

Marketing Students Perceptions of Market Research as a Career Option

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Abstract

This research study identifies and explores undergraduate marketing student's perceptions of market research as a possible career option. It identifies their general 'top of mind' descriptors of market research, what they perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of a market research career and reasons for either considering or not considering a career in the market research industry. The study was conducted over a four year period among students enrolled in an undergraduate marketing research unit. A qualitative approach was taken with students invited to complete a principally open ended data collection form, where they could record their perceptions in a number of topic areas. The study was conducted at the commencement of the unit, and again at the end of the unit, in part to explore if exposure to information about market research affects perceptions in a positive way.

Key words: Market research, students, perceptions, careers, recruitment, marketing

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Introduction

A McKinsey Global Survey found that the search for talented people is the single most significant challenge facing many organisations (Sunderland 2008). How to attract and retain quality staff in economies with low unemployment like Australia is not a challenge that is restricted to any one industry (MRSA 2000). Many talented people are recruited into their first jobs straight out of university. Positively, business students perceive that marketing does offer a wide variety of career opportunities in comparison with other business disciplines (Camey & Williams 2004). Marketing related occupations, including the specialist areas within marketing, are expected to experience a continuing growth pattern in the next decade (Adams et al 2001). However some careers in marketing (e.g. personal selling) have a negative image among many business students (Swenson et al 1993, as cited in Camey & Williams 2004).

Literature Review

The market research industry in Australia which has grown substantially since its establishment in the 1930's (Ihle 1993) is highly dependent on human capital. Recruitment of talented people (and their retention) is one of the key challenges facing the market research industry (MRSA 2003). The career expectations of Generation Y have been investigated in the human resources literature (though not in relation to market research). It has been argued that new entrants into the market research industry have often entered the industry more by accident, than by design as a planned career path (Sweeney 2001 and Turtle & Katryniak 2010), and it also has been argued that market research lacks a profile as a career among university students (MRSA 2000). Additionally among university students who have some awareness of market research as a possible career, the image of market research is not positive. For instance, a 2005 study found that 86% of undergraduate marketing and business students perceive market research as boring, dull, tedious or mundane (Drinkwater 2005), and in a Colmar Brunton study ten years ago many respondents also perceived market research in the same way. Only 63% perceived the industry as a long term career option and fully 37% saw market research as a stepping stone to a career in mainstream marketing (MRSA 2000). In a study of managers', academics' and students' perceptions of the essential knowledge and skills of marketers, students gave market research a lower rating compared to strategic marketing, consumer behaviour, product and brand marketing, and marketing communications. These latter four were perceived as the top four necessary

knowledge areas (Gray et al 2007). In another study, advertising was the single most cited marketing industry among students when asked to specify the type of marketing job they envisaged that they would be working in after graduation. Two thirds fewer cited market research (O'Brien & Deans 1995). 'Mainstream' marketing and advertising careers in comparison to market research have status, possibly because they are longer established, higher profile and better understood by the community (Turtle & Katryniak 2010). Student views of the importance of market research, and market research as a career option can no doubt be grounded in general community perceptions of market research. There has for instance been an historical confusion between market research and telemarketing (Blackadder 2005). Popular representations of market research focus on data collection methods, without revealing any of the value adding strategic inputs or outputs lying behind this (Blackadder 2005). The contribution/benefits of market and social research are not well understood (President, AMSRS 2006). These are fundamental problems which lie at the centre of the generally poor image of the market research industry among marketing students, as well as business decision makers, and others (Blackadder 2005). The problem is one therefore of both low awareness and poor image, and this is reflected in part in the reported difficulties in attracting and retaining high quality staff, in competition with career opportunities in other industries perceived to be more exciting and having higher social status (AMSRS 2006). For recruitment (and retention) purposes it is therefore necessary to understand how the industry is perceived by the pool of potential talent. This can be of assistance to the industry in the search for talent that the McKinsey Global Survey (Sutherland 2008) identifies as a key challenge.

