BURKE: Learning and Growing Through Marketing Research

Alberta Burke, who previously worked in P&G’s marketing department, founded Burke, Inc., in 1931. At that time, there were few formalized marketing research companies, not only in the United States, but also in the world. As of 2014, Burke, based in Cincinnati, OH, is a marketing research and decision-support company that helps its clients to understand their business practices and make them more efficient. Burke’s employee owners add value to research and consulting assignments by applying superior thinking to help clients solve business problems. Burke is 100 percent employee-owned. This video case traces the evolution of marketing research and how Burke implements the various phases of the marketing research process.

The Evolution of Marketing Research

The first recorded marketing research took place more than a century ago, in 1895 or 1896. By telegram, a professor sent questions to advertising agencies about the future of advertising. He got back about ten responses and wrote a paper describing what was happening. In the first years, most of the marketing research done was a spin-off of the Bureau of Census data, and the analysis was basically limited to counting.

The next wave of marketing research, often done by ladies in white gloves who knocked on doors and asked about cake mixes, came in the early 1930s. The primary methodology was door-to-door surveys; the telephone was not a very widely utilized service at that time.

Then came World War II, which saw the introduction of the psychological side of marketing research. Through the 1950s and 1960s, television became an integral part of life, and with that came television advertising. Testing of television commercials became the hot area of marketing research in the 1960s and 1970s. Another fundamental change happening at that time was when the marketing research industry made a shift from just generating and testing new ideas and sharing them with clients to working more with clients on how to use those ideas to make decisions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Burke moved a notch higher by developing processes to provide further value. It began working with customers to identify the basic decision that needed to be made and then determine what information would be required to make that decision. The marketing research industry started developing processes that generated information to be used as input into management decision making.

The marketing research industry has come a long way from the telegrams of 1895. As of 2014, the industry is trying to find creative ways to research consumers using methods such as telephone interviews, mall intercepts, Web interviews, mobile phone surveys, social media, and multimode methods. As Debbi Wyrick, a senior account executive at Burke, notes, when people can respond in more than one way—responding in the way that is most efficient for them—it increases the chance of getting a response.

To stay on the cutting edge, Burke conducts meta-research (research about how to do research). Recently, Burke was concerned with whether the length of an online (Internet) survey has an adverse impact on the completion rate. In an effort to find out, Burke fielded two Internet surveys. One was brief (ten questions taking an average of five minutes to complete), and the other was longer (twenty questions taking about twenty minutes to complete). The completion rate for the short survey was 35 percent, whereas it was only 10 percent for the longer survey. Burke now designs shorter Internet surveys to reduce the proportion of people who drop off without completing the survey.
How Burke Implements the Marketing Research Process

We briefly describe Burke’s approach to defining the marketing research problem, developing an approach, research design, data collection and analysis, and report preparation and presentation.

**Defining the Marketing Research Problem and Developing an Approach.** The simplest way to find out when a company needs help is when it has to make a decision. Any time there is a go or no/go, a yes or no, or a decision to be made, Burke asks what information can help reduce the risk associated with the decision. Burke then talks with the company to develop the information that might help to reduce that risk.

The first step is to define the marketing research problem, and a lot of discovery takes place at this stage. The account executive (AE) will sit down with a client and try to determine whether what the client believes is the problem really is the problem, or whether Burke needs to change or broaden the scope of the problem. Discussions with the key decision makers (DMs) might reveal that the company has been focusing on too narrow an issue or that it has been focusing on the wrong problem altogether.

Burke believes that defining the marketing research problem is critical to a successful research project. The company finds out what the symptoms are and works with the client to identify the underlying causes. Considerable effort is devoted to examining the background or the environmental context of the problem. In at least half the cases, when they go through the process of exploring the problem, the problem will change. It will gain a new scope or direction. This process results in a precise definition of the marketing research problem, including an identification of its specific components.

Once the problem has been defined, Burke develops a suitable approach. The problem definition is refined to generate more specific research questions and sometimes hypotheses. Because of its vast experience, Burke has developed a variety of analytical models that are customized to the identified problem. This process also results in the identification of information that will help the client company solve its problem.

**Research Design Formulation.** In formulating the research design, Burke places special emphasis on qualitative research, survey methods, questionnaire design, and sampling design.

