THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL TRUST IN THE USE OF RESEARCH

Recent and ongoing advances in the way marketplace information is collected and made available provide managers and other research users with unprecedented amounts and kinds of information. Moreover, essentially the same information is available to competing firms at about the same time. As a consequence, competitive advantage is to be found increasingly in what is done with information, i.e., how it is used or employed rather than in who does or does not have it. It is not surprising, then, that more and more attention is being given to factors affecting whether and how information is used (Barabba, 1987; Deshpande and Zaltman, 1982, 1984, 1987; Krum, Rav, and Keiser, 1988).

From these efforts, insights have begun to emerge concerning how the use of research is affected by such factors as organizational structure, unexpected results, the political acceptability and actionability of findings, data quality, where in the decision process information becomes available, environmental change, product or service maturity, whether the intent of research is developmental or confirmatory, and the frequency and timing of researcher-manager interactions.

Perhaps the single most important factor affecting the use of research is the presence or absence of trust. The literature on agency-client and researcher-user relationships has pointed to the importance of trust in creating and maintaining relationships (Cagely, 1986; Glaser, Abelson, and Garrison, 1983; Michell, 1984; Wackman, Salmon, and Salmon, 1987). However, exactly how or in what ways trust is important, particularly with respect to the use of marketing research, has not received much attention.

Drawing on extensive interviews with 170 researchers and managers from client organizations, advertising agencies, and research firms, this article explores the nature of trust between managers and researchers and its impact on the use of marketing research, especially advertising research.

The Concept of Trust

The Research Literature. Trust is a basic feature of all social situations that demand cooperation and interdependence (Johnson-George and Swap, 1982). It is not surprising, therefore, to find an extensive research literature on the social and psychological dimensions of trust and its role in developing and maintaining relationships. Trust has been described in this literature as an expectation that the word or promise of another person or group can be relied upon (Rotter, 1967). Given this expectation, the ensuing trust serves as a basis for a person or group to arrange and present their activities in a manner acceptable to others (Scanzoni, 1979). Trust also varies
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In the final stage, trust is based on faith that the other party will continue to act in a responsive and caring manner despite the vicissitudes of an uncertain future (Kempel, Holmes, and Zanna, 1985). Faith is partly a function of predictability and dependability, but again it is also influenced by the personal security and self-esteem of the person/organization doing the trusting.

Drawing upon both the research literature and our interviews, we define trust as an interpersonal or interorganizational state that reflects the extent to which the parties can predict one another's behavior; can depend on one another when it counts; and have faith that the other will continue to act in a responsive manner despite an uncertain future. This way of defining trust is built on the concept of embeddedness, i.e., trust is established by the gradual increase of properly conceived and timed acts on the part of each person in a relationship (Shapiro, 1987). This definition was narrow enough to guide our thinking about the factors affecting the development of trust between researchers and managers, but broad enough to allow for the fact that trust can take on different shades of meaning with different aspects of a relationship.

Respondent's Viewpoints. As this discussion suggests, trust is both a subtle and complex variable. Certain dimensions of trust seemed somewhat more important for researcher-manager interactions within a client organization or advertising agency. Still other dimensions seemed somewhat more important when the central researcher and manager/user were in different organizations. For example, many firms rely heavily on research companies and advertising agencies to provide research expertise (in addition to simply collecting and

according to the extent to which a person believes another to be benevolent and honest (Larzelere and Huston, 1980). Here benevolent refers to how genuinely interested a person is in a partner's welfare and is motivated to seek maximum joint gain. Honesty is defined as the extent to which an individual's statements of future intentions are believable. It also refers to the believability of statements of current importance about past and present events.

Trust has also been studied as a way to achieve a desired objective in a risky situation (Giffin, 1972). Trust is further viewed as a way in which partners can cope with the uncertainty and vulnerability that exists in all such relationships (Heimer, 1976). Another view of trust is as an impersonal rather than personal state (Shapiro, 1987). Impersonal trust seems to embody hope that a person with whom one must necessarily work will perform in a competent manner (Barber, 1983). For example, impersonal trust may occur when managers must place faith in researchers outside the organization where it is difficult to monitor, evaluate, or constrain the researcher's performance. Moreover, impersonal trust is necessary when the research relationship is transitory or when the manager lacks the expertise to evaluate the research effort.

