



Setting the Scale: A White Paper Series

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How To Avoid Solving The Wrong Problem
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It has been nearly a month since I set out to learn more about how I can most effectively lose weight. And already, I'm frustrated.

The problem, I've come to realize, isn't that there's not a good source of advice on weight loss. Rather, there are a myriad of sources, many of which are contradictory, and all of which claim to offer that secret method that will make me lose weight and keep it off.

One of the more dubious methods I've discovered is on a box of breakfast cereal. It informs me that I can lose up to six pounds in two weeks by replacing two of my daily meals with Special K breakfast cereal (or one of a number of other Special K-related products). "Fill up all you want on fruits and veggies and eat a sensible third meal whenever you choose!" the plan proclaims.

I have to smile as I read this, because Special K, like most breakfast cereals, is loaded with sugar and carbohydrates. To fill up one of the regular-sized breakfast bowls in my cupboard, I need nearly two cups of Special K. That serving size contains more net carbohydrates than a Snickers candy bar.

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Portion control is a little easier with pre-packaged portions, and Special K does have those available. But they're not an ideal option. If I opt to replace that bowl of cereal with a Special K shake or a Special K protein meal bar (neither of which is nearly filling enough in a single serving for a guy who weighs 250 pounds), I'd get nearly the same nutritional value that I'd find in a packet of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups.

At least with the candy, I wouldn't be under the illusion that I was making healthy choices for breakfast.

But then, that's the problem. It's easy for a

breakfast cereal company to promise that a change in diet will result in a quick (but meager!) weight loss of up to 6 pounds, because the cereal company is counting on the fact that the dieter has been consuming an even greater number of calories per meal than a sugary cereal or candy bar might offer. These calories aren't coming from low-calorie foods like vegetables or foods high in dietary fiber like fruits. They're coming from other processed foods that have all sorts of hidden calories built in, engineered by food scientists who have figured out how to use salts, sugars and fats not only as a means to make processed foods appetizing, but also as preservatives to ensure they'll last longer on the shelves.



During my information-gathering phase, I've been surprised (and somewhat dismayed) to learn that few foods that have been extruded, enriched, fortified or otherwise processed have much to offer in terms of nutrition, particularly for those designed to be consumed as part of breakfast, the so-called "most important meal of the day." I've seen plenty of breakfast products in the cereal aisle making health claims to the contrary, of course. I've even seen advertisements from Kellogg's attempting to portray Pop-Tarts as a healthy alternative -- that's right, Pop-Tarts, which actually have the same amount of net carbohydrates per pastry as a Milky Way Candy Bar... and which come in packs of two to encourage consumers to get through the box more quickly so they'll buy more.

So, according to my research, what's the best thing to eat for breakfast? Boring old unprocessed oatmeal with just a touch of sugar or syrup on top. Or maybe a piece of fruit. Or, if I'm hungry enough, slices of the latter added into the former. Though both also include a high proportion of carbohydrates, being unprocessed makes those

carbs harder to digest, which in turn means they're less likely to be turned into fat by the body.

Which leads me to wonder -- have I been thinking the wrong way about dieting? In my previous diets, I've always focused on reducing calories. But the more I've read, the more I've come to realize that not all calories are created equal. Those that come from simpler, more natural foods aren't digested in the same way as those coming from processed foods. A sugary soda or a candy bar provides a remarkably efficient way for my body to turn calories from carbohydrates into fat. So, for that matter, is a bowl of breakfast cereal.

"Maybe my problem," I remark to myself one morning as I walk past the breakfast cereals and pastries in my kitchen to select an apple from the fruit bowl, "is that I've focused on trying to cut calories when I should have been focusing on cutting certain kinds of calories. Maybe my diets haven't worked because I've cut back on things I usually eat instead of replacing them with healthier things that I don't eat."

That thought nags me throughout the day. Could it be that I've had trouble shedding weight simply because I've defined the problem incorrectly?

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Marketing research has become a fairly common activity in the business world, partially because it is proven -- many an organization has saved itself from embarking down a road that would lead to ruin thanks to the insights gleaned from careful research -- and partially because it provides a way for organizations to minimize risk and maximize reward for a relatively low expense compared to the millions that might be at stake if a decision is made from intuition instead of information.