Methodology

This study used a principally qualitative approach, with students writing down their perceptions of market research and careers in market research on a self completion form featuring open ended questions. This had the advantage of being able to gather data from a large number of respondents at one time, avoiding interviewer bias, and group influence, while allowing respondents to use their own words to express their perceptions. The first part of the data collection instrument helped to develop a brief profile of students, namely the number of marketing subjects previously studied, and whether the students are majoring in marketing, or other subjects. The main body of the instrument (the open ended questions) focused on the reasons why a career in market research might or might not be considered after graduation, what advantages a career in marketing research would have, what disadvantages such a career might have, and key words or phrases that they would use to describe market research. Prior to this respondents majoring in marketing were asked to identify from a list which areas of marketing they had previously considered, or are considering as a career. The study was conducted among all those enrolled in an undergraduate marketing research unit at an Australian university in a metropolitan area. Students were not given any credits for completing the open ended self completion form. As this market research unit is a core subject in the undergraduate marketing major program, the great majority of those enrolled in the subject are marketing majors. Data

was collected over a four year period (2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010), in two waves each year. The first wave of data was collected at the start of the semester (prior to the first marketing research lecture), and the second wave of the data was collected at the end of the semester (after the last marketing research lecture). It was anticipated that after students became more familiar with marketing research, that they would have more positive attitudes about market research as a career option. In total 223 respondents completed the self completion form over the four year period (2007-2010) at the start of the semester, and 209 completed it over the four year period, at the end of the semester. In other words the great majority who completed the start of semester self completion form also completed the end of semester self completion form. The specific objectives of this study were to identify and explore undergraduate marketing student perceptions of market research as a career option, to identify how stable these perceptions are over time, and whether exposure to information about marketing research shifts perceptions.

Findings

In order of mentions **careers being considered** were advertising, brand or product management, event marketing, public relations, market research, sales promotions, sponsorship, direct marketing, merchandising, packaging, and last – personal selling. This order of careers being considered (or previously considered) did not vary much over the 2007-2010 period. Advertising, brand or product management were the most cited career choices by a considerable margin. Event marketing and public relations were less often cited, but still to a significant extent. While market research was chosen by less than half of the respondents that specified advertising and brand or product management, and it was overall one of the least considered marketing careers, it was not at the bottom of the list for the respondents. Furthermore, the numbers claiming to be considering a market research career did rise to a noticeable extent between the start of the semester, and the end of the semester, as the respondents were exposed to more information about the subject matter in the marketing research unit. The most cited **reasons for considering a market research career** included a perception that it is interesting finding out things about consumers, that it is interesting finding out about markets, and that it is simply personally interesting. Other mentions included a perception that market research as a career offers a challenge and continuous learning, and a variety of work with different industries and markets. There were some mentions (albeit a limited number) that market research was being considered since it is rewarding to help businesses achieve their performance goals, that it is rewarding working in a ‘people’ industry involving substantial communications or that the industry offers good remuneration, or job security. The main cited **reasons for not considering a market research career** included a perception that market research is a boring and tedious area of marketing, that the respondent’s career preferences simply lie in other areas, that they are not very good with the mathematical or statistical aspects of market research, that they are simply not interested in the area, or that market research itself is not creative enough to appeal as a career choice. The most cited **perceived advantages of a market research career** included the ability to develop understandings about different markets and industries, to learn more about

