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A Typology of Health Marketing Research Methods—Combining Public Relations Methods with Organizational Concern

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SUMMARY. Research plays a critical role throughout virtually every conduit of the health services industry. The key terms of research, public relations, and organizational interests are discussed. Combining public relations as a strategic methodology with the organizational concern as a factor, a typology of four different research methods emerges. These four health marketing research methods are: investigative, strategic, informative, and verification. The implications of these distinct and contrasting research methods are examined.

KEYWORDS. Healthcare, health marketing, health services, research methods, public relations, organizational concern

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INTRODUCTION

Research plays a vital role in health services. Physicians coordinate clinical studies to examine the effects of the latest drugs and technologies. Hospitals perform quality evaluations to ensure accreditation worthiness. Insurance companies conduct patient satisfaction surveys and use the results as negotiating points. Patients involve themselves as study participants in both investigational clinical studies and as respondents to questionnaires. Research plays a pivotal role throughout virtually every avenue of health services delivery.

To help health services leaders understand different types of research in the field of health services, a theoretical typology of health marketing research methods is presented based upon the following two factors: the public relations methodology; and organizational concern. This two-by-two model is supported through four distinct types of health marketing research methods: investigative research, strategic research, informative research, and verification research.

Next, a discussion of the key terms (research, public relations, and organizational concern) used in the model is to be presented. This is followed by a discussion of the substantive basis of health marketing research typologies, including a thorough discussion of the four theoretical health marketing research methods. Finally, the implications of this model are considered.

KEY TERMS OF THE MODEL

What is Research? The term research is applied to any academic pursuit that uses scientifically-sound methodologies. Theoretical research leads to advancements in conceptual ideas. Empirical research examines data and utilizes statistical techniques to find answers or opinions to research questions, propositions, and/or hypotheses.

Research can be of an exploratory nature, such as when one does not know much about a particular topic but desires to learn something (almost anything) about that topic. Exploratory research often uses the descriptive case study approach, wherein the investigator arranges a situation that allows for an in-depth analysis of a relatively small subset of the totality of the situation.

Research can be qualitative, quantitative or a combination of the two. Qualitative projects imply that the investigator desires to subjectively understand that which is being examined. Ethnographic and anthropologi-

cal techniques, wherein one immerses oneself in a particular culture for a defined period of time, are examples of qualitative research techniques.

Quantitative projects, on the other hand, involve objectively measuring what is being examined. Quantitative research can be either primary or secondary research. An investigator is undertaking a primary study when examining, for example, respondent data collected via an original questionnaire. Secondary research involves analyzing someone else's data, such as when an investigator "spins tapes" or downloads a dataset from the internet.

To help clarify the difference between qualitative and quantitative projects, qualitative studies can help us discern the existence of a particular behavior. It can also help the investigator determine the best way to ask questions about a specific behavior. In contrast, quantitative studies allow us to actually measure how extensively the behavior occurs and, perhaps, help us learn which variables are associated and/or intertwined with the behavior.

Regardless of the technique utilized to perform the specified research, all research must adhere to established standards of conduct and purpose. From a conduct perspective, health services research must be consistently performed and must be transparent and readily accessible to outside peer review and interrogation. From a purpose perspective, health services research must measure at least one of the following needs: efficiency, quality, effectiveness, diagnoses, or mode of therapy. In addition, health services research should be in a standardized form so that all healthcare stakeholders can understand and use the information produced.

Research affords several different types of value. For example, research can help an organization determine the optimal manner and place to allocate scarce resources. Research can lead to the development of best practices, and this includes measuring the effects resulting from changing the behaviors of providers and/or patients. Research can be used to authenticate reimbursement for specific procedures that may have been either under-reimbursed or not reimbursed at all.