And yet research is often conducted for the wrong reasons, with the wrong people, and by asking

the wrong questions. Organizations tend to have voracious appetites for information, but are not always so discriminating about the quality or usefulness of the data being gathered. If good research is a well-prepared meal that is catered to the individual tastes of those who are dining, bad research is the all-you-can-eat buffet of information gathering. Good research requires the skillful guidance of a chef who knows how to combine flavors appropriately. Bad research

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makes compromises and is guided by a desire to know a little bit of everything rather than a need to know a lot about something.

At the heart of all of this lies a dilemma that must be addressed by any organization conducting research -- is it more important to be quick or is it more important to be right?

Quick research is generally done for one of a handful of reasons. In some cases, it's conducted because an organization spots an opportunity with a very limited window and gathering a little bit of information to help guide the gamble is better than having no information at all. There is nothing wrong with conducting quick research in such a circumstance; in fact, it can often prove quite helpful!

But far more often, quick research is done to appease something arbitrary -- say, an individual has a meeting coming up and he or she has been tasked with coming up with numbers to share, or a research report needs to be generated to support some larger business objective, or a focus group needs to be conducted to test an upcoming advertising campaign. When the need to know is based around a deadline that is not based in opportunity, but in bureaucracy, quick research can easily be done badly and generate information that is not at all accurate or useful.

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Research that is conducted more thoughtfully, on the other hand, can have a tremendous value if the organization takes the time to think through the reason the information is important and what strategic goals that information can help to support down the road. This sort of research may take weeks or months to conduct, but it will yield data that are much more comprehensive, much better suited to stand up to scrutiny and much more robust in application.

When a problem is defined improperly:

- Research will not be able to provide helpful insights
- Research will skirt around the real problem without providing a solution
- Data may suggest a course that seems to solve a problem, but is merely addressing a symptom

Like a fine meal prepared by a skilled chef, a thorough research report can generate memorable moments and surprising insights. The research can become an experience that can be enjoyed and built upon. Unlike a quick study conducted for the benefit of having a few numbers at a meeting, a detailed research report can provide a multi-course experience, with each phase building upon the last, each problem finding a solution, and each subtle nuance finding its opportunity to contribute to the overall flavor of the work.

It is this more thoughtful style of research that demands a great deal more preparation. And yet the rewards are so much richer that those who become accustomed to this style of research will begin to find themselves avoiding the all-you-can-eat experience in favor of something more specifically prepared.

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At the heart of this more thoughtful approach to research is a mantra that strong research begins

with a good understanding of the problem that needs to be solved.

This stage of problem definition is an important step -- some might say the most important step -- in ensuring that the resulting data from a study will actually be useful. When a problem is defined properly, it becomes much easier to ensure that the population, the sampling method, the research methodology, data collection instrument and plan

of analysis are all able to work towards a common goal. When a problem is defined improperly, it is likely that research will not be able to provide helpful insights. At best, it will skirt around the real problem without actually providing a solution for it. At worst, the data may suggest a course

that seems to be solving a problem, but which in reality is merely addressing a symptom that has a far deeper - and more potentially devastating - cause.

The distinction between symptoms and problems is difficult, because symptoms often seem to require immediate attention while problems can generally be left alone without seriously affecting performance in the short term. Symptoms are visible; problems are often hidden. And in treating the symptoms without regard to the problem, we may make things worse without even realizing it.

I learned this lesson the hard way one morning when I walked into work with a stomachache. My stomach had, by that point, been feeling funny all week, but I reassured myself it was nothing serious and reasoned that I was experiencing the symptoms of either a gastrointestinal bug or something I'd consumed that hadn't agreed with me. The pain was high up in my abdomen, right where the stomach resides. I could tell it was a legitimate stomachache and not a problem coursing through the rest of my gut.

When the stomachache didn't go away, I ventured over to the drug store and bought some over the counter medicine to relieve the cramping and bloating I was feeling. An hour later, I vomited that up. An hour after that, my stomach was hurting so badly that I was rolling around on the floor of my office. At that point, my co-workers told me that if I wouldn't go to the doctor, they were going to take me themselves.

