Generating value from market research use: Doing more with less?

ABSTRACT

The use of market research (MR) information is poorly researched, providing a limited, fragmented understanding about how users process and apply MR information in marketing decisions.

From a systematic review of organizational learning literature, we propose a seven-step MR information use process, which we study using a real-time experience tracking approach in an academic institution. Users *acquire* and subsequently *transform* MR information that they *disseminate* among fellow users. The latter *analyse* and *interpret* this information, *applying* insights directly in marketing decisions or *store* them for future application. Value-in-use emerges at each stage of the process as users co-create insights by merging the MR information with other internal or external information.

Our findings support the existence of all of these steps and determine three types of value-in-use: users define and seek specific MR information for immediate decisions (instrumental) and "store" lessons or insights for eventual use (conceptual) or used in a symbolic way to justify previously held positions if not to strengthen their relationships with others (symbolic). Users draw *social* value when MR information is requested from or shared with others, and draw *performance* value when MR information is requested from others or when it is used to produce own output.

KEY WORDS

Value-in-use, market research, information use, real-time experience tracking, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

At US$33.6Bn (ESOMAR, 2012), the global market research (MR) industry is a noteworthy B2B knowledge service provided by MR organizations to corporate customers. With challenges like economic and political turmoil, dampened growth and consolidation among the main rivals, MR organizations struggle to offer more value to corporate customers through systematic collection and analysis of market data (MR information).

Apart from relying on various sources of market information, organizations outsource MR information to identify opportunities and situations as well as ideas to generate and refine marketing actions (Malhotra & Birks, 2007).

FROM MARKET RESEARCH INFORMATION TO VALUE

As marketing executives strive to see the "bigger picture" in making informed decisions, organizations become increasingly reliant on a widening range of information sources to support marketing decisions (Wills & Williams, 2004). Perhaps this trend is just one symptom of the everlasting gap between what MR suppliers deliver and what their clients expect (Neal, 1989 is one of the earlier observers). MR firms seem to focus on what they can deliver best to their clients, and take a "goods dominant" view of value as embedded in the data or information they produce for clients (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Woodruff & Flint, 2006). MR suppliers own and control value through the production of MR information – a traditional notion of value that contrasts against the more recently accepted *value co-creation* view, where value "is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" (Holbrook, 1994, 1996:138).

We argue that customers co-create value *with* their suppliers (under a service-dominant logic view (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2010) and that customers create value is *during* their *use* of MR information *within their space* (Macdonald, Wilson, Martinez, & Toossi, 2011).

USING MARKET RESEARCH INFORMATION

Literature on how customers use MR information offers only a fragmented and limited understanding. Only a handful of studies relate to this topic, most of which rely on single informant, cross-sectional survey approaches (Deshpandé, 1982; Diamantopoulos & Horncastle, 1997; Diamantopoulos, Schlegelmilch, & Allpress, 1990; Diamantopoulos & Souchon, 1999; Maltz & Kohli, 1996; Moorman, Deshpandé, & Zaltman, 1993; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpandé, 1992; Moorman, 1995 and Sinkula, 1990 among others). Research adopting processual approaches is rare and often relying on single informants' memories of events that form part of mundane, day-to-day processes.

This literature largely draws from market-based learning (MBL) theory) (Sinkula, Baker, & Noordewier, 1997) where organizations engage in learning by generating market information. This market information is in turn disseminated across different users and applied in marketing related decisions. MBL literature:

- emphasises the flow of MR information *from MR suppliers to customer* organizations where the use of MR information is *limited* to a number of actors situated within the marketing or

MR functions (Sinkula et al., 1997) as opposed to the *entire* organization that is engaged in the use of market information;

- relates to knowledge as an *asset* open for utilization, ignoring *knowledge as a process* view (Boisot & Macmillan, 2004; Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995);
- assumes that MR information is directed into a *linear* process involving four phases: acquisition   dissemination   application   storage (consistent with (Baker & Sinkula, 1999)

However, we note that this framework is *insufficient,* offering only a disconnected view about a collective organizational process as:

1. users assimilate MR information through a process of understanding and interpretation before it is internalized for application among decision makers (W. M. Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Diamantopoulos & Souchon, 1996; Zahra & George, 2002);
2. a level of learning happens after applying MR information in marketing decisions – involving codification of knowledge and its storage in an organization's memory (Diamantopoulos & Souchon, 1996; Huber, 1991; Sinkula, 1994);
3. users determine information needs prior to acquisition of MR information (Leonidou & Theodosiou, 2004), and
4. users process and merge information from multiple data sources to create customer insights – or an understanding of customer profiles and behaviours that is potentially actionable by predicting customer reaction to variations in the value proposition (Bailey, 2008).