Some authors have described trust as emerging through three distinct stages in relationships (Kempel, Holmes, and Zanna, 1985; Kempel and Holmes, 1986). First, trust is characterized by predictability or the ability to foretell an individual's specific behaviors. This is most readily accomplished when that individual behaves in a consistent manner in a stable environment. Zeltner (1984) has suggested (without using these concepts directly) that this first stage of trust has been weakened on the part of clients toward their agencies as a result of the large number of agency mergers and acquisitions. Because organizational changes among agencies can lead to changes in social relationships between agency and client personnel, these changes have been viewed as decreasing the client organization's ability to predict agency actions.

As time progresses and predictability is retained, trust becomes less a function of specific behaviors and based more on an evaluation of the qualities and characteristics attributed to the other—trust is placed in the dependability of the other person and not in their specific actions. This second stage may be characterized by a manager's willingness to allow himself to be personally vulnerable in a risky situation in which a researcher (or other manager) could affect the manager in a harmful way. Circumstances involving risk and vulnerability are important in establishing trust. There has to be a willingness to extend trust to another person who can display untrustworthy qualities as easily as trustworthy ones.

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... of their relationships with researchers. There are several reasons for this. For example, many firms are contracting out for research expertise, i.e., they are relying more and more on research companies and advertising agencies for important design, statistical and interpretive expertise. They may, in fact, work with a variety of research companies in the course of a year or so. As a consequence, managers are often working with a larger number of researchers and spending less time with any one of them. The absence of enduring manager-researcher relationships coupled with less researcher familiarity with the client organization and the manager’s situation decreases the opportunity for high levels of trust to be established, even though very high quality research may be provided.

Another reason trust may be absent concerns the increasingly short-term, tactical focus of managers’ thinking and behavior. This can create friction, especially with agency researchers who may have a longer-term, more strategic viewpoint. This difference in orientation can inhibit the development and maintenance of trust between managers and researchers even though neither viewpoint is uniquely related to trustworthiness. Also, a client’s focus on evaluative research using very precise but often rather uninformative measures as a kind of report card, in contrast to the agency’s advocacy of more developmental research, may also bring these groups into conflict. As with the short-term–long-term difference in orientation, this disparity in perspective hinders the development of trust between organizations. Many additional barriers to trust were discussed in the interviews. Overcoming these barriers requires time, energy, and persistence on the part of both parties. It also requires a good understanding of and sensitivity to the factors that facilitate and inhibit the development and maintenance of trust.

Methodology

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 93 people while telephone interviews were conducted with an additional 77 people. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of these interviews by type of organization. A total of 170 people were interviewed representing 94 organizations. Interviewees were key people chosen from the largest advertisers, the largest advertising agencies, and major research or consulting firms. Additional people were identified by various

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 trusting, and every effort was made to interview these key informants. Very few people declined to participate and those interviewed were very generous with their time. Interviews often exceeded an hour and many lasted close to two hours. Telephone interviews generally exceeded one half-hour often continuing for an hour. In 44 percent of the face-to-face interviews a second interviewer was present. In some instances a second or even third person was present from the interviewee’s organization. A copy of the general list of issues/questions we developed concerning the use of marketing research, especially advertising research, was sent in advance to respondents. Certain issues/questions were flagged as being of special relevance to the particular respondent. The face-to-face interviews were relatively unstructured whereas the telephone interviews were more structured.

Developing and Maintaining Trust

Some of the more frequently mentioned perspectives on trust were offered by both researchers and managers in the interviews. The factors contained in these perspectives have a major influence on the development and maintenance of trust. The relative importance of these factors can vary from one relationship to another and over time. The contexts in which managers and researchers interact also add special qualities. Additionally, there are unique properties of the researchers’ and managers’ positions in their organizations that predispose them to somewhat different viewpoints regarding trust and related issues.

