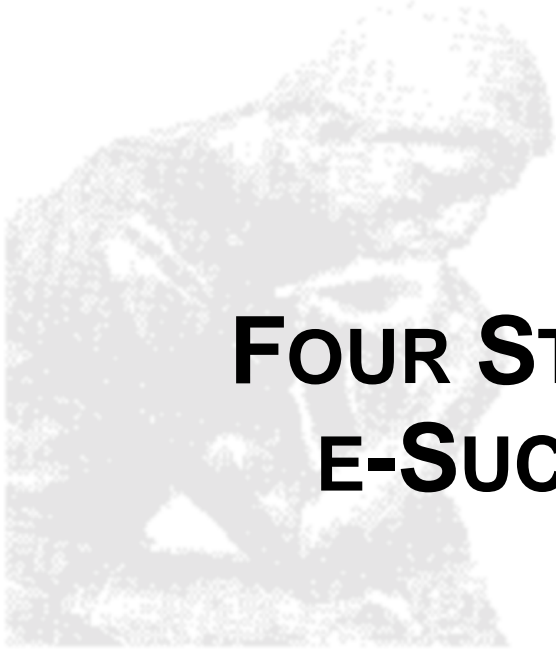


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FOUR STEPS TO E-SUCCESS

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THE FOUR STEPS TO e-SUCCESS

Market researchers are rapidly embracing a new technology – The Internet. The explosion of Internet use on both the consumer and business level has promoted new ways to collect and explore data. However, tried and true market research efforts do not have to be abandoned in the process. To the contrary – the key to useful and actionable research still lies in the proper use of data collection methods and thoughtful, high quality analytics. Instead of embracing the Internet Revolution without question, clients benefit most from the integration of new technology and traditional research.

However, the Internet and related ways of collecting data have also opened the door to new information-gathering possibilities. Researchers can now offer customized research approaches based on data mining techniques and/or the integration of market research and data base technology. In the vast majority of cases – especially in the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) space – this serves to enrich the overall market research process and add needed value and business intelligence at key customer touch points.

e-Research and e-Business

e-Research is a practice concerned with all approaches to market research, both qualitative and quantitative. From focus groups to standard research instruments to advanced data mining approaches, techniques are utilized to make sense of e-Business data and information. An important component, however, is still very basic. Companies (both dotcom and brick-and-mortar gearing up for e-Business) need to ask: ***What business are we in?***

From this simple starting point, strategy is formulated; issues of branding and positioning emerge; and sales/marketing ideas coalesce.

The Four Steps

The four steps to e-Success follow a logical approach to the emerging business intelligence needs of e-Businesses. They trace the following research path:

- Web Site Assessment Protocols
- Online Market Research Surveys
- Online Advisory or Consumer e-Panels
- Web Mining

Web Site Assessment Protocols inform about the website. They sharpen e-business focus and assist in fine-tuning online strategies. In addition, they can begin to address branding and positioning issues in the web space. Without a doubt, this step is the most important to e-Success, but unfortunately the one most overlooked or passed by in the rush to “get online”.

Online Market Research Surveys are deployed to allow e-businesses to get to know customers – a key step in Customer Relationship Management. With online surveys – just as with traditional market research – actionable business information can be gathered towards improving service by better meeting the needs of customers.

Online Advisory or Consumer e-Panels are convenient ways to regularly and effectively track critical business issues/trends, customer perceptions, and changes in attitude and satisfaction toward product, service, or industry. In addition, the nature of online panels and the online environment affords quick collection and assembly of research data.

Web Mining techniques are coming of age quickly. These highly sophisticated tools allow exploration of web site data (often in real-time), segmenting and profiling of customers (including integration with corporate or third party databases), and the construction of predictive models.

STEP 1: WEB SITE ASSESSMENT

Many web efforts suffer from a lack of attention to the user. Recent research reports have shown that most sites fail basic reliability and consistency tests. Web usability and navigability – although deemed important by experts in web design – is often neglected. Finally, too many e-Business websites suffer from a “lack of identity”. Advertising and marketing efforts are making valiant attempts to build online brand and awareness. However, without a thoughtful study and understanding of basic business fundamentals, no “idea” – no matter how compelling – can flourish for long.