Research results can affect national healthcare policy. Research contributes to the development of health policy by clarifying particular issues through data analysis and by operationalizing diverse perspectives such as social, economic and political points of view. Research can contribute to policy implementation by increasing the knowledge base of those who are responsible for translating policy into action. Research provides estimates of success of various policy directives. Research also provides information regarding constituent interests of the parties involved with and affected by a policy proposal or a statement of policy.

What is Public Relations? Public relations is essentially about communications, sometimes to tell a positive story, sometimes to control a crisis situation. Public relations is the avenue through which an organization's public persona and reputation are developed, nurtured, and altered. While public relations as an ideal implies some sort of transparent review of collective communications of an organization, the reality is that public relations often is used as an obfuscating mechanism to present an image of an organization that does not really exist. Even a clear and sound public relations process cannot force an organization to behave morally (Kent and Taylor, 2002). That is an integral part of the values that an organization brings to its mission and vision as well as in support of its overarching goals and operational objectives.

To illustrate this last point, it has been said that the yearly rankings by various popular press outlets of an organization's reputation are really nothing more than beauty contests and that these rankings are irrelevant for determining the real organizational reputation. In addition, public relations is an activity that is indirectly controlled by a dominant coalition within an organization which controls others via complex power relationships (i.e., power over, power with, and power to). These power relationships create constraints that undermine and limit the choices of practitioners, thus rendering it difficult for practitioners to always do the "right" thing (Berger, 2005).

Public relations firms are engaged to increase public awareness and facilitate public understanding of the company's self-chosen and self-determined reputation. These firms create high-level awareness among the organization's stakeholders to generate and secure public backing of past efforts or to gauge potential public acceptance of future actions. Public relations firms often manage the information arising from controversial activities of the organization.

The practice of public relations has experienced tremendous growth and evolution over the past 25 years, especially in the area of medical public relations (Henderson, 2005). In fact, health care has been identified as one of the fastest-growing areas of public relations, according to a survey of more than 150 public relations firms (Seitel, 2001). The constant changes in healthcare's hyperturbulent environment have led to an increased need for public relations communications with important stakeholders.

According to Kent and Taylor (2002), public relations is rooted in dialogic theory. They describe dialogic theory as consisting of five major tenets, with the main point being that public relations is a communication mechanism designed to create a dialogue with important stakeholders.

The tenets of a meaningful dialogue are mutuality (the recognition that a stakeholder-organization relationship exists), propinquity (the timeliness and spontaneity of interactions), empathy (the understanding of common goals), risk (the willingness to interact), and commitment (the organization opening up and becoming vulnerable to its stakeholders). This dialogic theory of public relations assumes that the communications between parties are intended to be opportunities for each side to share with the other. The authors state that when sharing during communication does not occur, the dialogue becomes rhetorical with communication transforming into a debate.

What is Organizational Concern? All organizations struggle with the problem of whose interest is most important. An organization can assume a posture of concern for the public or it may adopt a self-preservation approach and focus its concern on itself. It can be argued that every organization uses each approach and regularly switches the tone of discussion between concern for the public and concern for oneself, depending on the specific issue at hand. This idea of using both perspectives, depending on the specific issue, classifies the discussion as a meso-level factor that falls somewhere between the macro-level of altruism and the micro-level embracing survival.

Summary of Key Terms. The key terms described above provide the cornerstone and infrastructure for an examination of the following typology of health marketing research.

TYPOLOGY OF HEALTH MARKETING RESEARCH

Research serves several roles. Research can be used to detect a disruption in the status quo. Research can be used to educate and inform. Research can be used to challenge assumptions and pre-conceived ideas. Research can be used to provide feedback about new innovations and technologies. In addition, research can be undertaken in a variety of ways.

The specific way to implement a particular research project depends on the combination of research-related factors. One mechanism to assist with the decision of which health marketing research method is most appropriate is to combine the public relations method and organizational concern. Two types of each factor will be examined, with the result shown as the 2 x 2 typology and displayed as Figure 1.

