Organising Interface Research: The Individual and the Group

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Abstract: The authors describe a research model that they have found particularly helpful in their pursuit of ‘Interface’ research. They are keen to share what they consider good practice with other colleagues who are either considering conducting research into, or are keen to start researching into, the ‘Interface’.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to revisit some fundamentals and basics of researching in order to remind us of the proven mechanisms that underpin good research practice. For example, our research should follow the proper procedures for identifying a research topic; defining and refining research aims and objectives; and founding our conceptualisations on comprehensive literature reviews. The paper will also reflect on what should be included in an individual research plan and how we might organise our research plan within appropriate timescales.

A significant aim of the paper is to illustrate how research synergy can enable the development of group research which offers greater efficiency over individual research programmes. The rationale is based on the assumptions that supervision and teaching in marketing/entrepreneurship interface research is individualistic and fragmented, therefore it cannot achieve meaningful efficiency. Also, we observe that ‘other’ social science disciplines have achieved efficiency through synergy, for example biochemistry whereby candidates work together on specific research areas whilst individually examining a unique research problem.
On the basis of this rationale, we describe how we adapt models from the research sciences and apply them to interface research built around a conceptual model; and adapt research supervision approaches to engulf a synergistic framework. The process applied is a combination of one-to-one supervisory meetings; group meetings covering presentation and focused discussions on specific topics; and informal dialogue between group members.

We conclude the paper by outlining the outcomes of a synergy experiment which includes a strategy for producing publications - workshop to conference to journal; a compilation of synergistic literature databases, catalogued by topic; author; etc; development of international collaborative research projects; and the development of publications – journal articles; workshop papers; conference papers; work in progress.

DO YOU HAVE A RESEARCH STRUCTURE?

As busy academics under increasing time pressure in teaching and administration, we often find ourselves juggling our time between these essential duties and doing meaningful research. Often our research concentration is on getting articles published in journals, but how much credence do we give to good research practice? Do we, as experienced researchers apply the rigour and logic of good research practice to our own research to the same extent as we require from our research students? Or do we rely on our experiential knowledge of research and at best carry out an implicit application of good research practice.

Indeed, do we ask ourselves the kind of questions we pose to our students when approaching our latest research? For example: What is my research focus/topic and how do I justify this in line with my research problem? What is my literature foundation and overall aims and objectives?

It is useful to briefly revisit these questions in terms of how they underpin all our research, whether individually or as part of a group

ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH TOPIC

Of course, the process begins with addressing the research topic, initially in a broad way and then moving the focus quickly to a specific description
(Creswell 1994). A research focus can take a number of different perspectives. For example, the research focus may consider any aspect from a historical perspective in terms of what happened and when it happened. Alternatively, a future perspective may be taken in terms of what is planned or expected to happen. Or, a current perspective might be chosen which considers what is happening NOW. In all of these perspectives as researchers we may be seeking to evaluate existing phenomenon or perhaps some aspect of new phenomenon.

Whether or not a time perspective is taken within a research topic, further refinement towards determining the specifics of the research problem can be achieved by positioning our research in one of a range of contexts. The research topic, either in general marketing or applied to the interface maybe:

- industry specific
- within a single market
- within an existing market
- a new market situation
- within a distribution channel
- within a local, domestic or international
- examination of direct and indirect competitors marketing
- about industrial or consumer marketing
- about Services marketing
- small firms marketing
- electronic marketing
- business to business marketing
- direct marketing, and so on, the variety is infinite.

Whatever the chosen specific, phenomena or characteristics of a research topic, the research problem can be identified and refined further by the specific focus represented by the nature and type of research. The research may set out to define aspects of marketing or to redefine some issues. It may wish to examine the scope and range of a given domain. The research may seek to discover how or what are the key aspects/issues of a domain. An issue might be to consider the impact of new phenomena upon an existing marketing circumstance. The research can incorporate aspects of conceptualisation, measuring, comparing, analysing, assessing, evaluating, experimenting, adapting or adopting, any aspect of marketing theory or techniques. Of course a refined and defined research project may incorporate any combination of these aspects or may only consider one as its distinctive characteristic. Having framed the topic into a specific focus, the research will seek to establish a firm justification towards the research problem.
WHAT ABOUT THE JUSTIFICATION OF A RESEARCH TOPIC IN LINE WITH A RESEARCH PROBLEM?

