

Use this checklist to select research firm

BY MARGARET R. ROLLER
President
Roller Marketing Research
Greenville, S.C.

BIGGER IS NOT ALWAYS better when selecting a marketing research firm. And, yet, the high incidence of large research companies, in the U.S. and abroad, suggests that marketers indeed associate "quality" research with staff size.

The implication is that the greater the number of designers, analysis, report writers, and field supervisors, the greater the likelihood of the research firm's capacity for producing a quality product.

This reasoning is fallacious, given the assumption that what marketing managers seek is the best-possible quality for their research dollars.

Responsibility for the "bigger is better" myth rests, to a great extent, with marketers themselves. Clients often fail to thoroughly evaluate the characteristics of the research firms that bid on their projects.

In addition, many marketing executives seem to equate low cost and quick turnaround with quality research. Those attributes aren't mutually exclusive.

However, quality research typically refers to research that has been efficiently and accurately designed, executed, and analyzed. Quality research produces actionable information, reported to the client as a clear, concise interpretation of the data which directly relate to the original research objectives.

MARKETING MANAGERS who are shopping for a research firm to do a quantitative study should observe and evaluate these eight characteristics:

1. The research firm's spokesperson (salesperson?) should be an experienced and knowledgeable researcher. If not, you're wasting your time and energy.

2. The research firm's representative should know enough about your business to properly design a questionnaire. The researcher doesn't have to be an expert in all categories, but he or she should be willing to learn enough about your company to fulfill the research commitment. Beware of researchers who say: "Anybody can design a questionnaire."

3. The researcher should be able to spend the time needed to design an effective questionnaire. Haste makes waste — and leads to questionnaires that are too long, too short, or poorly worded.

4. Make sure the person who meets with you is the same one who will design the overall study and questionnaire, and supervise the fieldwork. If not, your project will be susceptible to communication problems.

5. The researcher should be accessible. When you phone with a question about your project, you shouldn't be referred to a third person who is unfamiliar with your needs and research objectives.

6. Ask who will establish the coding instructions and brief the coders. Make sure the raw survey

data will be accurately interpreted and keypunched. The best questionnaires and interviewing can be ruined by sloppy coding and data input.

7. Data-tabulation errors are common. Make sure the firm has established controls to minimize inaccurate data reporting.

8. Find out who will write the report and what it will consist of. The report shouldn't be a retyped version of a computer printout, but a concise, easily understood analysis of the data which are most relevant to the original research objectives. Ideally, the researchers involved in the initial phase of the project will write the report.

IN THE AREA of qualitative research, especially focus groups, marketing managers should consider these issues:

1. The researcher should under-

stand qualitative methods and their limitations, and your research objectives. How much experience does the firm have with qualitative research?

2. The researcher you talk to should be the one who actually moderates the focus groups. Moderators need to be thoroughly involved with a project from its inception. Beware of researchers who contend that "anyone can moderate a focus group." That's not true.

3. The moderator should listen to the tapes or read the transcripts of the focus-group discussion before doing the analysis/interpretation.

4. Find out who will write the report. While the researcher and the client may not agree on the analysis, the moderator should always present his or her interpretation of the group discussions.

5. A laundry list of respondents' quotes is of little value in under-

standing and analyzing group discussions. The final report should use verbatims only to highlight and emphasize the moderator's interpretation.

MARKETING MANAGERS are responsible for making these observations and judgments when seeking research firms. The marketer also should remember that he or she is buying one of the most essential ingredients of first-rate research: a close one-on-one relationship with the researcher.

While research firms of any size are capable of violating quality standards, it is primarily the larger companies that are most guilty of these infringements. Large firms have a limited selection of qualified personnel and are forced to delegate bits and pieces of clients' research projects.

Research monies are continually wasted due to clients' naive as-



Margaret R. Roller

sumption that bigger is better. The size of the firm should be of minimal concern when buying research services. Rather, the client should base the selection decision on the quality of the design, execution, and analysis.

MM