



Survey Research and Client Relationship Management
Hugh F. Cline, Ph.D.
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Survey Research and New Management Tools

Survey research has undergone dramatic changes over the last forty years. In the week following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 the National Opinion Research Center at The University of Chicago started a national probability sample survey asking approximately 1,500 respondents a series of questions concerning their learning about and reactions to the tragedy. It took over four weeks to collect, record, analyze, and report the results of that survey. Using currently available information technology this kind of survey can now be completed within the time it takes to finish the last telephone interview. A national probability sample today can be completed and reported within 24 hours. And the costs per survey are a fraction of those in 1963.

Using telephone conversations rather than mail questionnaires, entering response data into computer files as interviews are being conducted, completing statistical analyses immediately, and providing real time access to online data files all have drastically changed the business of survey research. Furthermore, these developments have created new tools to assist decision makers in both the public and private sectors. Yet very few organizations in either sector are using these new survey research capabilities effectively to monitor processes, inform decision making, or aid in strategic planning. The concept of continuous monitoring and immediate corrective action is widely recognized and applied in the production industries, but in the knowledge and service industries it is for the most part unappreciated and under utilized.

The Avoca Group of Princeton, New Jersey has pioneered in the application of these new survey research techniques to enhance the relationships between pharmaceutical companies and the contract research organizations that conduct clinical trials on their new products and services. As more and more corporations find it prudent to outsource many functions previously completed within house, creating and maintaining effective strategic client relationships becomes of paramount importance. The survey methodology developed by The Avoca

Group can be applied to help senior managers in many different industries to monitor and enhance strategic client relationships.

Management of Client Relationships

The growing and ubiquitous competition created by expanding global markets requires that corporations attain greater efficiency in all processes. As key functions are increasingly outsourced and corporations rely on others for coordinated production, the challenge of sustaining such efficiencies is ever greater. In most industries the relationships between contractor and client leave a great deal to be desired. Yet the failure to create and maintain such effective relationships can have serious, adverse effects on profitability. An examination of the methods used by most corporations to collect data to track costs of critical functions reveals that the client relationship is rarely carefully examined. A recent study completed by The Avoca Group documents that this pattern of neglect of client relationships is common in the pharmaceutical industry, and there is reason to suspect that this is true in many other industries as well.

Many client relationships begin as a contractual arrangement with a primary focus on such issues as timely delivery and cost containment. However, if not carefully and continuously monitored, a contractual relationship can readily dissolve into controversial and adversarial exchanges; and this is the antithesis of the ideal, which is a cooperative and collaborative arrangement. It is in the best interests of both contractor and client to focus on issues of quality, but it always seems more expedient or convenient to address only the immediate problem. A critical component of an effective, strategic client relationship is mutual trust. Modern survey research techniques can create and sustain the conditions of mutual trust between client and contractor by providing timely feedback on the perceptions of key participants in the processes of goal accomplishment.

Using a data collection and analysis system such as the one developed by The Avoca Group, feedback on emerging, critical problems can be available immediately for any necessary corrective action. Furthermore, the responses to the ongoing telephone surveys accumulate to create a longitudinal database file to identify trends for the assessment by senior management. The Avoca Group has accumulated valuable experience in building such collaborative relationships between contractors and their clients.

A Powerful New Management Tool

The combination of survey research methods, telephone interviewing, real time computer aided analysis and reporting, and multiple point access to a longitudinal

data base creates new opportunities for more effective and informed management decision making. For example, when interviews are conducted by individuals who are experienced and knowledgeable in a particular industry, they can immediately identify emerging problems and classify them into categories reflecting their severity and urgency. The most critical problems can be called to management's attention immediately for any necessary action. Furthermore, if desired, appropriate standard action plans for remedial steps can be planned in advance and activated automatically.

In the pharmaceutical industry The Avoca Group has developed such an automated feedback system from survey research that alerts the contractor of potential problems. The mutual recognition of the value of such information can create a climate of trust and transforms and maintains a collaborative rather than contractual relationship between all parties. Furthermore, as data are accumulated over time, trends in performance are readily monitored. The value of a longitudinal database of information on customer satisfaction for strategic planning purposes grows exponentially over time.

Hugh F. Cline, Ph.D, is a Harvard-trained sociologist and from 1976 to 1997 was Executive Director and Principle Scientist at Educational Testing Services. He currently is Adjunct Professor of Sociology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.