Of course, justification for a research problem stems from the broad area of the topic itself (Carson et al 2001). In judging the value of the topic the research should be in an area of marketing which is of interest, not only to the researcher which is an obvious aspect, but more importantly to marketing academia and to the profession as a whole (Janawicki 1995, Varadarajan 1996). Within this context the research should also be directed by some kind of issue. For example, an ‘enquiry’ into some aspect of marketing which has generated some doubts or questions over validity, or, an unexplained area of marketing which has previously received little attention, or an issue of query in marketing about an aspect which hitherto had been accepted without question. These research areas might also be classified as a topical aspect of marketing; an aspect of marketing deficiency; and/or a consideration in a specific context.

Use of appropriate literature will justify a research problem (Francis 1998). The purpose of literature referencing in justification of the research problem is to serve as a foundation for the justification and therefore to strengthen the justification and in doing so, strengthen the importance of the research problem (Borg & Gall 1989). References must be effective in supporting the justification discussion (Robson & Hedges 1993). The overall purpose is to indicate that the research topic has been chosen as a result of significant prior reading and considered research and a demonstration is being made as to how this prior knowledge can be used to justify the chosen research problem.

In constructing the research justification, we might imagine plotting the historical constructs of the topic. This would involve exploring the origins of the topic and identifying the core seminal works of the domain. The exploration would move, perhaps chronologically, through the historical development of the domain.

A justification will identify and track the key established factors surrounding a research topic and will lead towards the significant factors that indicate the issue which appears unanswered by the key established factors, thus the research problem. The justification is a clear demonstration of prior knowledge and intuitive understanding and grasp of a topic, whereby the reader is given the clear impression that all aspects of history, origin and background to a research problem have been brought to the fore.
by way of objective assessment. In addition to this impression, the justification should lead the reader in a clear and precise direction toward the core issue of the research problem and demonstrate the strong linkage between the overall research topic and the research problem.

OVERALL RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Perhaps the most important issue to address is our research aims and objectives. Do we pay enough attention to these? Any project needs a goal, something to seek to achieve. Research projects must have a clear and achievable overall aim (Creswell 1994). Such an aim must be focussed on the research problem identified at the outset. By addressing the research problem an aim is established. So for example, if a research problem identified as, ‘Conventional marketing theory is unsuitable for many small firms’, an overall research aim might be, ‘To determine how small firms do marketing that suits them’. Similarly, if a research problem is services marketing is identified as, ‘Service firms find it difficult to manage the intangible dimensions of services marketing’ an overall research aim might be, ‘To determine how to manage service intangibles effectively’.

The overall aim is the point of achievement which the research seeks to attain. In doing so it must also achieve clear steps of progression along the research journey. A research project will set out a series of planned objectives that will enable progression of the research as each objective is achieved. These objectives, like the stages of the journey are integrally linked to the overall aim, their cumulative achievement eventually allows the research overall aim to be achieved (Berg 1998).

The final aspect of a research plan is to seek to achieve certain expected outcomes as a result of achieving the aims and objectives. Outcomes are the insights and discoveries achieved by the research. They allow the researcher to assert that a solution is found and can be applied to overcoming the initial research problem. Outcomes can be speculated at the same time as the establishment of the overall aim and objectives. These speculative outcomes may or may not be achieved at the end of the research. If they are achieved a researcher can draw confidence in their suitability as a result of the rigour and validity of the research. If they are not achieved they will undoubtedly have been replaced by more appropriate outcomes resulting from refining and defining the research during the process.
INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PLAN

So far we have revisited what we have described as *good research practice* some basic fundamentals of academic research in order to serve as a reminder of the importance of adhering to such practice every time we embark upon a research project. There is an implicit assumption here that we *know* our research projects from the outset, as though we can simply choose a topic from a huge menu of choice. Of course this is not the case for most of us in academic research. Until our research has matured enough to win significant funding from whatever source, most academics struggle to find a research topic. How can the process of identifying a research topic be eased? We believe this can be done by devising an individual research plan.