Indeed, we see the use of customer insights as a *learning process* involving knowledge exploration (after Kang, Morris, & Snell, 2007) and exploitation actions (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; March, 1991). This process:

- is subject to constant change (behavioural view) (Cyert & March, 1963, 1992)
- results from *resources deployed* within (*exploitation*) or outside (*exploration*) the customer organization (Levitt & March, 1988; March, 1991), *interpretations* (Daft & Weick, 1984) and *reaching decisions* (Levitt & March, 1988)
- leads to the creation of value following the refining of existing knowledge and improving knowledge-using processes (Schumpeter, 1980).

Refining of existing customer insights involves mental processing of information (*cognitive view*) (Murphy & Allopenna, 1994; Murphy & Medin, 1985) and relies on interpersonal relationships within a social context (*social view*) (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Brown & Duguid, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1999; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Yli-Renko, Autio, & Sapienza, 2001). Users *replicate* and *exchange* customer insights, *co-creating content* and *interpretations* through language, dialogue and culture (Cook & Yanow, 1993, 2011; Schein, 1993), if not conflict (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Van de Ven, 2007).

We propose a seven-step '*use'* process (Figure 1), where MR information is *acquired* and *transformed* into understandable, comprehensive messages by the MR function, which in turn, *diffuses* these messages among relevant decision makers (users). These decision makers, in turn, weigh and *analyse* the content in the context of impending decisions, *interpreting* and merging MR information with other available information (from other sources) to create insights, with or without the intervention of other MR information users. These insights are in turn *applied* in

marketing decisions, or *stored* in knowledge banks (directly or in the form of lessons learnt from application in earlier marketing decisions) that support future marketing choices.

We also propose value-in-use is created during the users' processing of MR information, drawing from Beyer & Trice's (1982) typologies of use: *instrumental*, *conceptual* and *symbolic*. *Instrumental* use involves action based on MR information in specific, direct ways, intended to influence "external constituencies" (Moorman, 1995:321), indicating a high level of information specificity. *Conceptual* use relates to less specific information, with indirect application of the information that may happen only in the longer term (Maltz & Kohli, 1996; Moorman, 1995). *Symbolic* use involves the application of selected information in specific situations immediately upon the availability of information or after a period of 'gestation' (Beyer & Trice, 1982) typically in response to political stimuli – for instance, by consciously controlling the information use to justify pending or past behaviours

EMERGING QUESTIONS

That the use of knowledge leads to value creation (after Barney, 1991; Kang et al., 2007; Penrose, 1997; Rumelt, 1997; Schumpeter, 1980; Wernerfelt, 1997) is a notion relevant to organizational learning theory. However, existing literature:

1. offers process explanations about learning processes at an *organizational* level, or
2. treats knowledge as a fluid property that is easily exchanged between organizations or functions, or
3. does not distinguish between tacit or explicit knowledge exchanged by individuals, groups or organizations, or
4. largely relies on cross sectional positivist approaches relating to causalities and involving single key informants.

In these ways, existing literature offers only a limited understanding about processes and dynamic phenomena as is the MR information use process and the associated unfolding of value perceptions among users throughout the process, offering only partial and insufficient explanation in answering:

1. How do individual managers, departments and organizations make use of customer insights?
2. How does the use of customer insight affect perceptions of its value over time?

METHOD

We consider the use of MR information and associated value perceptions across such a process as an organizational learning phenomenon (Cohen & Sproull, 1991), dynamic in nature and constituted of events deserving a direct examination (Pettigrew, 1992, Van De Ven 1992; Van de Ven and Huber 1990). Although processes can be investigated as a *logic* explaining causal relationships or as a *category* of concepts explaining actions (at individual or organizational levels) (Van de Ven, 1992), this study adopts a temporal development perspective where:

- the MR information usage process and value perceptions are seen as a *sequence of events*, where *meanings and perceptions* change over time (Van de Ven, 1992);
- a rigorous and valid approach is adopted, involving explicit and direct observation of a process in action (Pettigrew, 1992).

