

From Research Findings to Business Action

By Douglas Cox

Early in my career, I believed my responsibility as a survey researcher was fairly straightforward. I worked with a client to develop a survey, collected the information, analyzed the results, and delivered a report explaining what we had learned.

At that point, I considered my job finished.

I didn't believe it was my place to tell a business leader how to run his company. After all, I was the research guy. My expertise was in gathering reliable information, not managing someone else's business.

And frankly, at that stage of my career, I wasn't sure I was qualified to do much more.

Over time, however, I began to question whether delivering a good research report was really enough.

I could complete a project, present findings I believed were valuable, and walk away feeling I had done an excellent job. But sometimes I had the uneasy feeling that little would come of it.

The client might appreciate the information, find some of the results interesting, and even compliment the quality of the work.

But the underlying reaction often seemed to be little more than, "That's nice information to know."

And then everyone went back to business as usual.

I eventually came to understand that delivering reliable information and helping a client put that information to work are two very different things.

Both are important.

When Good Research Doesn't Lead to Change

Research can reveal an important problem, identify the factors contributing to it, and even point toward potential solutions. Yet none of that guarantees the organization will do anything differently.

Sometimes the difficulty is knowing where to begin.

Imagine an employee survey that identifies concerns about communication, supervision, recognition, training, and opportunities for advancement.

The findings may be clear. Employees have identified several areas in which the organization could improve.

But what should management do first?

Are some problems more serious than others? Which ones affect the greatest number of employees? Are certain problems contributing to others? What improvements would make the greatest difference? And how much can the organization realistically accomplish at one time?

These questions go beyond simply reporting survey results.

They require interpreting the evidence, weighing alternatives, and considering what the organization can reasonably do.

Without that next step, even a carefully designed and executed survey can become little more than an interesting report.

And interesting reports don't necessarily produce better business outcomes.

A Project That Got It Right

One of the projects that helped shape my thinking involved a state department of motor vehicles.

Over the years, I conducted quite a bit of research for this agency. One particularly large project involved collecting more than 100,000 data points to better understand the experiences of its customers and identify opportunities to improve service.

The research ultimately produced 42 specific recommendations for improvement.

Forty-two.

That was a substantial number of potential changes for any organization to consider, especially one providing essential services to a large public population.

The agency could have thanked us for the report, discussed a few interesting findings, and filed it away.

But that's not what happened.

Instead, DMV leadership took the findings seriously and began considering how to translate them into improvements in customer service.

And I remained involved in the process.

My role wasn't to decide which recommendations the agency should adopt. Those decisions belonged to DMV leadership.

Rather, I helped them understand what was behind each recommendation, what the research suggested about its potential impact, and why it might — or might not — deserve priority.

We also considered something that can easily be overlooked when an organization is enthusiastic about making improvements: its ability to manage the changes.

An initiative might promise a meaningful improvement in customer service, but implementing it could require considerable time, staff involvement, or changes to existing procedures.

And each additional initiative placed more demands on the organization's capacity to implement change successfully.

There was no predetermined number of recommendations the agency intended to pursue.

The goal was to identify a manageable set of improvements that could make a meaningful difference.

Ultimately, DMV selected roughly half of the 42 recommendations for concentrated attention. It established committees to study and implement improvements and developed a plan for moving forward.

To me, this was research being used the way it should be.

The findings didn't dictate the decisions. They informed them.

And rather than treating the research report as the end of the project, the agency used it as the beginning of a process aimed at improving customer service.

Not Every Finding Deserves the Same Response

One of the lessons illustrated by the DMV project is that discovering a problem doesn't automatically mean an organization should devote resources to solving it.

That may sound strange coming from a researcher. After all, if the survey identifies an area in need of improvement, shouldn't management do something about it?

Not always.

Some problems affect a relatively small number of people. Others may be widespread but have a limited effect on overall satisfaction, employee performance, customer retention, or another important business outcome.

Still others may be important but extraordinarily difficult or expensive to address.

The challenge is to distinguish between findings that are interesting, findings that are important, and findings that justify action.

That requires looking beyond the numbers.

For example, suppose customer survey results indicate dissatisfaction with both the appearance of a company's offices and the length of time customers must wait for service.

