

Understanding the market research maze – where do I start?

Phew! It's a competitive world out there. But just how do we lower the gambling stakes and seek to ensure that our titles improve on those of our competitors? Getting closer to your market will help.

Of course, any publisher in educational publishing these days knows they should be doing regular market research, but as busy people, managing challenging authors and keeping up with the in-house meeting agenda, market research can be hard to get to grips with. Focus group or questionnaire? Mail or telephone survey? Where do you start?

➤ **Mail surveys**

Sending out a bunch of questionnaires may well be a very effective way to gather data. It's usually the cheapest method to achieve a large sample and will certainly help you understand some quite complex issues. Unlike a telephone call, you can include visuals and ask respondents to reorder or rank certain statements or features.

It will always take longer than a phone survey and the results will unavoidably be biased – because your respondents are always self-selected. And who answered the questions? You might have intended it for the head of Science, but was the lab technician or newly-appointed NQT drafted in to complete it?

To get the most out of a mail survey, remember:

- Limit it in length - not necessarily to number of pages, but how long it takes to complete. Three-five minutes may be what most busy teachers can cope with.
- Focus. You'll always get a better response the more focussed/personalised it is. A recent survey eliciting information on the needs of able students in MFL got more replies than one intended for the whole market. It might mean two questionnaires not one – but overall, you'll improve the response rate.

➤ **On-line data collection**

When teachers visit your website, can they complete a pop-up survey or take part in an ongoing opinion poll? If you have a bulletin board feature, can you stimulate strands of conversation to elicit opinions and thoughts on ideas you 'plant' there?

Of course, non web-users can't be represented and it's easy for respondents to click away and not take part. It also means that the questions you're asking are publicly available to your competitors, so you could never expect online to serve any sensitive questioning.

➤ **On-going customer feedback/real-time tracking**

Do you regularly include a questionnaire in every order sent to schools? Or a rapid-response form with every inspection copy? Or an editor's name to ring with comments? Questions must be kept consistent – only their 'stability' over an extended period of time will allow you to compare results in any meaningful way. Overall, they are cheap, quick, and provide data on an ongoing basis – and you may find it very easy to pick up on and rectify any possible customer dissatisfaction or misunderstanding.

➤ Phone surveys

Increasingly used, phone surveys will bring you the benefits of face-to-face interviewing but far more rapidly. Typically, the conversations may be recorded not only for report-back analysis but for any follow-up familiarisation you may like to do.

It's a much less personal method of interviewing which means there's less opportunity to build rapport with potential or actual customers, and you will be restricted on time and the complexity of questions you can ask.

➤ Face-to-face interviews

In-person interviewing is very often seen as the gold standard of research. It might involve random questioning or teacher 'interception' at an exhibition for a quick-fix, rapid response. Some pre-determination may be possible, but on the whole you'll find it difficult to target a specific group. It's a sample of convenience rather than of any other more sophisticated criteria.

Alternatively, in-depth personal interviewing with a pre-determined, pre-recruited group is ideal for really getting to grips with views and opinions to help you marry product with teacher needs far more effectively. A skilled, experienced and independent interviewer will encourage honest feedback and probe and dig for more information in a way that mail surveys simply can't. It's a great PR tool, too (assuming you don't want the research to be anonymous), it builds a good rapport with your audience and encourages fantastic cooperation from teachers keen to be involved in new product development.

➤ Discussion groups

Often called focus groups, I've listed them last because we often think of them first. But they should only really be used for gathering information you can't get any other way and not as an alternative to broader surveys. They'll help you establish views, opinions, feelings, but not how frequently these appear amongst your target audience.

But they do offer a face-to-face opportunity for you to meet your market and to hear teachers talk and to stimulate ideas amongst them. Group dynamics will be utterly unpredictable – and in the hands of a flaky facilitator, a poorly managed group won't deliver the results you need.

Understanding your market's needs is time consuming and demands careful planning but it's a crucial part of successful publishing. If you have been inspired to become more market-wise, Mary will be delivering a practical training session, Market Research for Educational Publishers, for the PTC in October 2006.

With more than 20 years' experience in educational publishing, **Mary James** founded *innoved* to provide research and consultancy services to help publishers identify what it is that teachers want to buy. As a Market Sleuth, she helps publishers become more market-wise, make sensible publishing decisions and sell more to see their market share grow. For more information, contact mary.james@innoved.co.uk.