An ethnographic inquiry fits these requirements, addressing the research questions by providing an account of a social world through a systematic exploitation of the researchers' own participation in the settings under study. However, three constraints limit the credibility, reliability, confirmability and the holistic character of a full ethnographic inquiry:

1. research participants' behaviours is likely to be influenced by the observers' presence (Atkinson, 1988; Charmaz, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009; van Maanen, 2011; Yin, 2009 among many others);
2. owing to likely long-term time frames, participants' and corporate conditions may change, risking abrupt ending of field work (Shipman, 1997);
3. inability of any researcher to capture the entire picture about what goes on of for the researchers to be present constantly where the action is happening (Atkinson, 1988; Gummesson, 1991, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009).

We address these limitations by applying a real-time experience tracking approach (Macdonald, Wilson, & Konus, 2012) that relies on SMS text submissions to capture users' engagement with MR information and customer insights, users' interactions with fellow external and internal connections as well as emerging perceptions of value. We piloted this approach for 28 days among a number of MR information and customer insight users employed in one private higher-education institution. In addition, participants submitted reflections in an open web-based diary for each encounter with an identifiable MR information or customer insight "packet" and filled weekly self-completion web-based surveys measuring seven-item perceived value scale for each encounter. Value-in-use is measured through two Likert-type scale statements each for *instrumental* use (after Moorman, 1995), *symbolic* use [social and legitimating uses after Diamantopoulos & Souchon (1996) and Sabatier (1978) respectively] and one item for *conceptual* use (authors). Two further items related to perceived learning and overall perceived value. Of the 21 invited participants, 11 actively participated by responding to web-based surveys, filling web-based diary and sending regular SMS texts. Study participants submitted a total of 113 experiences. This participation rate compares well with those observed in other real-time experience tracking studies like Baines, Macdonald, Wilson, & Blades (2011).

Five specific MR information or customer insight providers, their "packets" and MR information users were identified during initial qualitative interviews conducted with key MR information users (typified by programme leaders and marketing executives).

INITIAL FINDINGS

We find initial support for all the seven steps proposed for MR information use process, although we could not confirm the sequence of the steps as a result of the small number of observations. Participants felt more satisfied with MR information and customer insights provided by external contractors than about customer insights generated internally within the institution. Equally, participants tended to express more positive feelings when they used MR information as a means to interact with other colleagues – with responses tending to evidence stronger (perceived) relationships with colleagues as well as clearer "direction for implementation".

Findings also support the three types of value-in-use proposed. Users tend to define and seek specific information for immediate decisions (*instrumental*), evident from the reliance on self-initiated queries for data from databases as reported by users in text messages and web diary entries. Similarly, conceptual use featured as "food for thought" or past information kept in

mind for eventual use (see Table 1).   As for symbolic use, we find evidence not only in the quantitative responses provided by participants but also in their web diary reflections, suggesting social (Diamantopoulos & Souchon, 1996; Menon & Varadarajan, 1992) and legitimating use (Sabatier, 1978).

We subject the seven scale items to a factor analysis to obtain a two dimension solution (KMO = 0.817, 75.6% of variation): a "*social orientation*" dimension composed of three items ("gives me confidence in my market knowledge", "helps me strengthen my relationships with others in my organization" and "confirms my previous decisions") (Cronbach α = 0.812) and a "*performance orientation*" dimension composed of four items ("helps me reach effective decisions", "provides me with a clear direction on implementation", "I've learnt a lot from this encounter" and "overall, this is a valuable encounter") (Cronbach α = 0.890).   Better score means for the social orientation dimension featured in encounters when MR information is requested from or shared with others. Better score means for performance orientation dimension featured in encounters involving the requesting of MR information from others or used for the production of own output (such as reports, summaries or presentations).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

These findings suggest that outsourced MR information remains in use for a *long* period of time among various users in different functions and roles, *after* a supplier's MR information delivery step. This is consistent with Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj (2007) who find that clients of solutions often expect a more extended engagement with the supplier than the latter is prepared to deliver. For MR firms, this is an opportunity for service augmentation by offering continued interaction with users, as indicated by customer firm users' reliance on social interactions in the use of MR information. The social character of MR information use is also consistent with the knowledge (and value) co-creation propositions in a service-dominant logic view (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2010) happening within the customer firm's space (Macdonald et al, 2011).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper proposes a seven-step conceptual framework describing the use of MR information developed from a systematic review of the literature. It finds support from an initial study involving an innovative, real-time experience tracking approach that has obvious advantages over equally justified longitudinal, ethnographic field approaches.