Both findings deserve attention.

But additional analysis may show that waiting time has a much stronger relationship with overall satisfaction and customers' willingness to return.

In that case, improving service speed might deserve greater priority than redecorating the offices.

Of course, cost, feasibility, and other operational considerations also matter. A company might discover that reducing waiting time requires additional staff or significant process changes, while improving the appearance of its facilities could be accomplished relatively easily.

The research helps identify the potential value of each improvement.

Management must weigh that value against what it will take to achieve it.

The objective isn't to act on every finding. It's to identify the actions most likely to make a meaningful difference.

Turning Findings into a Plan

I've come to believe that one of the most valuable conversations in a research project should take place after the findings have been presented.

It's the conversation that begins with a simple question:

"What are we going to do with what we've learned?"

That question leads to several others.

Which findings are most important to the decisions we need to make? What actions might address the problems identified? What evidence supports those actions? What resources will they require? Who will be responsible? And how will we know whether our efforts have been successful?

These are management questions, but the researcher can make an important contribution to answering them.

The researcher knows how the information was collected, what the findings support, and where uncertainty remains.

That last point is especially important.

A survey may identify a strong relationship between two variables without establishing that one causes the other. It may reveal dissatisfaction with a particular service without explaining precisely which operational changes will solve the problem.

A good researcher should help management recognize those distinctions before committing resources to an improvement that may not produce the expected results.

And when the evidence isn't sufficient to support a particular action, the researcher should be willing to say so.

The researcher's contribution is not to make every business decision.

It is to help ensure those decisions are grounded in a sound understanding of the evidence.

The Researcher's Role Doesn't Have to End with the Report

My thinking about this changed considerably over the course of my career.

In the beginning, I saw a fairly clear dividing line. I was responsible for the survey and its findings. The client was responsible for deciding what to do with them.

Experience taught me that the dividing line didn't have to be quite so rigid.

In fact, I found that many clients welcomed continued involvement. Survey research was not something they dealt with every day. They understood their businesses far better than I did, but I often understood the research evidence more deeply than they did.

Those two kinds of expertise complemented each other.

I could help them interpret a finding, explore alternative explanations, evaluate the potential importance of a particular issue, and consider whether a proposed action was supported by the evidence.

They could bring their knowledge of operations, resources, organizational priorities, and practical constraints to the discussion.

Together, we could move beyond understanding what the survey had revealed and begin identifying what the organization might reasonably do about it.

This is why the final step in the Accurus Research Seven-Step Survey Success Cycle is **Turning Data into Action**.

It isn't an optional afterthought. It is an essential part of realizing the value of the research.

That doesn't mean the researcher should remain involved indefinitely, or that every project requires an elaborate implementation plan.

It means that before the project is considered complete, someone needs to connect the findings to the decisions and actions the research was intended to support.

The Real Measure of Research Success

I still believe that good research begins with a clearly defined purpose and depends on sound sampling, thoughtful questionnaire design, careful fieldwork, and responsible analysis.

Those things matter enormously.

But I've also come to recognize that technical excellence alone isn't the ultimate measure of success.

A research project can be conducted flawlessly and still have little influence on what an organization does.

Conversely, a project that helps management recognize an important problem, make a better-informed decision, and take meaningful action can create value long after the final report has been delivered.

The DMV project remains a particularly good example for me — not simply because of the volume of information collected or the number of recommendations developed, but because the organization took the next step.

It moved from learning about its customers' experiences to identifying practical opportunities for improvement.

And it recognized that the purpose of the research wasn't simply to know more.

It was to do better.

**The real value of survey research isn't measured by how much information we collect.
It's measured by how effectively that information helps people make better decisions.**

About the Author

Douglas Cox is President of Accurus Research and has more than 40 years of experience in survey research. Today, he helps organizations strengthen their survey research capabilities, close critical information gaps, and turn reliable evidence into better business decisions.

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AI Disclosure: *This article is based on Douglas Cox's professional experience, knowledge, and perspectives developed over more than 40 years in survey research. AI was used as a supplementary tool for organizational and editorial assistance. All core ideas, insights, judgments, and conclusions are his own.*