

RIGOROUSLY EMPLOYING THE OBSERVATIONAL METHOD IN A MARKETING RESEARCH COURSE

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ABSTRACT

While ethnographic research has gained increasing popularity in industry over the past decade or so, observational research continues to be an under-utilized methodology in the classroom. However, it can present even the shyest students an opportunity to learn a lot about how consumers buy and/or use products or services without approaching said consumers. Additionally, observational methodology presents a wonderful tool for entrepreneurs and small businesspeople to learn about their markets and competitors without spending a lot of money. Indicative of scenarios studied would be observing men vs. women cleaning equipment before and after use at a gym...or watching older vs. younger shoppers choosing produce in the grocery store. The former example relates to managerial implications regarding hygiene in the gym, the latter about how and what consumers choose in the produce section and whether their choices vary generationally.

THE MECHANICS OF THE PROJECT

Here is a brief review of how the project was described to the students: First, the professor went through the instructions in quite a bit of detail over one class period. This included handing out a written description of the instructions and expectations, going over what students should include in the proposal, giving an example of an acceptable marketing-oriented observation and highlighting concepts from the assignment such as demographic variables, behavioral variables, null hypotheses, alternative hypotheses, data collection form, frequency counts, percentages, cross-tabulation tables, Chi-square analyses, and limitations. The professor gave the students pointers about conducting an unobtrusive observation and reminded them of what would and would not be considered ethical conduct while conducting an observation.

The students were given one week to meet with their teams, find an appropriate venue for conducting their observation, put together a dummy data collection form (including how they would tabulate each variable), formulate two sets of hypotheses,

and briefly describe the managerial implications of their study. Each team submitted this proposal and within the week, the professor returned it with comments. The professor has found that, because this entire process is new to the students, giving them interim feedback before they invest in the data collection and analysis phases of the study can prevent many teams from committing costly errors. Furthermore, it reinforces the learning process. The students were given two to three weeks to collect and analyze their data and put together the final report. Most of the students used Minitab to run the Chi-square analyses of their cross-tabulation tables. They then commented on whether they rejected or failed to reject their null hypotheses.

THE PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE

Several objectives can be accomplished by assigning this observational study to student teams in a marketing research course. First, the students benefit from experiential learning. Experience is the best teacher when it comes to conveying the subtle nuances of marketing research to students. Once they have to discern certain things in the field, a light bulb goes off for them. Secondly, educators tend to focus a lot of attention on survey methodologies, but there is a lot to be gleaned from the less utilized observation. It has different strengths (e.g., one can see what people do, one does not have to directly interact with the observees) and weaknesses (e.g., the observees' motivations are unknown) than a survey. Thirdly, students get a chance to apply concepts they learned in statistics (e.g., sampling, Chi-square, hypothesis testing). Hopefully, this makes those once-abstract concepts more familiar and approachable. And, finally, there is a level of self-satisfaction when the students realize that they can design and execute an observational study. The professor attempts to demonstrate how they might use these techniques later in their professional lives to glean valuable insights.

References available by request