Relying on just 11 active study participants over a four week period, this study has dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) and holistic orientation (Charmaz, 2006; Gummesson, 2000) limitations. Indeed, as the studied organization suffers from annual business cycles (where marketing activities culminate during the winter months), it is likely that this four week study captures only a narrow aspect of the entire range of behavioural patterns. Planned future participant observation research will relate to a number of participating organizations, enabling us to not only determine the sequence of steps involved in the use of MR information, but also the ability to overcome business cycle issues that impact on an organization's patterns and processes involved in MR information use. Participant observation also offers insights into the nature of meanings and value at each step of the MR information use process, as well as impacting influences. Increased numbers of participating users will also help in establishing typologies of users according to the types of value they seek in their use of MR information.

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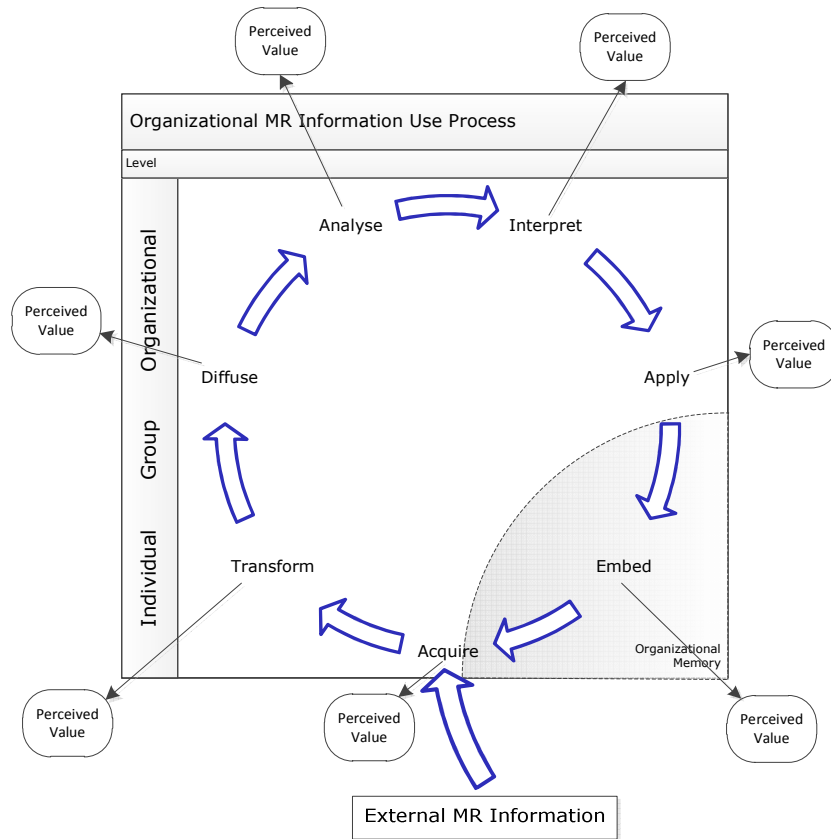
APPENDICES

Figure 1 Proposed MR information use process

Table 1   Summary of quotes from web diaries

Value	Quote	Participant
Instrumental	*"I used the* [named] *database to get some information about some magazines. It was a positive experience"*	4
	"In light of customer feedback, FD was happy for me to negotiate with client re [named] *membership - negotiation successful!"*	1
Conceptual	*"read and discussed with* [named colleague] *– implications for event topics next year"*	1
	"Working with people from various other industries really helped to develop my thinking"	3
	"decided on agenda for Feb workshop… and looked ahead to outline forward agenda beyond that – bearing in mind the feedback we'd had on the Nov workshop"	1
	"was all a bit mediocre – I like to think we're good… Food for thought"	1
Symbolic	*"Useful background. Confirms our decisions about market entry in both cases"*	1
	"spoke to colleague about the (institution) ranking… reinforced my own view"	1