The first stage of “need” in building e-Business insight often resides in the exploration of basic business issues through the use of focus groups. Additional sessions can range from the truly scientific (tracking and measurement of eye movements) to “softer” assessments, such as group critiques and exploration of a variety of web site designs, advertising creative, and positioning issues. This is followed by web site design that is assessed and studied through usability and navigability tests.

The insights, results, and observations made in the focus groups provide the grist for the next step, which is to enlist traditional survey techniques delivered in the online environment.

STEP 2: ONLINE SURVEYS

Once a sight has been adequately tested and developed, most e-businesses quickly need to learn about their visitors and customers. While web-mining tools exist that “automatically” track and report on information found in web log files, they are limited – and do not constitute the whole picture by far. Just as valuable – and usually more useful – is the deployment of online surveys that gather important information businesses need to inform their customer “relationship”: satisfaction, awareness, usage, propensity, and the like.

Deployment of online surveys can be accomplished in a number of ways: by email invitation, by web site “pop up”, and by formal invitation through letter or phone. Online surveys can be timed to appear at a certain place in a website, or to capture every “nth” visitor. Results can be merged with stored data from website registration forms or data on databases in a corporate warehouse or data mart.

Since the collection of data and feedback is so rapid in the online environment, such deliverables as real-time reporting and monthly tracking reports provide valuable and actionable business intelligence in a familiar form to marketing, sales, and executive divisions.

STEP 3: ADVISORY AND CONSUMER ePANELS

An ePanel is a dedicated group of specific users, clients, or advisors who agree to provide substantive feedback on a regular basis. ePanels are no different from traditional Advisory, Executive, Expert, or Consumer panels that provide business leaders and strategists with useful and critical research information.

Developing an ePanel can require an extensive evaluation and search process to best reflect the population of interest to the eBusiness. Once created, ePanels are housed in an attractive password protected website that serves as “home base” for the administration of timely or mission critical surveys. ePanel management and maintenance assures a continuous supply of brain power that can be accessed to address business issues, perceptions, and concerns. In addition, ePanels are valuable as devices to track important metrics over time.

On the buy/sell side, ePanels can be used to test products, concepts, and positioning strategies, as well as provide trend information for a variety of activities and metrics.

STEP 4: WEB MINING

Web Mining is more than the automatic counting of web clicks, or even when/where someone “clicks off” on a website. While valuable, these metrics tell us little about the “who, what, where, why, and how” questions that need to be effectively answered to drive the customer relationship building process.

Web mining tools handle extremely large quantities of data – too large for a human analyst to consider – and search for patterns, associations, and relationships. Web mining enhances traditional and advanced market research approaches by employing a bottom up approach. Data mining tools can measure individual customer/visitor-level behavior and help make sense

of a vast assortment of variables. In addition, Web mining incorporates data collected from surveys, makes use of information contained in corporate or third party databases, and supplements aggregate analysis tools like OLAP.

Increasingly, data and Web mining is being integrated into a larger process termed “Knowledge Discovery in Databases”. While many variations of the model exist, it is essentially an effort to tie the entire business process together into a coherent whole *built around the customer*. The net effect is efficiency and effectiveness in communicating and building customer relationships and forms the essence of the “one-to-one” business revolution. The elements consist of:

- Data Warehousing and Data Marts
- Target Data Selection: getting at the data you require
- Cleaning
- Preprocessing
- Transforming and Reducing Data
- Data Mining
- Selecting Models
- Evaluating and Interpreting Models
- Consolidating and Using Models

Data gathered as a by-product of web activity and behavior, consciously collected, used, and mined is another potent facet in the overall picture.

SUMMING UP

The four steps constitute a framework to approach continuing and necessary research to drive e-Business success. Businesses can enter the research protocol at any step. Increasingly, however, it is clear that the e-businesses that crave success would do well to thoroughly consider the four facets described above.