The essence of an individual research plan lies in the sourcing of a research topic. Such sources are research ideas that stem from our teaching, interests in the field, experiential knowledge, observation of issues, and no doubt a host of other sources. Let us consider these a little further.

*Research stemming from teaching.* Any teacher of marketing will be aware of the theory versus practice issues in much of what we teach. We are often aware that some of the fundamentals of marketing theory are primarily just that, theories. We know that our students are unlikely to use them in their professional marketing careers. Why should this be so? Perhaps there is a myriad of reasons. These reasons offer opportunities for identifying research topics. Similarly, in our teaching we are often aware of, what appear to be deficiencies in the theory or topic within marketing. Some of the curriculum is difficult to teach because the topic is confused or unclear. Such aspects also offer opportunities to develop research topics. In addressing the problems created by both of the above examples we will often introduce innovative teaching into the curriculum, such innovative teaching approaches offer opportunities for research in the pedagogical domain.

*Research stemming from interests.* Any research that we do should be of interest to us, but often we can find ourselves in a circumstance whereby we are unaware of our genuine interests. Sometimes we may have an interest in a field since embarking on a career in the area. Sometimes this career is chosen or it may have emerged and evolved as opportunities have presented themselves. As academics we find that there are areas within our career domain that interest us more than others. It is in these interests that we accumulate readings and develop a scholarly knowledge without actually
doing any empirical research. These scholarly interests are definitely areas from which research topics can be developed.

*Research stemming from experiential knowledge.* As our academic careers progress and mature we accumulate experience in a vast array of areas. This experience underpins our competence and enables us to make reasoned and considered judgements on issues within our career domain. With regard to our academic areas of interest we accumulate knowledge over time so that our knowledge today is not just a snap shot of understanding the immediate, rather our perspective and understanding is founded on accumulated knowledge gathered and stored over a longitudinal period. Marry this knowledge accumulation with our experience gleaned over time and we have a vast fund of experiential knowledge, especially in the areas we are intuitively interested in. This experiential knowledge serves as a strong foundation for sustaining and developing research topics.

*Observation of issues.* Marketing is a hugely visible domain. We can observe illustrations of marketing in every walk of life: in all aspects of the media; when travelling by whichever means; when shopping; when walking or sitting in a public place and so on. Often we find ourselves stimulated by something unusual and this in turn may generate a creative spark which may lead to a research idea. Similarly, we can often develop an awareness of marketing processes through observing these as they are performed. These regular observations can form the basis of meaningful research topics.

Whatever the stimulus for our research and regardless of the kind of research that we do, we all have the frustration of finding enough time to do research. We constantly find ourselves coping with the often conflicting tensions of teaching administration and research. How can we best organise for doing research and how can we improve the efficiency of our research?

One of the best ways to improve research efficiency is to treat research time in the same ways as teaching time. Our teaching time is set in our diaries for the full period of the teaching term. We would never dream of interfering with class timetables without building in some recompense, such as a rearranged time or schedule. In a similar way we should organise our research time and set aside meaningful *chunks* of time that enable us to focus uninterruptedly on our research. Meaningful time is very important to the research process, since the very nature of research requires time. For example, the *conceptualisation* period of a research project, including
literature gathering, reading and reflecting may take several months. Similarly, empirical research, analysis and writing are time consuming activities, which are mostly carried out within a diary of other duties.

Although careful organisation of our research time will enable greater productivity, the fact remains that research that requires us to do all aspects is not only time consuming but grossly inefficient. Further inefficiency is inherent because it is invariably fragmented and disjointed because of having to fit in with other duties. How can we negate some of this inefficiency?

SYNERGISTIC GROUP RESEARCH

In the field of management and marketing research academics are often solo researchers. Sometimes we may team up with a research friend and do joint research but this is still largely individualistic research. Only occasionally do we work in research teams, usually as part of a major research project that is grant funded. However, the synergy that is inherent in such large research projects is the kind of thing that we should seek for any size of research project. How can this be organised and achieved? In offering one answer to this question we illustrate a synergistic group research experiment we have been working on in University of Ulster over the past four years.

