HOW TO RESEARCH

An easy guide to better research, by **Fuse Insights**

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Business is increasingly driven by data and insight, and market research is something most of us have to work with at least occasionally. But research can often be uninspiring, even disappointing, whether it's unhelpful results, or a process that leaves your stakeholders totally uninterested. In fact, research often seems like a black box that nobody really understands, and which never quite delivers what you need. But it doesn't have to be this way!

Good research isn't about the vendor or methodology you use;

it's based on how you set yourself up for success and how you think about each element of the project. As we've outlined in this paper, there are several principles that will make your research project easier and more useful, regardless of whether you're an expert or a novice with market research.

INTRODUCTION: MAKING RESEARCH EASIER

Research is a key step in decision-making and strategic planning across business functions, from marketing to sales strategy, product development and beyond. Businesses need robust insights to determine the best course of action, and research provides this essential guidance. But it's still often viewed as an obscure process that few people pay attention to and even fewer actually understand.

True, most of us have a general sense of how research works: identify the target audience, decide on the questions to ask them, and see how they respond. And we know what we want it to provide, too, in terms of clear business answers and information you can really act on. But how do you ensure your research achieves those aspirations? And if you're using an external vendor, how do you know they won't drown you in bar charts and data rather than giving the answers you need?

Given these challenges, it might seem easier to avoid the risk and expense altogether, and just cope without research. But it's obviously preferable, if possible, to find a way to make your research work better for you and deliver the actionable insight you need. And here's the thing: you don't have to be a research expert (or even interested in it) to manage that. At Fuse Insights we know that the most important ingredients of successful research are things that are easy to control, starting with how you frame the project and how you tie it back to the business challenges you're addressing.

Whether you're a fully-fledged data guru or just have to work with it from time to time, there are steps you can take at each stage of a project to give your market research the best chance for success. In this whitepaper we've outlined five principles of great research; follow them and you'll be well on your way to a better market research project that will be more valuable for you and your business.

PRINCIPLE 1: KNOW WHY YOU'RE DOING IT

The first step of any research starts long before you write any questions, and frames the entire project: you have to understand why you're doing research in the first place.

It sounds obvious: every project, research or otherwise, starts with asking why you're doing it. And clearly most research can be summarised as "we're asking people what they think of our brand because want to know what they think of our brand"; or "we're asking how they buy particular products because we want to know how they shop". Except that's not **why** you're doing research; that's what it's **about**.

> **Instead, you need to ask why you want to know what people think of your brand, and what you'll do when you find out. Will the results help you design a new product or improve your customer service? Will they shape or feature in your marketing material? Or do you need it for something else?**

Everyone has their own way of getting at this; some agencies, for instance, use the 'Five Whys' technique. But in our experience, the simplest way to start is to think about **business outcomes**, and what happens **after** you get the research results. If everyone loves your brand, what will you do with that information? What decisions will be taken as a result?

This requires an honest assessment of the research's possible outcomes, and of the wider business context. And, because it's tough to predict research results, you need to consider the outcomes if you don't get the data you expect. If people dislike your brand, is that still useful information? How does it affect what happens after the research?

To get to the 'why,' think...

› What decisions will the research enable?
› What's the story you hope to be able to tell with the data?
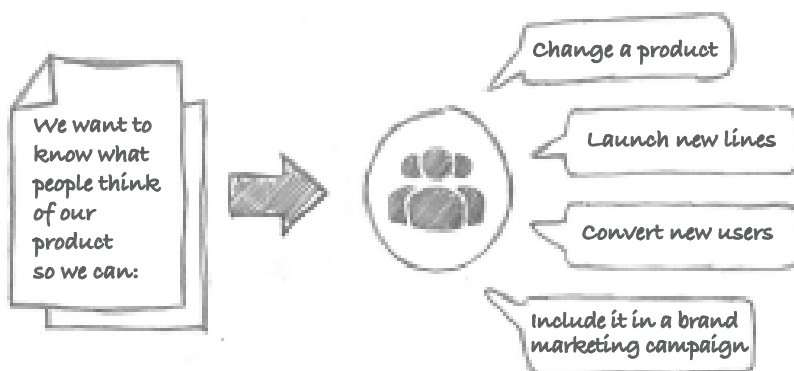
At this point, you should also be thinking frankly about how your business works, and how your key stakeholders will react to the research. Are they open to unexpected findings and new insights; or do they expect the research to reassure them and validate their current thinking? What does the research have to include or cover to convince them the results are valid and important?