**Qualitative Research.** One of the pitfalls that Burke encounters comes with qualitative research. Qualitative research is nice because it is immediate. The information generated tends to be extremely rich and in the customers’ words. Burke gets to see what kinds of answers are being given and what kinds of questions and concerns customers or potential customers might have. However, one of the dangers is thinking that all customers or potential customers might view products or service offerings in the same manner, that is, generalizing the findings of qualitative research to the larger population. To gain a better understanding of their individual opinions Burke also can conduct focus groups online.

**Survey Methods.** Burke uses a variety of methods including telephone, mall intercept, mail, and Internet or Web-based surveys. Burke carefully selects the method that is best suited to the problem. Burke predicts that telephone surveys will decrease, whereas Internet surveys will increase. If Burke is trying to interview customers around the globe, it sends an e-mail invitation to respondents to complete the survey via the Web. Burke likes the Internet’s ability to show pictures of a particular product or concept to the survey respondents. Currently, Internet surveys are the most popular at Burke and across the marketing research industry in USA.

**Questionnaire Design.** In designing the questionnaire, Burke pays particular attention to the content and wording of the questions. Some questions are well-defined and can be easily framed;
for other issues, the exact questions to ask might not be clear. The simpler the question and the more clear it is who the target respondents are, the better the information generated.

**Sampling Design.** Burke has a sampling department that consults with the senior account management team and account executives to determine the proper sample to use. The sampling frame is defined in terms of who the respondents are and who can answer the questions that need to be addressed. The target population is defined by the marketing research problem and the research questions. Burke often buys the sampling lists from outside firms that specialize in this area. Burke is concerned about using a representative sample so that the results can be generalized to the target population (e.g., all the target consumers as opposed to only the consumers included in the sample).

**Data Collection and Analysis.** Once the information has been collected, it will reside either in a computer-related format or a paper format that is entered into a computer format. The results are tabulated and analyzed via computers. Through the “Digital Dashboard” product, Burke not only has the ability to disseminate the results to clients when the project is finished, but also to show them the data as it is being collected. Burke breaks down the data analysis by relevant groups. You might see information by total respondents, and you might see information broken out by gender or business size. Essentially, Burke looks at different breaks in the data to try to understand what is happening, if there are differences based on different criteria, and, if so, how to make decisions based on that information. In addition, Burke likes the data to be categorized into usable units such as time, frequency, or location instead of the vague responses that respondents sometimes give.

**Report Preparation and Presentation.** Clients need information much faster than they have in the past because decisions need to be made much more quickly. Organizing large meetings to present data analysis results is not practical in many situations. Most of the time Burke reports and delivers data over the Web. The report documents the entire research process. It discusses the management decision problem, the marketing research problem, the approach and research design, the information obtained to help management make the decision, and the recommendations.

The report-writing process starts from the first conversation with the client, and it is written as the research proceeds, not simply when the project is almost done. The report focuses on improving management’s decision making. Burke’s goal is to help clients have better decision-making abilities so that the clients are more valuable to their respective companies. Burke emphasizes this focus by reminding its clients, “Here are the management decision and marketing research problems we agreed upon. Here’s the information we gathered. Here’s the decision it points to.” Burke might even add, “This is what we recommend you do.”

Burke believes that a successful research project often leads to a subsequent research project; the research process is more of a circular process. It does not typically have a finite beginning and end. Once you solve a problem there is always another one to work on.

**Conclusion**

The field of marketing research has evolved in sophistication, scope, and importance over the years. Advances in technology have improved processes and methodologies, providing higher value-added services. Burke has a strong identity and a long, rich legacy in market research—since 1931—and hence it is an apt representative of the marketing research industry. This case also demonstrates key aspects of the marketing research process, from problem definition to collecting data to analyzing data and presenting the macro-analysis report. Burke is continually undertaking efforts to improve the marketing research process, and this is what helps Burke and its clients learn and grow.
Questions

1. Describe the evolution of marketing research. How has the role of marketing research changed as the field has evolved? How is social media changing marketing research?
2. What is Burke’s view of the role of marketing research?
3. Visit www.burke.com and write a report about the various marketing research services offered.
4. What is Burke’s view of the importance of defining the marketing research problem?
5. What is Burke’s view of the marketing research process? How does it compare with the one given in Chapter 1?
6. If Burke were to offer you a position as an account executive with the responsibility of providing marketing research services to P&G, would you accept this position? Why or why not?

Reference