The Three R's of Applied Research - With Particular Attention to Sales Management

Thomas R. Wotruba, San Diego State University

Abstract

Applied research needs not only rigor and relevance, but also responsiveness to the needs of practitioners. Suggestions for applied research topics in sales management are offered.

Introduction

For years, academics have talked about the 2 R's of good research -- rigor and relevance. Rigor relates to the quality of the research process used to generate the results while relevance involves applicability of the results or implications for the practitioner. Numerous criticisms of the value of research coming out of business schools have recently appeared, however, suggesting that either this research has not met the test of the 2 R's or else the 2 R's are not enough. For instance, a critical assessment of business schools noted that, "for the most part, given the thousands of faculty members doing it, research in business administration during the past 20 years would fail any reasonable test of applicability or relevance to consequential management problems" (B-ehrman and Levin 1984, p. 141).

A Marketing Analogy

Providing a truly successful applied research contribution has many parallels with the marketing of products and services. In a recent book on facilitating the diffusion of knowledge, Glaser et al. wrote, "If knowledge is indeed to enhance our existence individually and collectively, that knowledge must reach the people who need it in a form they can put to use" (1983, p. 3). If the product of our research is "knowledge" and our market target is "the people who need it," the parallel to marketing seems clear. Good marketing starts with the needs of the marketplace to be served. Yet it is interesting to note that in the recent task force report of the American Marketing Associa-

tion on developing, disseminating, and utilizing marketing knowledge, there is no attention given to discovering what are the needs of the practitioner (AMA Task Force 1988).

Unfortunately, a different kind of marketing strategy seems to be more prevalent. It appears that a lot of the work of academic researchers illustrates the "better mousetrap theory" in which our market target of research users will eagerly take the initiative to seek out research from various published sources. But Glaser et al. suggest that this is unlikely to occur. "Few practitioners make any systematic effort to uncover research results that could serve as a basis for change; instead, they rely heavily on contact with colleagues to stimulate innovation" (1983, p. 312). Further, it is possible that managers do not perceive academic research as representing "better mousetraps." Glaser et al. suggest this with their observation, "One of the problems with most research reports is that they strike the practitioner as being unaware of and unappreciative of what has already been achieved" (1983, p. 313). Another source reinforcing these findings is the recent report on management education by Porter and McKibbin (1988). They state:

The degree of acquaintance that the business world has with the research coming out of business schools seems limited at best. Stated otherwise, as far as we could tell, many key managers and executives pay little or no attention to such research or its findings. The direct impact ap-

pears nil (p. 170).

And they state further on:

The business world is, generally speaking, ignoring the research coming from business schools . . . The total perceived impact is, judged from what we learned in some 200 interviews in the business sector, virtually nil (p. 173).

A Selling Analogy

What is the underlying cause of this problem, and what can we do to solve it? The diagnosis might be found in another analogy, this one involving the features-benefits distinction taught in personal selling. The "features" of our research can be paralleled with the first R, rigor. These features include the reporting of the methodology and all those statements meant to indicate evidence of a rigorous research design. The "benefits" of our research relate to the second R, relevance. Relevance is usually found in a section at the end of a research article discussing implications for managers. The hypothesis can be speculated that many more pages of journal space are devoted to the "features" of our research than to its "benefits." This pattern is largely reflective of our academic training and the demands of journal editors and review boards. Some shift in these proportions would be helpful, not by any sizeable reduction in the discussion of rigor, but by a somewhat expanded or at least more cogent discussion of relevance.

This features-benefits perspective must be carried one step further, however. Salespeople have discovered that benefits may be necessary (as are features), but they are not sufficient unless they produce a solution to a high-priority problem of the prospect. Thus, as we move beyond features and benefits to add "problem-solving" to our selling model, so should we move in our analogy beyond rigor and relevance to a third R, which can be termed responsiveness. For our research to be truly worth disseminating and using, it must be responsive to the needs of its market. Rigor is required for valid results, relevance is necessary to translate these results into meaningful terms for practitioners, but responsiveness is essential to guide us in selecting research that is desirable and useful to our profession.

Suggestions for Sales Management Research

In sales management, which is clearly an applied branch of the marketing discipline, a shift in research orientation is needed in two ways.

The first deals with the third R, responsiveness, and involves topics for research. Numerous suggestions for sales management research have appeared over the past decade, but these have all come from academicians (Albaum and Churchill 1979; Ryans and Weinberg 1981; Ford, Walker and Churchill 1983). Rarely do we get published research suggestions from practitioners. Based on conversations with sales managers, however, the list in Table 1 represents a personal impression of topics which would have great practitioner interest.

The second shift in research orientation is more concerned with the first two R's, rigor and relevance. These involve issues of methodology and generalizability. For instance:

Variables chosen for study should reflect what is controllable by sales managers, not simply what appears in a conceptual scheme or model borrowed from some other discipline.

Sampling units should be relevant, not simply convenient. Thus, undergraduate students or even MBA students as surrogates for experienced salespeople represent sampling units which will provide highly suspect external validity.

The focus of the research report should start and end with well-defined statements of practitioner need (as opposed to justifying a study largely because "there is little reported in the literature on this topic"). Methodology is important, but what good is superb quality control if the market doesn't know how to use the end result or doesn't care?

Finally, we need to foster a motivation for doing and submitting research papers that involves being useful to the practicing profession rather than just being published and attaining another line on a vita.

All three R's are important. But without responsiveness, we run the risk of losing touch with the practitioner side of our profession -- the ultimate marketplace for university teaching and research. As good marketers, we should also practice what we preach.

Table 1
Suggested Applied Research Topics in Sales Management

- 1 Determining and evaluating various organizational structure configurations to correspond effectively with customer buying processes and to differentiate effectively from competitors.
- 2 Allocating budget funds among various sales management programs, such as regular compensation, special incentives, training, supervision, etc., to achieve a specific set of goals.
- 3 Alternative ways of developing a profit orientation in the sales force, and the effectiveness of these alternatives under varying market and competitive situations.
- 4 Differentiating the recruiting and selection process for various career path opportunities in sales, sales management, and other marketing areas.
- 5 Developing operational guidance regarding various motivational devices and programs and in relation to specific situational variables such as stage in salesperson career cycle and stage in product life cycle.
- 6 Measuring the impact of variations in quota plans, including length of quota periods, extent of coverage in the quota plan (e.g., sales, activities, expenses, etc.), extent of participation in quota-setting, and degree of intra-period flexibility in quota levels.
- 7 Determining the impact of various modifications in the selling job from repackaging of tasks (to sales support persons, for example) and expanding responsibility of salespeople because of their close customer proximity and need for quick adaptation to competitor actions.
- 8 Gaining an understanding of the impact of ethical concerns on sales manager effectiveness in reaching short-term and long-term goals.
- 9 Assessing the effectiveness of various combinations of training program administration -- e.g., centralized vs. decentralized, concentrated at one time vs. distributed over a longer period of time. Above all, determining what types of training program objectives are feasible and how program effectiveness can be assessed.
- 10 Devising a framework for assessing high-tech contributions to selling effectiveness and efficiency, involving such aspects as computers and videodiscs.

References

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