Ultimately, research is only a small part of the many processes that keep the lights on at your business, and its value lies in how well it helps you to reach your business objectives. So the more you understand these nuances and incorporate them into your project planning, the more successful the research will be.

LESSON #1 The first and most important part of any research project is to understand and describe the business need – the 'why' behind your project.

PRINCIPLE 2: EVERYTHING FOLLOWS THE 'WHY'

By now you know why you're doing research and its potential outcomes – both what you'd like to see, and other outputs it might produce. Chances are you also have some questions that you want to include in the research, too.

At this point, the major decisions you have to make are what type of research you're undertaking (quantitative, qualitative or something else), and how to word your questions. The sheer range of research methodologies and the myriad ways that questions can be asked can seem bewildering, and there's a very real sense that making the wrong choice will result in wasted budget and useless data. So where do you start?

In short, you follow the 'why.'

The good news is that despite the overwhelming array of options available to you, **there aren't that many different ways to conduct good research**. In fact, most research studies can be planned through three main elements:

a. **Methodology**: Do you need 1:1 interviews, a focus group or a quantitative survey?
b. **Sample**: How many people should be included in the research, and who should they be?
c. **Questions**: What questions should you ask, and how should they be worded?

The right answers stem from the 'why' behind your research. Equipped with the understanding of why you need the research and what it needs to deliver to be successful, it becomes easier to scope out your project.

As an example, imagine you're planning to launch a fresh product to attract non-users to your brand. Your research needs to identify the most appealing product features and benefits, and show the potential appetite for this new offering.

Starting with **methodology,** the results need to provide numbers to compare different product options ("more people like option A than option B"), so the research has to include a quantitative survey. If the research is generating possible options, it makes sense to also include a qualitative element such as focus groups.

When it comes to **sample:** clearly the research should focus on people who currently don't use your brand, with a skew towards your intended target audience (women 18-35 with kids, for example). And broadly you should aim for the largest reasonable sample size that's within budget.

…and just like that, the research is taking shape, and other essential details (like questionnaire wording) will follow from there.

This may seem simplistic, but fundamentally designing research comes down to understanding the intrinsic business problem behind the research, then weighing up how well different options will help you solve that problem.

We want to know what people think of our product so we can:

Change a product	= Quant survey of loyal & infrequent users
Launch new lines	= Focus groups of in-market consumers
Convert new users	= Survey of non-users
Include it in a brand marketing campaign	= Voxpops among loyal users

There are myriad ways of asking people how they feel about something. Get it wrong and you end up with useless data and without the answers you need.

It's also a key principle in analyzing research data.
Most research studies produce a huge amount of data – far more than you can use. When it comes to working out which data points are most useful, and which to ignore, the easiest approach is to go back to why you're doing the research, and what business outcomes the results will lead to. From there, it becomes much easier to see what's important in the data, and what's interesting but ultimately not useful for your needs.

LESSON #2   **Successful research design (and analysis) is about weighing up how well different options answer the 'why' behind your research.**

PRINCIPLE 3: BE CURIOUS

When asked what skills they think are important in research, many people think it's essential to be comfortable with numbers, or to be good with people. But in reality neither is vital: researchers are some of the least outgoing people you'll meet, and there are many areas of research that don't involve numbers at all.

Instead, the most important attribute is curiosity – particularly the habit of looking at something (everything!) and wondering "why does it do that?" or "what happens if…?". The best researchers have it in abundance; they're curious throughout the process and always wondering about what's behind particular findings and results. So, if your research explores whether people like your product, it's about looking beyond simple yes/no responses to consider **why** they like it, and thinking about the underlying attitudes the product taps into. It's this secondary exploration that really gets to the heart of the question, and uncovers new insight and information.

Good research involves being curious throughout the process and thinking about what's behind particular findings, rather than just taking them at face value.

So what does that look like in practice, and how do you apply curiosity in a meaningful way to a research study (for example, about your product)?

1   GATHER ALL THE BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Before you even have a research plan, you'll need to bring together what you already know about the product, the audience and the wider market. Ask yourself:
- *What are my product's strengths and weaknesses?*
- *Who buys my product and how do they differ from people who don't buy it?*
- *What do my competitors offer and how do customers respond to their offerings?*

Answering these questions means reading any available previous research, and thinking about what you know, what you **think** you know, and any assumptions you may have.

