

Writing a Research Brief

Planning Market Research



Why Write a Research Brief ?

Writing a research brief is an essential first step in any market research exercise. It will help the market research agency develop a relevant and appropriate research programme. The very act of writing a brief enables the author to prioritise the objectives and planned outcomes of the research.

Planning the Brief

The more time spent planning the research, the better the outcomes are likely to be. Ultimately, it helps you clarify your objectives and prioritise what you want from the research. The brief helps the research agency develop the most appropriate research solution, and to derive the best value from the available research budget.

The starting point is always the business objectives. Involving relevant departments at the outset will save time by ensuring all key business objectives are included in the brief.

There is often a tendency to include 'nice to have' issues. The more focused the objectives, the more focused the result!

General Considerations

Project Timelines

The particular research methodologies adopted for the programme will have a strong bearing on the timeline of the project. Similarly, the scale of project (e.g. larger programmes of telephone interviews or personal depths) will affect timings. Review periods between phases can also add significant delay, and need to be accounted for.

Budget

Providing an indication of the available budget will allow the agency to develop an appropriately costed programme. Talking to an agency first to get an understanding of ballpark costs will save a lot of time later.

Give the Agency Sufficient Time

More complex research programmes inevitably take longer to design than simple, small scale studies. Typically, a more involved proposal will take a week to prepare and a brief costing a few days, or if necessary a matter of hours!

Key Headings in the Brief

A brief should be concise, yet outline key information. The following headings provide a general template.

1. Background
2. Business Objectives
3. Research Objectives
4. Preferred Approach and Methodology
5. Deliverables
6. Timings
7. Budget
8. Contact Names
9. Submission Information

1. Background

An overview of the business, relevant issues to the project, and details of recent studies provides valuable background. Although time consuming, one of the most useful pieces of background information (particularly for business to business studies) is accurate information on the size and structure of the customer base or target audience. If appropriate, this should include who the most appropriate contact points are (e.g. particular job functions).

2. Business Objectives

Business objectives should be summarized separately from research objectives. For example, a company seeking to launch a new product (business objective) might consider a research programme to measure the level of market interest and estimate likely revenue levels at the optimum price point.

3. Research Objectives

Provide a summary of the research objectives. For example, in the new product launch initiative above, detailed information objectives might include determining optimum pricing levels of different customer or market segments, and identifying the most attractive product features. It is not necessary to produce a comprehensive list of detailed information requirements, but defining the core information objectives necessary to meet the wider business objectives is an essential component of the research brief.

4. Preferred Approach and Methodology

You may have a preferred methodology, or would like several alternative options costed in the proposal (for example alternative options of conducting focus groups and individual depth interviews). The agency should always review options, and if necessary, make additional recommendations for the most appropriate approach.

5. Deliverables

Specify required deliverables. For example, whether a full report or powerpoint summary report is preferred. Detail the number of presentations, interim meetings and workshops likely.

6. Timings

The time to conduct a research programme is largely driven by (a) the scale of the exercise (e.g. number of interviews) and (b) type of data collection (e.g. face to face interviews will take longer than online surveys). In business to business surveys, difficult-to-reach audiences can have a much greater impact on the length of time to conduct interviews. For example, interviewing CEOs in FTSE100 companies or Finance Directors will inevitably be more difficult to interview in a short period than general consumers.

If the research needs to be conducted within a limited time frame, or there is a key reporting date to be met, including this information will have a significant impact on the type and scale of research methodology. Interim results can always be presented against a series of key milestones.

7. Budget

Research agencies generally prefer to be given notice of the available budget of the research programme. Clearly larger budgets offer greater scope for larger and multi mode programmes (e.g. qualitative and quantitative research, greater targeting of discrete audiences). Some organizations have less experience of research and find it difficult to pre-specify the budget. Most agencies can provide an indication of likely costs for different types of study before a formal written brief is provided.

8. Contact Names

Include details of relevant contacts, including the preferred or primary contact.

9. Proposal Submission Information

Specify when the proposal must be submitted, to whom and where. If hard copies are required in preference to electronic documents, specify the number of copies required. Proposals can be presented to assist with the clients' evaluation.

Further Information

If you would like further advice when writing your research brief, or would like to discuss a specific research project, please get in touch with www.redshiftresearch.co.uk.