 10,000 sites in classified, searchable databases. These sites are content rich databases, instead of simply homepages of dubious value. Other relatively new services that are helping to classify and catalog the invisible web are *The Big Hub* [<http://www.thebighub.com>], *Internet Oracle* [<http://www.internetoracle.com>], and *Webdata* [<http://www.webdata.com>]. Of particular interest to marketing researchers is iMarket's Zapdata [<http://www.zapdata.com>]. It provides an impressive collection of marketing data for free, although users must first register online. These sites for searching the invisible web should be not be considered a replacement to popular search engines such as *Alta Vista* [<http://altavista.com>], *Lycos* [<http://www.lycos.com>], *Web Crawler* [<http://www.webcrawler.com>], and many others too numerous to mention. The important lessons for marketing students are to understand how search engines work, and be aware of their inherent

limitations. Equally important is to explain what constitutes the invisible web, and to provide sites and strategies for finding this information. The Internet, its content, and the means of finding electronic information changes daily. Fundamental strategies of keyword searching, classification schemes, and cataloging practices change very slowly, if at all, and students must be taught these skills to become effective researchers.

Information retrieval and assessment is one of the primary functions of a university business librarian. Librarians, through formal training, daily experience, and continuing education, have a keen sense of how to retrieve and assess information. Students are well served when librarians are included in a course-integrated program of instruction in marketing education. A one or two day seminar taught by the librarian in lieu of the regular class meeting is usually sufficient for introductory database instruction. Research is a vital component of marketing education, and the inclusion of library instruction in the curriculum provides students with the necessary skills to conduct effective marketing research.

When instructing students in doing marketing research via the Internet, the most important concept, from a librarian's perspective, is determining authority. In order to accurately assess the quality of the marketing research retrieved from the Internet, the student must be able to determine with reasonable certainty the authority of the data. The author can be personal, corporate, or governmental. In any case the identity and perceived reliability of the author is absolutely crucial in determining whether or not the data retrieved can be considered valid.

Almost any search for marketing data using any of the popular Internet search engines will retrieve tens of thousands of sites. At the University of San Diego, marketing classes often include a library instruction unit. The librarian, in consultation with the marketing professor, creates a course-integrated instructional seminar wherein students are taught strategies for successful marketing research. One instructional tool used to help students to see the importance of determining authority is the fictitious "Bob's Marketing Homepage". The students are instructed to ask the following questions:

- Who is Bob?
- Where is he getting this information?
- How do you know if it is accurate?

- Why is Bob putting this up on the Internet for free?
- Is this information going to be here tomorrow?

The honest answer to all of these questions is, of course, "I don't know!" This exercise has proven to be quite effective in getting students to be suspicious of data found for free on the Internet. The questions listed above are a good way for students to assess the authority of any information they retrieve. These questions can be easily answered when the author is a government agency, a marketing association, or a well-known marketing research firm or periodical. There are many ways to refine the results of research: careful selection of keywords, using Boolean operators (and, or, not) to focus the search, and limiting by year, languages, or material type. None of these are, in the opinion of the author, as useful as questioning – then determining – the authority of the data retrieved.

Because of the tremendous amount of information readily available via the Internet, students need a method that will allow them to focus their research before they begin searching. The goal is not to retrieve marketing data, but to retrieve just that data relevant to the current research project. An effective way of bringing focus to a marketing research project is the traditional outline. It need not be a formal Roman numeral I, section A outline, but simply an organized list of research objectives. Creating an outline forces the student to think through their research objectives, and determine the specific goals of their search. Many students simply search for "marketing research" and are overwhelmed when tens of thousands of items are retrieved. Prior planning encourages thoroughness and precision, two qualities necessary for doing effective and efficient marketing research.

Students often have unrealistic expectations of the type of marketing research available in university libraries. Although libraries typically subscribe to a wide variety of electronic and paper publications that contain data relevant to marketing research, it is quite rare for libraries to acquire – either electronically or in paper - marketing research reports sold by private consulting firms and large marketing research companies. The marketing research that is available in libraries is usually produced by governmental organizations or is material that the library has purchased from an information vendor on a subscription basis. (Poe, 2000) Students need to be made aware of the limitations of this data. It is often the case that the information they are seeking is available, just not in the format they would like. "Turn-key" marketing

research reports are prohibitively expensive and rarely available in university libraries. Course-integrated library instruction teaches students that a market profile can be cobbled together using a variety of free and fee-based Internet sources, as well as traditional paper sources.

With the explosion of distance education, Internet-based research has become an essential part of the marketing curriculum. Indeed, the existence of the Internet has created the means by which an extensive program of distance education courses can be offered. Instruction in the use of the virtual library in distance learning courses must be an integral part of a quality distance learning experience. (Wolpert, 1998) Librarians can identify electronic sources of marketing research, arrange for remote access to subscription databases, and provide reference assistance via e-mail. Instruction on how to determine the authority of web sites and Internet research strategies can easily be transmitted to distance learners. Web-based tutorials are routinely used with good success to impart this information to distance learners. (Flanagan, 1999)

Librarians can be quite effective in teaching students what is available, and more importantly, what is not available and why. Long experience with searching the Internet gives librarians a unique perspective on the constantly changing capabilities and shortcomings of the Internet, a lesson that students of marketing must learn as part of a thorough education. Students must be made aware that not everything they need is on the Internet. Many information products are more easily accessed in book form, or are not even available electronically. Virtually all marketing information is digital somewhere, but access to it is often not cost effective. Many sites request a fee in the form of a credit card number in order to retrieve the data. Often times, libraries have the print form of the data, which is purchased once and available to all library users. Paying for the same marketing research downloaded via the Internet for each user is not cost effective. Availability of electronic information is an area of constant change. As information products become less expensive online, paper subscriptions are abandoned. The best way to keep track of the current status of needed information products is through consultation with the librarian. Databases available via the Internet have a wide variety of methodologies of organization. There are as yet no standard means of indexing, cataloging, and classifying the information resources on the Internet. Subscription databases that many libraries offer such as

ABI/Inform, Dow Jones Interactive, and Lexis-Nexis all have different content and search engines. Effective and efficient research requires that students receive instruction in searching these and other databases.

Course integrated library instruction is a necessary part of quality marketing education. The librarian must keep abreast of the constantly changing formats and availability of the information products used in marketing research. With this knowledge, the librarian can teach the student and marketing professor about new information products and changing search capabilities. (Crawford and Barrett, 1997) Awareness of what is and is not available via the Internet, and understanding of how Internet search engines work and the existence of the invisible web, and how to craft a marketing research project from the available information is a crucial component of marketing education. It is a common misperception that the Internet makes it easier to find information. This is quite definitely untrue. The ability to retrieve tremendous amounts of information requires the researcher to critically assess the information retrieved to determine its authority. The data retrieved must also be assessed to determine if it satisfies predetermined research goals, or if further research is necessary. The researcher must develop the necessary skills to effectively search the Internet using a wide variety of search engines, each of which employ a different methodology of organization. Marketing instructors would do well to form a strategic alliance with the librarian to create a learning environment wherein students can be instructed in both the theory and practice of marketing research.

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