And so I had my wife drive me to my family care practice, where the physician's assistant who saw me listened to my description of my symptoms and decided to give me something to ease my stomach cramping. I wound up vomiting that up, before passing out. The P.A. told my wife she wasn't sure what was wrong with me, but that it was time for me to head to the emergency room.

Soon, I found myself in a bed in the emergency room, and a doctor walked in and asked me if he could try something to see if he could help get to the bottom of this stomach pain. I nodded. He jabbed me lightly with two fingers, pushing into my right side. My body seemed to explode into pain, as if he'd jammed his fingers into my abdomen. But I could see that he'd barely touched me. "Yep," he said, in confident confirmation. "You have appendicitis."

What had thrown everyone off was the fact that I kept describing a pain in my stomach and not on my side. The symptoms I was feeling were the result of my appendix rupturing and spewing distress signals up to my stomach. I couldn't feel the pain in my side as intensely as I could feel the pain in my stomach, so I didn't notice it. I was so focused on one symptom that I didn't notice a far more dangerous one.

I turned out to be quite fortunate - my appendix had ruptured in the best way possible without leaking into my body cavity, allowing the surgeon to take it out through a minimally invasive technique that night. Within a few days, I was back home and resting up. The problem had been addressed,

and so the symptoms went away as well. Had I remained focused on those symptoms for just a few hours longer, however, my surgeon said it would have been likely that I would have turned septic and required far more severe surgery.

If I had kept trying to self-medicate the symptoms instead of allowing someone with medical training to help me solve the problem, I might have even put my own life on the line.

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Rarely do organizations face problems as dramatic as my case of appendicitis, but many do face problems that affect their overall health and effectiveness. Many of those problems are ultimately people problems -- problems with the way front-line staff have been trained to interact with customers, problems with the way management views the competitive market, problems with the way B2B relationships are being conducted, or problems with how strongly employees feel valued. None of these are easy problems to address, and many organizations use research to address symptomatic concerns resulting from these problems rather than investing their time and energy into getting to the root of them.

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Consider, for example, a sit-down restaurant that begins asking each of its customers to take a survey to rate their service experience. This sort of surveying method is commonly used, and yet its intent is plainly misguided. By asking customers to provide feedback on their dining experience, what the restaurant management is really doing is asking the customers to share their emotional response to the service they've received despite the fact that such a mechanism is already built into the exchange through the expected gratuity.

If a customer is happy with the service, he or she will offer a more generous gratuity (and perhaps some kind words!) than if the service is merely OK. Rarely will a customer take the time to fill out a survey to further gush about the experience. The financial reward is much more relevant to both parties involved.

But if a customer has a poor experience, it is often not enough to simply reduce the tip. It is when a customer is upset that he or she will seek to provide the most feedback, filling out a survey card on the table, seeking out a manager to complain to or even offering a harsh critique to the server directly. Thus the survey card is little more than a tool for attracting negative feedback, and the information gleaned only provides insight on the symptom, and not the true problem itself.

For example, the real problem might be that the management is not training service staff to deliver top-quality service. Or it might be that management is intentionally shorting the number of servers on the floor to reduce payroll hours and that the individual waitstaff are juggling too many tables. It could even be that servers consider the restaurant itself to be a less desirable place to work and that management refuses to do what it takes to address servers' concerns.

All of the above problems could be solved through research, but they would also be difficult to identify through data collected from table surveys. In this example, an anonymous employee survey would provide more meaningful data, as would bringing in an observational researcher to look for gaps between the ideal and reality of day-to-day life in the restaurant.

It is quite common for large organizations to conduct research when variables treated by management as metrics show a sudden decline -- sales have stagnated, unit sell-through has

tapered off or growth in a market has slowed. As far as management is concerned, the problem is "why have our numbers dropped?" and the correct approach is to get out there and start asking the customer why. In other words, the problem is related to financial measurement, and management turns to perceptual data to try to address it.

The entire exercise is folly, more often than not. Customers may participate in the marketplace, but unless they are exceptionally well-informed, their opinions tend to be unqualified and based

upon an emotional response that may change with the weather. Asking customers why sales are declining or why growth is slowing is like trying to determine the regional source of the beans in a cup of coffee -- so much has occurred since the beans were harvested that only an expert will be able to offer an opinion with any degree of accuracy.

