

Utility Of Archival Research: Breaking The Boundaries

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Abstract

This paper explores the relevance of historical research to contemporary marketing theory and practice. The paper surveys the international context/ recognition of such research and the Australian- New Zealand 'situation' and poses the question, 'Can we leave our history to the historians?' Arguably, we can use historical studies to enrich contemporary research and practice in the marketing domain especially marketing strategy and innovation and marketing positioning in practice. The paper canvasses eight principles for using archival research to address marketing questions, and the implications for academic researchers and practitioners.

The Current Boundaries

Bartels (1962), Hollander (1986), and Savitt (1989) amongst others have provided valuable insights into the history of marketing thought, and the use of historical studies in the marketing domain. Nevett (1991, p.13) explicitly examined how some of the techniques of historians could be applied in marketing practice. More recently, Alexander (1997) 're-visited' Hollander, and argued convincingly for additional historical studies in retailing. Following Hollander's death, Jones (2004) reflected on Hollander's immense contributions in this domain. Advertising has attracted researchers who use historical documents such as newspapers to trace developments in one company, one product, government campaigns (Witkowski, 2003) or the use of devices such as humour (Beard, 2005). Often such studies use content analysis as their method of data analysis. The advantage of these studies over descriptive histories is that they invoke a marketing paradigm.

One of the difficulties with archival research is that most archival materials by their very nature are unique to one location, and in the majority of archival deposits, the materials are not digitized and therefore the researcher must visit the collection or deal remotely with the archivist. If researchers do travel to archives, they need to be prepared for the unique features of archival data collection.

Using Archival Materials to Research Particular Marketing Problems

There is an extensive historical literature on retail and distribution, but many of these studies in the Australian context use descriptive analysis often taking labour management (Reekie, 1987) or economic history approaches (Ville and Merrett, 2000) which although informative and interesting, do not seek to understand or position their work in a marketing paradigm.

Some researchers have tackled marketing questions using archival materials. Welch (2000) in her study of business networks, argues that archival data can help to improve validity and reliability in longitudinal cases studies. In their case study of the marketing success factors in retail longevity, Miller and Merrilees (2000) used company archives, which included published Annual Reports, original financial records and advertising, together with interviews with the Managing Director and Marketing Manager. Their findings include a new model of

success factors, and demonstrate the use of multiple data sources, which required qualitative analysis and financial analyses such as the advertising-to-sales ratios in different periods (Miller and Merrilees, 2000: 76). Roberts (2003) used archival materials to focus on selling, a fundamental arena for marketers. Waller (1992) researched the early development of shopping by mail order catalogue. Miller and Merrilees (2004) use archival materials to examine the relationship between fashion and commerce, and the roles of retailers in providing innovative services, that are marketing-driven not simply market-driven approaches. Surveying these studies suggests that certain marketing questions can benefit from using archival materials. The challenge however is to develop best practice approaches to data collection in archives.

Guidelines for Marketing Academics and Market Researchers

Most of the relevant advice about research using archival materials comes from outside marketing (Duff and Johnson, 2002; Hill 1993). Welch (2000) is a helpful exception. From the outset, prospective researchers should note that archival material can be both qualitative (texts, images, oral histories) and quantitative (financial records, employment records). Researchers can take a modified grounded theory approach to archival work, and use archival material to develop or test theoretical frameworks.

Archival research requires a systematic and determined approach to identify appropriate documents and artefacts and to use and interpret the materials in such a way as to ensure data integrity. One advantage of using archival data is that there is potential for longitudinal retrospective studies. Development or *changes* in practices can only be identified longitudinally, not by using snapshot approaches that provide only point in time views, with no recognition of precursors or subsequent occurrences, and which eliminate temporal contextualization. For example, a snapshot approach would not capture intergenerational ownership adequately, or the evolution of marketing practices or innovation. The challenge with retrospective longitudinal studies is to find sufficient data from reliable sources to address the research question. Other potential limitations are the gaining of permission to use archival collections and physical access. Some collections like the retailing John Lewis Partnership Archives in England are difficult for Australasian researchers to access for any sustained period, or with multiple visits, because of financial constraints. The very nature of archival collections means that they are usually only available on-site. Despite advances in digitisation, most archival researchers need to visit and research where the collection is held.