Some of these factors suggest guidelines for researchers to follow when they interact with clients in their own and other organizations. Other factors suggest ways of structuring the research function and its resources.

... respondents ... made it clear that it was not possible to trust someone who was always willing to compromise his or her values, ideas, or training to meet client demands.

Being a Team Player. Many respondents distinguished between a researcher being “a team player” and “digging in your (the researcher) heels on a point you feel strongly about.” Being team players, as opposed to digging in their heels, often requires that researchers go along with manager actions they do not feel comfortable with but are not judged to be harmful to the firm. To make such judgments, the researcher needs enough familiarity with the firm to know when a particular use of research will or will not have serious consequences. Being a team player may require sacrificing methodological or interpretive norms so a client can meet a product deadline or downplay his or her culpability in a brand’s poor performance. A researcher’s flexibility in responding to special client needs was a quality respondents thought very important. This flexibility seems to lend credence to those situations in which researchers feel it is necessary to dispute a particular use of information or when they decline to perform a task because insufficient time is available to do it properly.

When researchers demand that exactly the right thing be done all the time, managers may question the extent to which the researcher can be considered a “part of the team” or relied on when it counts. On the other hand, respondents also made it clear that it was not possible to trust someone who was always willing to compromise his or her values, ideas, or training to meet client demands. Therefore, further trust is established when researchers take a firm stand against a particular use or interpretation of research which they feel is truly detrimental to the firm. One advertising manager described such researchers as having the “courage of their convictions.” Other interviewees, when discussing these same postures, also mentioned that researchers must be sincere in their attempts to help clients and yet secure in their opinions about the use of a particular piece of research. There was considerable comment about balancing these two postures. As one researcher put it:

The dilemma is that if you always dig your heels in and fight for your ideas you are considered arrogant and foolish. However, if you constantly back off when the client challenges one of your ideas you’re considered a pushover. You need to know when to cry “wolf” and when not to.

A researcher’s decision to dig in or back off is affected by a variety of factors including the level of trust already present in the relationship, the posture taken in the most recent critical incident, and the personal and professional implications of the research findings for the managers involved. Respondents seemed to agree that to maintain relationships you have to, as one agency researcher put it, “Learn to lose a few battles to win the war.” The war, in this case, is the maintenance of trust in the rela-
relationship and the ability to stand firm successfully on a position when that is necessary.

**Being a Truth Teller.** Related to the idea of "digging in your heels," respondents continually expressed the importance of honesty in researcher-user relationships. Most felt that being honest was a necessary ingredient to building trust. Researchers, in particular, felt the need to be honest with their clients by "showing all the cards" even if they are not all positive. As one researcher stated:

You've got to be a truth teller. You just can't play politics. Once you've got a reputation for being a truth teller you've got it made in terms of having your research accepted.

Outside suppliers agreed that honesty was a key to their relationships with advertisers. As one noted:

The advertising business is a trust business. It is essential to be able to say to an advertiser, "Your advertising needs to be better." Creative people in the agency may resist this but you must have the courage to present this kind of thinking to your clients.

Interestingly, in the interviews, both agencies and client firms acknowledged that they sometimes withhold information from one another. Not surprisingly, each party believed the other holds back more data more often. These beliefs reflect a basic lack of trust in these relationships. One reason that agency people do not share all research with their clients is that they feel clients cannot be trusted not to jump prematurely on a particular finding during exploratory research and thereby inhibit the agency's thinking about an issue. Likewise, when managers don't feel they can trust researchers to support their research agendas or interpretations, they may refrain from asking for research or from using it when available. Zand (1972) documented the effect trust has on information exchange:

One who does not trust others will conceal or distort relevant information, and avoid stating or will disguise facts, ideas, conclusions, and feelings he believes will increase his exposure to others, so that the information he provides will be low in accuracy, comprehensiveness and timeliness; and therefore have low congruence with reality . . . When others encounter this behavior, initially they will hesitate to reveal information, reject influence, and evade control.

