

Research question or research problem?

The terms "research question" and "research problem" are often used interchangeably.

Some researchers think in terms of a single research problem and a number of research questions that arise from it. The questions are lines of enquiry to explore in trying to solve the overarching research problem.

It may be useful to think of problems as coming out of your business data - that's the O data (otherwise known as operational data) like sales figures and website metrics. For example, why do sales peak at certain times of the day, or why are customers abandoning their online carts at the point of sale.

Research questions are a tool you use to solve those business problems.

4 steps to defining your research question

1. Observe and identify

Businesses today have so much data that it can be difficult to know which questions to address first. Researchers also have business stakeholders who come to them with problems they would like to have explored. A researcher's job is to sift through these inputs and discover the higher-level trends that are worth the investment of resources.

This often means asking questions and doing some initial investigation to decide which avenues are worth pursuing further. That could mean talking to cross-functional teams across your business, or going outside your organization for additional expertise and contextual information from the wider industry.

Sometimes, a small-scale preliminary study might be worth doing to help get a better understanding of the business context and needs, and to make sure your research question addresses the most critical

problems. This could take the form of a few in-depth interviews, an environmental scan, or a literature review.

Example:

The sales manager of a sportswear company has a problem: sales of trail running shoes are down year-on-year and she isn't sure why. She approaches the company's research team for input and they begin to explore by asking questions within the company and reviewing their knowledge of the wider market.

2. Review the key factors involved

As a marketing researcher, you must work closely with your team of researchers to define and test the influencing factors and the wider context involved in your study. These might include demographic and economic trends or the business environment affecting the question at hand.

To do this you have to identify the factors that will affect the research project and

begin formulating different methods to control for them.

You also need to consider the relationships between factors and the degree of control you have over them. For example, you may be able to control the loading speed of your website but you can't control the fluctuations of the stock market.

Doing this will help you determine whether the findings of your project will produce enough information to be worth the cost.

You need to determine:

a. which factors affect the solution to the research problem.

b. which ones can be controlled and used for the purposes of the company, and to what extent.

c. the functional relationships between the factors

d. which ones are critical to the solution of the research problem.

Example:

The research team at the running shoe company is hard at work. They explore the factors involved and the context of why Yof sales are down for trail shoes, including things like what the company's competitors are doing, what the weather has been like - affecting outdoor exercise - and the relative spend on marketing for the brand from year to year. The final factor is within the company's control, although the first two are not. They check the figures and determine marketing spend has a significant impact on the company.

3. Prioritize

Once you and your research team have a few observations with promise, prioritize them based on their business impact and importance. It may be that you can answer

more than one question with a single study, but don't do it at the risk of losing focus on your overarching research question.

Questions to ask:

Who? Who are the people with the problem? Are they end-users, stakeholders, teams within your business? Have you validated the information to see what the scale of the problem is?

What? What is its nature and what is the supporting evidence?

Why? What is the business case for solving the problem? How will it help?

Where? How does the problem manifest and where is it observed?

To help you understand all dimensions, you might want to consider focus groups or preliminary interviews with external (including consumers and existing customers) and internal (salespeople, managers and other stakeholders) parties to provide what is sometimes much-needed insight into a particular set of questions or problems.

Example:

After observing and investigating, the running shoe researchers come up with a few candidate research questions, including:

What is the relationship between US average temperatures and sales of our products year on year?

At the present time, how does our customer base rank Competitor X and Competitor Y's trail running shoe compared to our brand?

What is the relationship between marketing spend and trail shoe product sales over the last 12 months?

They opt for the final question, because the variables involved are fully within the company's control, and based on their initial research and stakeholder input, seem the most likely cause of the dive in sales. The research question is specific enough to keep the work on course towards an actionable result, but it allows for a few different avenues to be explored, such as the different

budget allocations of offline and online marketing and the kinds of messaging used.

4. Align

Get feedback from the key teams within your business to make sure everyone is aligned and has the same understanding of the research question and the actions you hope to take based on the results. Now is also a good time to demonstrate the ROI of your research and lay out its potential benefits to your stakeholders.

Different groups may have different goals and perspectives on the issue. This step is vital for getting the necessary buy-in and pushing the project forward.

Example:

The running shoe company researchers now have everything they need to begin. They call a meeting with the sales manager and consult with the product team, marketing team, and C-suite to make sure everyone is aligned and