



# Do you know what you don't know?

By Christine McCarley

So you think you know your market? Do you know the needs of your customers? Most companies and organizations feel they do in fact have a handle on their respective markets and then go ahead and plan marketing strategies based on what they think, not on the actual facts and data.

Most marketing professionals are brilliant intuitive thinkers with a good gut feeling and a keen marketing sense, with marketing degrees and industry experience. The reality, however, often has a way of eluding the most insightful of marketing professionals. Without actual on-the-ground-collection of fresh data on an appropriate sample size, even an industry-leading guru could not accurately determine the real market situation and positioning status of even the smallest of companies. As Donna Barson says, companies that do the best are the ones that do their homework.<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever watched the popular television show *Undercover Boss*? The show is a good example of how business owners discover how their decisions affect consumers and perceptions of their company. How does the undercover boss uncover the real perceptions of his company? By collecting information from employees, customers and suppliers. The result, is that they actually discover the reality of their business situation and how to implement positive changes.

It is amazing how much can be discovered from gathering and analyzing primary and secondary information first by qualitative theme generation, and then by quantitative followup surveys for detailed confirmation of general themes discovered. This kind of original, fresh data collection, is often over-looked and not utilized for many different reasons, such as budget constraints, misunderstanding of the process, and misunderstanding of the incredibly valuable unbiased insight that that this kind of research provides. "Many businesses fail to use research to shape their plans by conducting market research and market analysis," says Karen Albritton. It's either overlooked or perhaps small businesses feel it is a cost they can't afford," she says. "Marketing plans that do not consider such research, however, will almost certainly waste money."<sup>2</sup>

Businesses are marketing products and services ultimately for their customers/consumers. Customer preferences and needs, must be satisfied – otherwise, no business will survive. Without understanding the marketing environment you may be trying to survive in at the moment, you are guessing at next steps, adding

higher risks of failure and uncertainties into the deadly brew of unknowns. To survive in today's competitive marketplace, a business must understand and satisfy its customers' needs.<sup>3</sup>

The objective of Market Research is collecting data internally and externally within your particular marketing environment, through existing and potential customers, from the competition and even suppliers perhaps. Market research reveals your business' marketplace: understanding competitors, communication with current and target customers, observing trends (both demographic & products/service). Research will uncover new opportunities, dangerous pitfalls, define problems and measure the brand reputation, while facilitating a more accurate positioning and brand statement.

By identifying & evaluating problems & opportunities through market research. The collected data is then interpreted into marketing strategies for the organization. This guiding document is the rolled out into marketing plans, media plans, brand re-define if necessary, all with measurement systems installed so that marketing objectives & goals can be measured and assessed.

Some of the questions that marketing research can answer during the marketing planning and marketing outcomes measurement process are: *Who are my visitors? Where do they come from? How do they get here? When do they come? What activities do they do when they are here? What are their accommodation choices? How well are my destination services meeting the needs of my customers? Is the quality, the price, the range of options and activities consistent with what my customers want? How do I communicate with my potential customers? Where do they get information — print ads, television, the Internet, travel agents? What messages do I need to put into my marketing materials to attract visitors? What new products or services does the market want?* For tourism marketing, these questions help a DMO's marketing manager to make practical, strategic and tactical decisions about which markets to pursue, what themes or messages to put into marketing materials, what product development strategies to pursue, and other issues that require information to support a sound decision.<sup>4</sup>

Knowing where you stand within your market, and how the industry views you is essential to truly understanding your market position. Don't waste your hard-won marketing budget on mediocre marketing returns — find out what you don't know.

1. *Start Your Own Business* Fifth Edition (2010) Entrepreneur Media
2. How to write a marketing plan *Inc. Magazine* Feb. 2010
3. *Conducting Market Research and Developing a Strategy* (2010) Canada Business
4. *A Guide to Using Marketing Research and Marketing Measurement for Successful Tourism Destination Marketing* (2010) by Erin Mitchell & Mitchell Westlake, Industry Canada/FedNor