Conversely, the greater the trust in researcher-user relationships, the greater the information exchange, i.e., the greater the disclosure of more accurate, relevant, and complete data about the problem and one's thoughts and feelings about this information.

Two factors, among others, appear to affect both truth-teller status and the effective balance between being a team player and digging in your heels. First, as suggested earlier, when a user perceives the researcher as acting in the company's best interests, even when presenting bad news, trust in the researcher increases. Second, when research departments have a discretionary research budget or are otherwise less dependent on a few internal clients for their basic funding, researchers can yield more independent judgments. This occurs because researchers are not as financially dependent on a specific manager for the support of their function. This independence increases the researchers' inclinations to act more in line with overall corporate interests, be more honest with clients, and to present bad news. This budgetary arrangement indirectly, but importantly, fosters independent, honest, and trusting relationships between researchers and managers.

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**Mutual Understanding of Needs, Capabilities, and Goals.** A common understanding between researchers and users with respect to each other's needs, abilities, and goals is also essential to a trusting relationship. This understanding helps researchers and users set more realistic boundaries on their expectations of one another and hence increases the likelihood that they will perceive one another as predictable and dependable. Many respondents suggested that this understanding is achieved most effectively when researchers are in close physical proximity to users. This allows researchers to develop better personal rapport with users and to therefore feel a greater stake in the user's performance. Close proximity also increases researcher involvement in, and hence their familiarity with, the marketing problems to be researched. This, in turn, creates more focused and relevant research and a more realistic basis for interpreting data and expressing judgments.

Another factor which improves understanding between researchers and managers is their having experience in one another's jobs. When researchers
have had line experience and/or managers have had research experience, their ability to empathize with the other increases. This ability can foster the development of trust by helping each party understand the constraints and difficulties faced by the other.

A major barrier to gaining a better understanding between advertising agencies and their clients is their sometimes very different values, orientations, and cultures. Much has been said in various forums about the tension and conflict between agencies and clients arising from these differences. Evidence of such tension and conflict was also present in the interviews. For example, many agency people gave the impression that, relative to their clients, they (1) are more involved in exploratory than confirmatory research; (2) use a wider variety of quantitative and qualitative tools; (3) are more oriented toward strategy than tactics; (4) prefer longer-run to shorter-run evaluation measures; (5) work in a less risk-averse environment; (6) approach problems or tasks with broader backgrounds; (7) have a broader basis for believing what it is they know; (8) have superior interpretive skills, and so on. This list could include dress codes, conversational differences, and even a strong sense of who is the "smarter" partner. Clients favorably distinguish themselves from agencies along these very same dimensions. As a result, researchers and managers can be thought of as operating with two very different sets of norms, values, and objectives independently of organizational context. Other research has documented these differences (Deshpande and Zaltman, 1984). The important observation here is that each party believes they are distinctly different from the other. When

one or the other party perceives these differences as being large, a form of xenophobia develops which lessens or thwarts the development of trust.

As differences between the groups are minimized and they gain a better understanding of one another, users' trust in their researchers increases and users are more likely to include researchers in their decision process. This in turn enhances the usefulness of research and the ability of researchers to provide more relevant information. This means more varied perspectives are brought to bear on decisions and a broader array of ideas will be shared. Moreover, unarticulated knowledge—what it is we know that we don't know we know—which is so very important, has more opportunity to be surfaced, challenged for its validity, and used when appropriate. Many respondents felt that this form of knowledge was among the most useful and that it was more likely to be brought forth in the presence of trusted colleagues with different perspectives.

Managing Bad News. The ability to manage bad news is central to the development of trust between researchers and managers. When researchers or managers perceive the discovery of bad news, they discovered bad news, researchers were less trusted.

Three skills surfaced as being essential for bad news management. First, researchers in particular made it clear that the more significant the bad news (i.e., the greater the repercussions of the research results for decisions, reputations, or the bottom line), the greater the need to find and stress the good news in the same data. Second, the more significant the bad news, the greater the need to develop valid explanations of the findings. By offering an explanation, managers felt they were being given some understanding or insight, not just data. Third, and perhaps most important of all, is the researcher's ability to present constructive ways of responding to the bad news. Managers in particular thought that the impact of the news could be softened by researchers' suggestions of different strategies for coping with the problem.