consumer's needs and wants (and their behaviour), the variety of work, and constantly learning new things, and (to a lesser extent), being involved with an essential part of marketing, which provides the basis of strategy. Lesser numbers of respondents cited their perception that such careers have scope for creativity, offer chances to interact with a wide variety of people and projects, and (at a broader level) to understand trends in the market and environmental change. On the other hand the most often cited **perceived disadvantages of a market research career** were the perceptions that working in market research would be boring and mundane, a repetitive process, not as exciting or creative as some other marketing areas, and that the statistical and mathematical aspects would be difficult (or beyond ones ability). Some also made points that it would be frustrating not having the chance to influence or control all aspects of marketing (including strategy). A lesser number of respondents over the four year period noted down that a career in market research could be a lot of hard work, too much work or too stressful, that it is simply not exciting enough as a career option, and/or that it might mean job insecurity (since market research is perceived as a non-core area of marketing). Lastly respondents were asked to write down five **key impressions of market research** using key words or phrases. Many respondents used literal/descriptive words and phrases, like qualitative, quantitative, surveys and information. Others used terms more linked to their personal perceptions. The latter have been analysed for the purposes of this study. The most commonly cited positive terms used to describe market research included - informative, interesting, basis for knowledge, valuable, exciting, understand markets, and insights. In contrast, most commonly cited negative terms to describe market research included complicated, tedious, boring and repetitive.

Conclusions

Most marketing students over the four years of this study did not cite market research as a career option that they had, or were, considering. Market research as an area in marketing is perceived in both a positive and a negative light. Respondents tended to have either principally positive or negative perceptions, and these influenced their interest in market research as a career, as well as their ability to identify advantages and/or disadvantages of a career in market research. Exposure to information about marketing research increases the likelihood of considering a career in market research, and the ability to articulate positives about its advantages. A number of the findings in this study mirror the findings of earlier studies, reinforcing the fact that the market research industry is far less 'top of mind' for undergraduate marketing students than some other areas of marketing (such as advertising), and that there is a common core set of negative perceptions about it as a career option. However this study has also identified a number of perceived strengths of the industry and perceived advantages of a career in the market research industry. This is potentially of use to the industry in its communication strategies. The context for the negative perceptions apparent in this study may lie in the general community negativity towards market research identified earlier in this paper. The positive perceptions on the other hand may be a product of the marketing information communicated to students in units undertaken prior to undertaking the marketing research unit, and subsequently the information

communicated to students in the marketing research unit itself. They may also in part reflect the market research industry's past and present communications to students, the general community, and business decision makers.

Marketing Implications & Limitations

While the quality of new recruits from universities to the market research industry has continued to improve (Cowley 2010), based on the results from this study there is clearly some way to go. This is borne out by recent recruits who have joined the industry. Research undertaken by Byrne (2009) among young researchers indicates that they see value in the industry having a stronger presence at universities – directly with students in lectures, at careers fairs, and indirectly via careers advisors. The industry has certainly been taking a number of initiatives to build its profile with young people, and to attract young talent. Aside from participating in university open days, building relationships with academic staff, and the establishment of a graduate traineeship program some time ago (Byrne 2009) have been undertaken. Additionally, the industry body (AMSRS) has an onward going communications and engagement campaign in order to improve general public, media, and business community perceptions and attitudes to market research (Harris 2009). There is certainly some consensus that the market research industry needs to make a more concerted effort to improve its public image (Turtle & Katryniak 2010). Much could be done to reposition market research as the industry that provides the intelligence that helps drive business decision making (Drinkwater 2005). Additionally a fundamental role of marketing educators is to provide marketing students with courses that meet their current and future personal and career needs (Adams et al 2001). In other words marketing research units taught at Australian universities could for instance use more guest speakers from the industry, could be taught with more of a managerial (as opposed to a technical) focus, and could more explicitly 'sell' the value of market research as a useful and rewarding area of marketing!

This qualitative study could easily be replicated at other universities and in other countries to assess the generalisability of the results. There is also potential to measure the perceptions of market research identified in this exploratory study. One major limitation of this study is that the student sample was drawn from a single campus of a single university. Another limitation is that the study focused principally on undergraduate marketing students. The market research industry does recruit graduates from other disciplines, and a future study could explore the perceptions of students in other business disciplines (and non-business disciplines). There is also potential to compare student perceptions of careers in market research with perceptions of careers in other industries (which may or may not have similar recruitment problems).

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