This is not, of course, to suggest that the "voice of the customer" is unimportant. Quite the contrary -- most researchers (myself included) would advocate that "voice of the customer" research should be conducted regularly as a broader feedback system to help identify problems and opportunities. When customers have a share of voice in the internal decision-making process through research, organizations often reap huge benefits.

But when organizations are only focused upon detecting symptoms and charge out to ask the customer what the problem is, they're bound to get a lot of surface information that never really gets to the heart of the actual problem. And more often than not, the information that is gleaned from this sort of research will lead to conclusions that are wrong.

For example, let's say that a cell phone manufacturer has suddenly seen a decline in sales due to changes in the marketplace. When the cell

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phone manufacturer was riding high, consumers wanted physical keyboards. But now, they want touch screens, and the manufacturer is scrambling to catch up so it can deliver a device that can help it to correct its course.

Here is a situation where a manufacturer is likely to conduct a lot of research with end-users, trying to find that perfect set of features that will stimulate interest in new users while preventing the alienation of old users. The new concept will go through focus groups, through choice modeling, through prototype testing and through endless iterations before a design is finally completed. The design team will look at competing devices, read through volumes of data about consumer preferences, and try to find some innovative features (such as, a physical button that immediately sends out tweets on Twitter) that can help the new phone to stand apart.

But for all of this activity and all of this research, the manufacturer is never really addressing the fundamental problem: it has stopped innovating in a way that resonates with consumers, and it is now playing catch-up with its competitors. What's more, the manufacturer may also be ignoring the fact that phones that lack cutting-edge features can still be quite profitable if they're sold to a different target market. The problem may be that its current sales channel doesn't understand the product's selling points and is offering it to the wrong consumers.

Ultimately, the new product may succeed based upon the whims of the market, but it is more likely to fail to meet expectations than not. Management will likely blame the research it conducted. And it should. The research itself is not to blame, however; it is the fact that management focused on solving the problem of building a better mousetrap instead of first determining if it lacked the innovative capability to stand toe-to-toe with competitors who were already several steps ahead of them.

In the end, research with the sales channel, with employees, with consumers in secondary markets

or with consumers in emerging markets would have been far more fruitful to this organization. In finding a new market to sell existing products, the organization might have been afforded the luxury of time and capital to begin boosting its innovative abilities. Instead, the organization's management will now have yet another failed product on its hands... and the consequences of that failure are sure to follow.

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My wife asks me why I've stopped eating Special K, and I tell her that I'm concerned that it's a part of my problem. "I've been eating three to four cups a day, as my 'healthy snack,'" I tell her.

"But the box says it'll help you to lose weight," she says. I nod, and point out the guidelines suggesting that I should be replacing two meals with small portions of Special K and then eating fruits and vegetables for snacks.

"It occurred to me," I tell her, "that by cutting out the breakfast cereal entirely, I'd probably lose a lot more than six pounds."

She nods, though she's not entirely persuaded -- she loves breakfast cereal and eats it for dinner when I'm traveling. But then, she doesn't have the same need to lose weight that I do.

Still, it's a good thing she loves cereal, because I've resolved to give the stuff up entirely. Since I am not a fan of oatmeal, my breakfasts, I've decided, will now consist of fruits and nuts. And my healthy snacks will include more of the same.

The problem, I've realized, isn't that there's anything wrong with breakfast cereal. Special K is fine in the recommended quantities. No, the problem is that I'm consuming so much of it that I might as well be eating candy.

And fortunately, that's a problem I can solve.

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The Research & Planning Group is a **full-service qualitative and quantitative marketing research agency** based in Saint Louis, Missouri. In its thirty years of business, RPG has provided a variety of marketing research services to clients all over the world.

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2013 White paper series

RPG has launched a new white paper series for the year 2013. This series is an engaging yet informative set of articles that parallels Research Director Sean Jordan's weight loss crusade to the use of marketing research to keep an organization healthy. There will be a total of 6 issues.

Please contact Cassandra Lu, the marketing coordinator for RPG, if you would like to subscribe, unsubscribe or receive the white paper in a different format or email address. She can be reached at cassandra@researchplan.com.

We hope the white paper series is useful to you and brings new insight into the marketing research process. We hope it is a fun read as well!

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