To understand this typology, we will examine each factor in turn. Although public relations methods actually form a continuum from

FIGURE 1. Typology of Health Marketing Research Methods

		Organizational Concern	
		Concern for Public	Concern for Self
Public Relations Method	Dialogic Public Relations	Investigative Research	Strategic Research
	Rhetorical Public Relations	Informative Research	Verification Research

dialogic to rhetorical, for ease of understanding, this model uses only the endpoints of the continuum. As discussed earlier, a dialogic public relations method means that there is two-way communication between the organizations and its stakeholders. On the other hand, the rhetorical public relations method is more like unilateral communication emanating from the organization and received by its stakeholders. With rhetorical public relations, the organization is not particularly interested in hearing the ideas and opinions of the stakeholders.

The second factor is called organizational concern. This factor is also a continuum. It ranges from concern for the public to concern for self. When the organization is concerned for the public, the organization shows an openly outward interest in understanding the opinions and needs of its stakeholders in an effort to satisfy its constituents. However, when an organization is strictly concerned with itself, the organization effectively closes out its constituents and adopts a reclusive, survival-at-all-costs stance.

The combination of the two public relations methods and the two distinct organizational concerns results in the four different research methodologies of investigative research, strategic research, informative research, and verification research. Each of these distinct research methods will now be discussed.

Investigative Research. This type of research is predicated on the organization's concern for its stakeholders and utilizes a dialogic public relations method. This research method has as its purpose to help both the organization and its stakeholders investigate and learn about each other so that each side can support the goals of the other. For example, when Parrish Medical Center (Titusville, Florida) decided to build a new hospital, it fully implemented this type of research method (Mroczek et al. 2005). Parrish Medical Center fully involved its constit-

uent base with the intent of actually listening to its stakeholders. They used focus groups, surveys, and public opinion polls involving county officials, patients, AARP, community associations, local physicians, and others in the discussion of both the optimal location for the new hospital and the best internal design and layout of the new facilities.

Strategic Research. Like investigative research, strategic research utilizes a dialogic public relations method. However, it differs in that the organization is concerned only with itself. This research method is used when the organization desires to learn about its stakeholder interests for purposes related to determining how to more effectively compete in a particular marketplace. For example, when a health care insurance company surveys its members regarding quality of healthcare services received from contracted providers, the insurance company is likely to use the results during its negotiation sessions with employers. In this example, the insurance company uses the questionnaire to inform its stakeholders of various organizational positions, yet the organization does not particularly care how its constituents use the information. The questionnaire mostly serves as a fact-finding instrument, including educating the organization about those issues which ultimately matter to particular subsets of stakeholders. In the example, the healthcare insurance company would use its stakeholders' information as it plans the company's overall strategic direction.

Informative Research. This research method is focused on an organization's concern for its stakeholders yet it employs a rhetorical public relations method. This research method is best described as telling stakeholders about something rather than involving constituents in the issue. From a practical perspective, the organization is not interested in hearing from its stakeholders. Rather, informative research is performed in order to highlight good news about the organization or to report negative things about the organization that have to be disclosed by law. For example, questionnaires and data collection related to a Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) site visit would be included in this category.

Verification Research. When the organization focuses solely on its own needs while utilizing a rhetorical public relations method, the verification research method is used. At this juncture, the organization ceases to be interested in the needs of its stakeholders, which means it has no desire in utilizing a sharing method of public relations. Instead, the organization desires to justify to its constituents why the organization chose to pursue a particular track. This research method is used to justify decisions after-the-fact and that makes this method more suscep-

tible to mishandling of research outcomes by the organization. While verification research can be undertaken for a good purpose, the literature is full of unethical examples of verification research. For example, in the 1990s, a leading tobacco company engaged in verification research to try to debunk the scientifically-sound research that showed a clear connection between second-hand tobacco smoking and failing health (Ong et al., 2001). This tobacco company attempted to use the results of this verification research to dissuade lawmakers from placing further constraints on the tobacco industry. In other words, the tobacco company had so much at risk when the link between second-hand smoke and illness was substantiated, the company engaged in verification research to try to justify to its constituents (including many lawmakers who received political contributions from the tobacco company) that its original decision to be in the tobacco industry was, in fact, justified by the low rate of risk it posed to users of its products.