Mindful of the inherent inefficiencies of our individualistic research, four of us with similar research interests, decided to experiment with a construct which we labelled Synergistic Group Research. We borrowed the outline framework for our grouping from our colleagues in the pure science disciplines, where groups of researchers work together on specific research areas whilst examining a unique and individual research problem. With this in mind we pooled our resources of literature and previous research outcomes and used it to construct a description of our research synergy. This outlines that we were all essentially qualitative researchers with varying degrees of experiential knowledge both in this specific research methodology and in our research topic, which belongs to the broad domain of marketing decision making in SMEs. Within this domain we had several specific areas of interest, represented by networking, competencies, opportunity recognition and process/implementation of marketing activities. Since we are first and foremost educationists, our research outcomes are always translated into our teaching and this invariably introduces a theory/practice dimension. We also have some industry specific focus in
relation to research in services marketing with specific reference to tourism and financial services.

It was within this framework that we recruited PhD candidates who currently number ten full time and part time people. The synergy process which has now become a familiar pattern consists of:

- One-to-One mentor/supervisor/researcher meetings – where each individual’s research issues are discussed.
- Group meetings sometimes consisting of formal presentations but more often are focused discussions on some aspect of our research. These meetings also involve periodic reviews of our research programme and updates of our writing and publishing schedules.
- Informal dialogue between group members – this is particularly so amongst our PhD candidates who are encouraged from the outset to share and compare their research progress and to act as sounding boards in a self help setting.

This process is ongoing and evolving continuously and is led by different individuals at given points of time or need.

**SYNERGY OUTCOMES**

The inherent efficiency of our *Synergistic Group Research* is demonstrated in its outcomes. These are summarised as follows:

- A sequential strategy/process for producing publications – this process begins with an *in-house* workshop outlining the research topic underpinning a potential research paper. The outcome of this, or several workshops is a conference paper aimed at one of the mainstream international marketing conferences or a special interest symposium focusing on a specialist topic. After presentation at a conference the reviewed paper is progressed further towards a full journal piece. In every stage of this development, (as is the case with this piece), the early drafts final paper are peer reviewed on several occasions, by at least two of the group, before exposure to external review.

- As part of our productivity standards, we aim to have a journal publication promised before the next conference paper is submitted so that a conference feels like a *reward* for successful publication output.

- A compilation of synergistic literature databases catalogued by topic, author, etc. Our library is organised electronically on *Endnote* and physically in hard copy using chronological reference numbering. This literature database is an invaluable resource for quick reference and foundation for the development of new pieces.
Development of international collaborative research projects – this is manifest most clearly in our ongoing research publications involving our friends and colleagues in the University of Monash in Melbourne Australia. Also, in our recent publication of a book on *Qualitative Marketing Research*, jointly authored between Carson and Gilmore of Ulster, Chad Perry of University of Southern Cross in NSW Australia and Kjell Gronhaug from the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration. We also have emerging collaboration with the University of Orebro in Sweden.

Count of publications - The extent of our research synergy outcomes is obvious when a count is made of our various publications. For example, in the past four years we have produced:

- Twenty-three double blind reviewed journal articles of national and international standing
- Two teaching textbooks
- Eight book chapters
- Nineteen refereed conference papers
- We also have seven articles under review and six working papers in progress.

We firmly believe that such an output could not have been achieved by each of us working individually on our own private and singular research.

Finally, our research synergy allows us to map a clear programme of our research tracks, and our two main research tracks are SMEs and Services with our two core streams of methodology and education.

If there is a downside to this *Synergistic Group Research* it is the virtual inability of any of us to write individual pieces because everyone is involved in the development of all research projects. In truth, none of us have any problem with this, however it is often the issue raised by our internal managers who argue that single authored pieces are good and internal collaborative research publications are secondary. Whilst single authored research is an indication of the individual’s ability to do research, it is still relatively inefficient according to our rationale outlined here. The sum total of our collaboration, the nature of which means that it can carry no passengers, is justification enough for underlining its merits. The challenge for us in the future is to try to maintain the synergy during the inevitable staff changes and influx of new personnel.
REFERENCES