2   DEVELOP A HYPOTHESIS

At this point, it's important to consider what you think the research will show, and why. It can be as simple as "people love our logo", or more complex, like "people buy our product on Fridays because they're getting ready for the weekend". Whatever it is, it's important that you know your hypothesis, what the results might look like if it's correct, and how you'll know if you proved it.

3   ... AND ALLOW THE RESEARCH TO DISPROVE IT

The flip side of knowing the results you expect is embracing the fact that you could be wrong: the research might (and probably will!) show something different. In fact, it's vital that the research can disprove your hypothesis; among other things, this means respondents have to be able to say they dislike your product, and why. Done well, this will provide further invaluable insight about your audience and your product.

4   LET YOUR CURIOSITY GUIDE THE ANALYSIS PROCESS

Once the data has been collected, you need to work out what it's showing. This analysis process is guided by the same curiosity: first, you check your hypothesis to see if the results are what you expected. Next is to explore why people have given those answers – using what you know from their other responses and the background context.

Crucially, you also have to think about where the results don't fit — where they're inconsistent or don't show what you'd expect. It can be tough to pick holes in your data like this, but these unexpected findings can help to build a comprehensive understanding of behaviours that you haven't seen before or attitudes you hadn't realized were important.

In the analysis stage, it's the unexpected insights — the "unknown unknowns"— that can really reshape your thinking.

Good research is about curiosity — not just looking for the obvious answer, but exploring why things might be the way they are.

PRINCIPLE 4: TELL ME A STORY

With the fieldwork and analysis complete, the only thing left to do is collate and share the results. It sounds easy: all you need to do is talk about what you found, sprinkle in some storytelling, and voilà! But it's more challenging than you might think. After all, what **is** storytelling in research, and how come it leads to so many dreary and unhelpful research presentations?
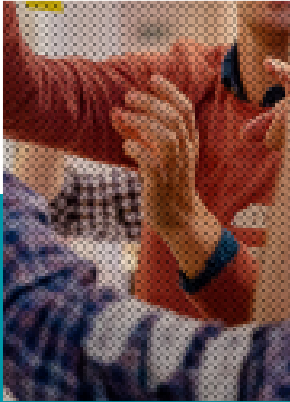
Done well, presenting research results comes back – again – to following the why: understanding what business objectives the research is supporting, and reporting the results in a way that helps achieve those objectives. And the easiest way to approach it is to think about the story the research tells.

The first step is to remember that it's what the research **found**, not what you did, that's most important. From there, a good next step is to ask: what is the story of the research? What's the headline that everyone should remember; and how would you explain it in 60 seconds?

Building further, why is this story the most important of all the possible stories from the results?

And if you had to explain the research to a different stakeholder, or a friend, would you tell them the same story in the same way, or would it be different?

This is the basis of your results presentation or report, and the entire presentation has to be structured around telling that story. As with all stories, it has a beginning, middle and end, where the beginning introduces the context and lays the groundwork, the middle builds on that context by exploring the key themes and their implications, and the end brings together those themes into a clear and memorable conclusion.

In general the best stories are those that get shared, that people tell to their friends and family, who in turn tell it to their own friends. With research it's exactly the same: a successful research story is one stakeholders understand and share with their colleagues and peers. So the way you tell the story has to speak to those stakeholders, and it has to do it in a way that clearly explains what it all means, why it's important, and why they should care.

Poor research presentations tend to be similar in a number of ways. Most obviously, they often feel like they've been written for the researcher, not the audience. So there's often a lot of focus on what the researchers did, talking in detail about how fieldwork was done and the complex statistics that were used on the data.
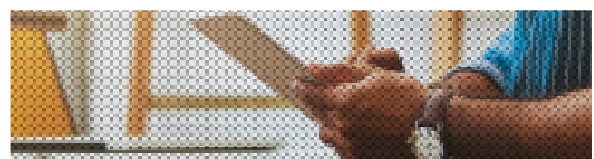
It's rarely useful; worse, it distracts people from more important parts of the research and its findings. Another common trait is unnecessarily complex data and explanations. Researchers sometimes believe that making a project sound more complicated and technical makes it more impressive; but the effect is to alienate the audience, leaving them baffled as to what the research is showing and how it's important.