Archival research presents some unique challenges and the principles for archival research need to be meshed with the protocols for qualitative research. The following guidelines have been developed by drawing on the literature (Duff and Johnson, 2002; Hill 1993; Miller and Merrilees 2000, 2004; Welch, 2000) and on more than ten years experience of researching and publishing using archival data. The eight principles proposed here are:

1. Have a clear research question and understand the rationale for archival research

It is axiomatic that the research question should drive the research design (Australian Society of Archivists, 2005a).

2. Understand how to select appropriate archives

Some deposits may be located within firms or other organizations, while others are located in public collections such as national archive collections, libraries, and university collections.

Databases of archival deposits and directories of archives are available (Australian Society of Archivists, 2005b). However, some collections are well known and others obscure.

3. Ability to gain access to appropriate archives

There are several aspects to accessing archives, once the researcher has identified a suitable collection. The major dimensions of access are *permission*, *temporal*, *physical* and *financial*. *Firstly*, access requires the researcher to gain permission to use the archival collection. Researchers may need to demonstrate that they have sufficient expertise, credibility and sensitivity to matters of confidentiality to be seen by the archivist as a serious researcher with a worthy project. *Secondly*, archivists are not necessarily employed on a fulltime basis, a situation that can act as a constraint in terms of spending sustained periods at the archive. Generally, researchers are not permitted to use the archives when the archivist is not available. Another dimension of temporal access is that the researcher must be relatively certain that the access will continue for the duration of the project. Discussions at the outset with the archivist help to confirm that this aspect of access is achievable. To illustrate, this requirement may not have been met in the case of the Coles-Myer Ltd Archive in Melbourne, because the company's archive was closed in 2000 and given to the State Library of Victoria. Cataloguing the materials was expected to take at least three years during which the collection would be generally unavailable to researchers. In 2005, the cataloguing is in complete and all materials are stored off-site. Furthermore, the off-site collection is unavailable from September 2005 to Easter 2006 during rehousing to a consolidated site in Ballarat (State Library of Victoria, 2005). The result is that extensive dialogue with specialist Library staff would be necessary if a researcher wanted to use this collection. Another temporal constraint for academic researchers is the potential need to visit archives outside teaching periods.

Thirdly, physical or geographic access may impose constraints. Researchers may be located quite remotely from the archive of choice even if it is in the same country. For final checking, the researcher may need to negotiate special arrangements with the archivist to facilitate the process. The archivist may also deal with minor matters of clarification by telephone. *Fourthly*, the financial aspects of access can be inhibitors where trips to archival collections necessarily incur substantial costs for transport and accommodation. Some archives may charge for access. Overall, the relationship with the archivist may strongly facilitate access to an archive, despite temporal, geographic and financial constraints.

4. Locating materials within the archive

Usually, researchers are not permitted to roam the archives, browsing at will. Therefore, dialogue with the archivist is critical to success. Frequently, company archives have only paper-based catalogues or finding-aids, very different from the computerized catalogues and databases that contemporary academic researchers use daily. Archival research is contingent on developing an active partnership with archivists so that the deposits can be mined extensively for potentially useful materials (Duff and Johnson 2002, Hill 1993). For example, Miller and Merrilees (2000) used mainly primary archival materials held by the firm with additional reference to secondary sources like the newspaper clippings files, which had been assembled within the firm.

5. Understanding which materials to use

The researcher's experience with business documents and intimacy with the goals of the research can guide the dialogue with the archivist about what materials pertain to the area of interest. A mutual clarification process must be used. The researcher can discuss a topic of likely interest such as innovation and the archivist can clarify, and then suggest certain

documents like diaries, annual reports or minute books that might contain relevant material. While searching those documents, the researcher might then ask for example if legal advice letters about patents or other correspondence were available. Patience and an iterative approach are fundamental to this part of the process.

6. Methods of data collection

It is often difficult to use research assistants, and Duff and Johnson (2002) have highlighted the importance of the researcher interacting with the archivist and the materials in the collection. Photocopying is often either restricted or not permitted at all, because of the fragile nature of many documents. Frequently, a researcher must request certain pages be copied and then wait for them to be sent after the visit to the repository. The costs of photocopying and for reproduction of photographs, microfiche, microfilm, videos and voice recordings must all be factored in to the resource requirements of the research project. Transcription, note taking, photography of artefacts, and voice recording can all be considered, however the decision on data collection will depend in part on the archivist.