Summary of the Research Methods. The typology of these four health marketing research methods represents and produces four distinct research methodologies based on the public relations method to be utilized and whether the organization's primary concern is for its stakeholders or for itself. In other words, for a given issue, an organization first needs to determine the level of stakeholder involvement and the primary type of organizational concern. Then, this typology will direct an organization to the appropriate type of research to conduct. More in-depth analysis is necessary to compile the details inherent in each of the four types of research methods.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW TYPOLOGY

The creation of this typology of health marketing research methods is important to the healthcare industry. Decision making in health services has become increasingly more reliant on information technology, evidence-based processes, and performance measurement (Sheingold, 2001). Current accreditation standards require that evidence-based medicine must be continuously reviewed in light of evolving evidence.

Indeed, the enormous amount of data available in healthcare has caused investigators to struggle with determining exactly when the evidence is examined sufficiently enough so that a decision can be made given some pre-defined levels of certainty and risk (Claxton et al., 2005). As a response to the abundance of healthcare data and its resultant data analysis needs, research-oriented universities have created

healthcare informatics laboratories. For example, the University of Central Florida in Orlando has created an Informatics Laboratory for use by faculty and doctoral students in both research and teaching using large healthcare data sets. This lab's mission is to (1) collect and use pertinent real-time data generated from multiple sources, guided by a theoretically informed framework, for producing reliable and valid metrics and benchmarking healthcare business activities and key performance indicators; (2) develop the best fitting model to show opportunities for optimizing efficiency and effectiveness; and (3) transform healthcare executive decision processes from an intuitive/tacit-based to an evidence-based approach in an enterprise-wide management. This mission affords an opportunity to formulate research and information models that ultimately can influence healthcare policy.

The above-discussed issues go hand-in-hand with the everyday operational challenges confronting today's high technology, outcome-oriented health care facilities. These constant challenges for better ways of measuring the progress of the health services industry demand a method for determining the best type of research method to use in different situations. Thus, this typology should prove beneficial as future research methodologies are considered for implementation.

CONCLUSION

In its purest definition, research provides sound outcomes generated by the scientifically-rigorous analysis of data. Whether or not the outcomes provide the expected causal relationships is independent of the analysis. Unfortunately, most health services audiences likely find both the raw data and the subsequent outcome both too complex and too confusing. In addition, statisticians can and do misuse both data and the associated research outcomes.

While research is assumed to be pure and not affected by sponsorship, the reality is that companies which fund research usually have a keen interest in the outcome of the research. For example, pharmaceutical firms have traditionally been big dollar supporters of funded research. Often this funding comes in the guise of continuing medical education (Elliott, 2004). Indeed, in 2001, pharmaceutical firms spent \$729 million supporting the continuing medical education of our nation's healthcare providers (Hensley, 2003). This represented 60% of all continuing medical education expenses in the U.S.

While we must be on the lookout for abuses such as the continuing education debacle, we should believe that most research is performed consistent with scholarly statistical methods and for legitimate purposes. Health services researchers need to display their results in a form that can be used by decision makers. These researchers must search for ways to clearly and concisely disseminate results to decision makers, including a process to continuously update the information.

In addition, it has been suggested that investigators use non-conforming statistical methods (such as Bayesian techniques) rather than the tried-and-true “frequentist” measures (Henriksson et al., 2006; Shiengold, 2001). These Bayesian methods allow for the introduction of subjective decision making processes into objective probability studies. As different statistical methods are introduced by researchers, it becomes even more important that a new typology of research methods be offered for consideration as a first attempt to categorize health marketing research methods using two distinct factors—the public relations method and organizational concern.

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