

Monitoring the Market

In my experience there are two types of business owner; the “just do it” type and the “show me the research” type.

“Just do it” business owners want to go on their gut instinct and if it feels right to them then in must be a goer. On the other hand the “show me the research” type don’t like to make a move until all the evidence is in and has been discussed and sliced and diced every which way!!

Obviously there are risks to both approaches ... The “just do its” can forge ahead without considering any of the risks or issues they may be facing while the “show me the research” types may never get off the starting blocks because they are too worried about making a mistake or want guarantees before doing anything.

Well, this article is about how to take a balanced approach to monitoring your market. I am not a great believer in over researching or constantly monitoring competitors; I like to make a thorough assessment of the marketplace, draw some conclusions, set some strategies and then act like a leader rather than a follower.

So here is a simple step by step guide to monitoring your market.

Before you start you need to define your marketplace: Depending on your business you could be trading in a number of different “worlds”. You may be in a specific geographic location, you might be operating within a defined industry or profession, you might have a product that appeals to a particular age demographic or you may be targeting people with a specific attitude or attribute. For instance if you are a motor mechanic you might be targeting Mercedes owners or if you have invented an environmentally friendly cleaning product you might be targeting people who are interested in green issues. Make a list of all the “worlds” you would like to keep track of.

Then identify the things you would like to monitor. These could include your competitors, product trends, new product developments, population changes, changing technology, attitudes of suppliers or clients. Add these to you list.

Next, think about how much time you should spend monitoring the marketplace. This is where the “just do it’s” will be thinking 5 minutes and the “show me the research” group will be thinking 5 hours!! If you are in a fairly static market then once a month or quarter is plenty, if you are in a field with fast changing technology or your business is riding the downturn rollercoaster then weekly is a better bet.

Now work out what you are going to use to monitor the marketplace. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

- Bureau of statistics will have information on your area and population changes that may create an opportunity for your business
- Local councils and Chambers of Commerce often have a statistical analysis of the area
- If you are a retailer in a mall, ask Centre Management for access to their research
- Read the local paper, it's a great way to find out what is going on and who is coming and going in the area. Check out DA applications to see who is coming to town and look for editorials on new businesses
- Make a local real estate agent your best friend! Estate agents are often the first people to spot population trends ranging from an influx of single professionals to a growing number of tree changers or sea changers moving to the area
- Profile your existing customers or clients and use that information as a benchmark to help you identify any changes in local population
- Find out what websites are the most relevant to your industry or profession and sign up for regular newsletters
- See if you can find an interesting blog that will give you insights into your profession or industry
- Check out websites of suppliers, competitors, peak bodies and organisations representing your industry
- Join a networking group that will give you access to people who can help fill you in on what's happening
- Look for an online user group that will give you access to international experts
- Check your newsagency to see if there are local publications that will provide useful information on technology or trends
- Search for overseas publications or websites that may give you information on upcoming innovations and trends
- Attend conferences and trade shows to find out the latest "thinking" and see what the market is up to
- Identify colleagues who might be willing to share information on the marketplace
- Web search to see how you rank compared to your competitors
- Check your competitors websites
- Drive by your competitors premises
- Mystery shop your competitors if possible. Keep in mind you may need to pay someone to do this research
- Look for research on your preferred generation. There are heaps of books and websites which will give you insights into Gen Y's, baby boomers and Gen X
- Don't ignore your own clients or suppliers. You can test attitudes and thoughts using regular surveys or annual focus groups. You can also set up a Client advisory Board if you want to be able to test new product developments and initiatives on a representative group of clients or suppliers

I know this sounds like a lot but once you have worked out what is right for your business you may only have 4 or 5 initiatives for monitoring your market. Put together a mini market review that will only take 1 – 2 hours a month.

For instance, in my business I subscribe to 2 magazines, have signed up for newsletters from 4 websites, monitor search terms and competitors web sites and compare notes with 2 colleagues. If I think changes are afoot I might add a couple of things to the list but generally speaking I spend about 2 hours a month monitoring the market so I can stay ahead of the pack.

So no matter whether you are a “just do it” or “show me the research” business owner you can now monitor your market with confidence.