It takes a lot of work to make an excellent research report or presentation. It has to be concise and credible, and speak to the audience in language they understand and can share with their own peers. Often it needs editing, going through page by page and asking yourself "why is this point here" and "what does this add to the story". But as long as you have that clear story in mind, and focus on ensuring your audience can understand the story and tell it themselves, you'll find it easier to build a great research report.

LESSON #4   **At this point, the success of your research rests on how you present the results, so it's worth taking the time to really build a great presentation**

Developing a research presentation? These no-nonsense tips will help you to design the best report.

Data isn't insight: The fundamental rule of reporting research is that you're there to share insight, not data. People remember "almost everyone likes it" better than they remember "87% of people gave a score of 7 to 10". So tell your audience what things mean, don't blind them with data.

Question every point: It's tough to find the right balance between showing too much detail and too little. So for every page and data point, ask yourself: why have I included this, and what does it add? If it's not adding insight or understanding, you should probably cut it.

Short and sweet beats long and boring. There's a reason TED talks are under 20 minutes in length: the longer your presentation, the more likely people are to lose interest, and the more likely your message is to get lost. Your presentation should ideally be 30 minutes or less; if it's longer, you need to unpick what you're presenting, and work out what's unnecessary to the story.

PRINCIPLE 5: PERFECT RESEARCH DOESN'T EXIST

Finally, when designing or dealing with research, it's worth remembering two important points that many researchers often overlook:

> No matter what you're doing, your research isn't perfect; and that's okay because…

> The perfect research study doesn't exist.

In simple terms, your research could always be improved. Think about the sample: what's the "perfect" sample size? For any project, 1,000 interviews is better than 100, but 10,000 is even better – so where do you draw the line? Your methodology could be improved, too. If you're using an online survey, telephone interviews would be more robust, but face-to-face interviews would be even better, and so on. No matter how good your research is, at some point you have to draw a line and accept that you can't design perfect research, and you certainly can't afford it!

Whatever the project, the best research study is the one that produces the most credible and meaningful insights within your budget, and that enables your business to make the decisions it needs to make. So rather than trying to design the perfect research project, it's more important instead to design the best study for your needs and budget, that delivers what you need in a way that's robust and that you can trust.

Ultimately, as long as you do it properly, your research doesn't have to be perfect; it just has to be good enough for what you need it to do.

LESSON #5 Don't worry about doing perfect research; instead focus on doing the best research for your needs and budget

CONCLUSION: MOVING FROM A BLACK BOX TO ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS
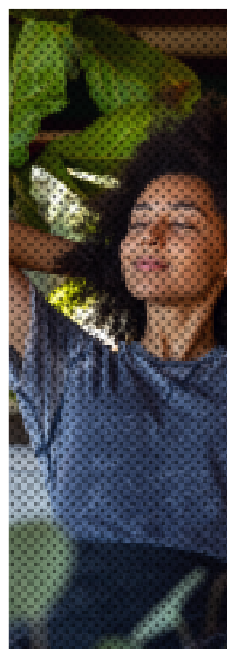
Research has long had a reputation for being an obscure and complicated process that few people can do well. And to some extent researchers have helped perpetuate that view.

But that's changed and continues to change: insights are now an essential part of any business decision-making process, and research is a tool that an increasing number of people have to work with. Whether you're in strategy, product development, sales or marketing, knowing the basics of how to manage and work with research is no longer optional.

The good news is that, as this paper details, research really isn't a black box; instead, it's something that most people can design and work with. By following the principles outlined above, you can ensure that any research you're designing, managing, or working with is effective and valuable, and adds useful insight to your processes and business.

ABOUT FUSE INSIGHTS

At Fuse, we're passionate about all things research. And we've seen – and done – enough research to know what works and what doesn't, and understand the common mistakes found in most research projects. We work closely with our clients to understand their business problems, and help them solve those problems with excellent research, collecting better data, uncovering more valuable insights and achieving better business outcomes. We harness several decades of experience from both the client and vendor sides of the industry to deliver well-designed studies, and analysis that tells useful stories and builds engagement among key stakeholder audiences. Our focus on thoughtful, valuable research has won us numerous awards, and our roster of clients includes Twitter, Roku and The Government of The Bahamas among others.

If you're interested in finding out more, or simply want to learn more about what we do and how we can help you, let's chat; you can contact us at
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