7. Developing systems (practices and processes) to ensure data integrity

Having a thorough grounding in qualitative research methods together with an understanding of literature in the domain of the research question helps the researcher to develop specific systems. It is important to emphasize that the ongoing professional relationship and dialogue between the researcher and the archivist are fundamental to the processes. A thorough understanding of and regard for the principles of archival research are critical for researchers. A systematic approach and deliberate dialogue with the archivist can increase the robustness of the data collection. It is useful if the archivist can be motivated by the interesting or novel nature of the research topic.

The various types of data collection and analysis require different consideration. For example, transcriptions of interviews can be sent to the interviewees for their consideration and their feedback about errors of fact. Dealing with archival material is more problematic because most often, the creators of the documents are not available. However, early consideration of these matters in the planning phase contributes to a robust research design. These issues also need to guide the researcher's interpretations of the findings, because the researcher must know how valid the data collection methods, the analyses, and the interpretations are. Mason (1996) deals with the latter by arguing that researchers should be able to demonstrate how they reached their interpretations.

Triangulation in qualitative research can take various forms including triangulation of *methods* ('reconciling qualitative and quantitative data...a form of comparative analysis'), *sources*, *analysts* (includes 'review by inquiry participants') and *theory* (Patton 2002, pp.556-558, 563). The use of multiple sources drawn from historical documents is a form of data triangulation, and can be augmented by cross checking with the archivist about inconsistencies and possible alternative explanations and interpretations. Data integrity, comparable to internal validity, can be achieved using multiple sources and by consulting with the archivist. Together these research strategies contribute to what Patton (2002, p.563) calls 'thoughtful systematic triangulation' to minimize 'systematic bias and distortion' and to increase 'credibility and quality'.

8. Ethical issues

Academic researchers would usually clear their proposed research through their institutional ethics committee. As well, the researcher should seek extensive guidance from the archivist

on this matter. Typically, issues of business confidentiality are excluded. Furthermore, generally *the thirty-year rule*, which is the standard used for most government documents, would apply, and thus more recent documents would not be used without thoughtful consideration and express permission. The ethical approach to documents emphasizes the roles of the archivist as screener, as referrer, and the grantor of permission to use data. The naming of individuals in research publications should be confined to those matters relevant to roles they had in the firm, and which are on the public record, for example through public access to the archive. Archival collections often have strict requirements for researchers who wish to publish and to which researchers are bound to adhere, as a condition of access.

Implications

Choosing archival research as part of the research design for investigations of marketing questions has several implications.

Implications for academic research

Opportunities continue to open up to academics to gain access to archival collections, for example, when firms close or merge. One particular difficulty with retrospective qualitative studies is the constraint on checking with original writers of documents. Dissemination of findings could be through the usual publication and conference channels. Other dissemination could be to organizations or even to public forums. Dissemination contributes to the qualitative research process and increases the possibilities that change in knowledge and practice can result from the findings. One final critical step is an evaluation of the research process and methods used. The design of the research process requires an evaluation framework as part of the study, with interim checkpoints. Two chief benefits are early warning of problems or potential problems, and identification of goal achievement. This is important for the individual researcher's learning and for properly identifying the contribution of the project and implications for future research.

Implications for teaching and learning in research methods

Most universities offer courses, which cover a mix of qualitative and quantitative research tools. A brief introduction to the use of archival data (both quantitative and qualitative) would benefit undergraduate students. In postgraduate coursework, more extensive exposure could be introduced into curricula so that assignments requiring an integration of theory and practice could add a component that incorporates historical research potentially using archives. For research higher degrees, the research training could include selected archival research, depending of course on the topic.

Implications for twenty-first century organizations

The escalation of company websites has seen the introduction of small sections about the history of the firm. This device can be interpreted as a means of assuring the wary online consumer of the stability of the business or organization. The caution is to ensure accurate use of archives and this is where a well-informed marketer could use the firm's archival material and other historical documents to contribute to the credibility of the organization.

Conclusions

Arguably, we cannot leave our history to the historians. That is, researchers investigating marketing questions can use a marketing framework to collect, analyse and interpret archival data. A major contribution of archival research is to longitudinal studies that are essential for understanding dynamic topics including marketing strategy and innovation, and marketing positioning in practice. A snapshot frozen in time will not suffice. The eight principles presented here can help researchers to broaden their own boundaries in research practice.

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