Managers and researchers also agreed on the importance of the researcher giving a manager advance warning of bad news, i.e., sharing it prior to its presentation to others. As one researcher stated:

You should show a draft of the research memo to decision makers first. This approach does run the risk of being shown as a pushover, but you are also showing that you aren't going to surprise and embarrass decision makers.

When researchers do this, managers feel they have an opportunity to work with researchers to present the results in a less dramatic way or at least have time to think about and consider viable responses to the problem before presenting the data to colleagues and superiors.

Supporting Answering and Asking Postures. Throughout
the interviewing process there seemed to be a subtle but very important psychological distinction between doing research and having answers. A person from a research firm expressed the feelings of several other inter-

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viewees when he commented that managers do not know how to ask researchable questions, "but they sure know how to ask why research doesn't answer the questions they do have!" A research director in a consumer products company commented similarly, "[a specific vice president] doesn't want research, he wants answers." Suggestions were made that managers are uncomfortable asking questions and that research may reflect weakness and uncertainty: it is manly or managerial to have an answer whereas having a question is not. In other words, admitting that one does not know something acknowledges ignorance and may render a manager less powerful. This may be one reason why most market research is confirmatory, i.e., it verifies that a particular idea is good and avoids having additional questions raised. It may also explain why both good and bad surprises tend to be dismissed. Even unexpected good news implies someone's judgment was in error.

The dilemma arises in that the reluctance to ask questions results in considerable use of limited knowledge in decision making. Because asking systems are a necessary part of answering systems, the more thorough the asking process the better the resulting answer. There is a catch though. Researchers identify with asking processes, while managers identify with answering processes: despite the interdependence of these processes, they often clash. Managers lose confidence in the ability of research (and hence researchers) to provide answers if it also raises new questions and in the process raises uncertainty rather than decreasing it. This, in turn, decreases trust in the researcher to perform what managers see as critical answering tasks. Researchers must manage these postures very delicately by providing managers with a sense of progress in answering their concerns, while also assisting them in finding out what they don't know and what it is they do know that they can be still more confident about.

Making a Believer Out of Your Users. The importance of believability surfaced repeatedly in the interviews. Researchers agreed that if users buy into the research or put faith in what the research is suggesting, then trust in the relationship is fostered. In this case, trust also affects the believability of research results. Several factors appear to affect the believability of research. First, when the researcher is credible, the research is more believable. That is, when the researcher is seen as having a distinctive expertise, the research products are more believable. In this case, a researcher's reputation or prior professional affiliation or past accomplishments color others' perceptions of his or her products.

Believability also requires agreement that sound and robust methods have been used in generating research. This is sometimes a point of conflict between agencies and advertisers. Agencies, on the whole, appear to feel more comfortable with a wider array of both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Many client firms, on the other hand, appear to rely on more conventional quantitative survey research methodologies. Exceptions include the very large advertisers who are more like agencies in the scope of their methods. These advertisers have, for the most part, subsumed the agency's research role and were therefore more like them than other advertisers. Different preferences in methodologies can create serious barriers to believing research results and therefore contribute to the lack of trust between these organizations.

Another quality mentioned as affecting the believability of research was how effectively it was presented. Aside from being organized and persuasive, interviewees noted that it is important that research be presented in a manner consistent with how managers prefer to process and use information. Some managers are highly skilled in using formal, analytically-driven research such as opinion and attitude studies and econometric analyses. Others are very skilled in applying their varied, accumulated experiences or intuitions when addressing the same question. Very few managers seem to be adept at using both sources of information.

Likewise, some managers are more comfortable with "pictures" of data rather than numbers. If the presentation can be tailored to meet the individual needs and dynamics of the audience, the believability of the research increases. As one agency researcher suggested:

Client trust is won through a two-step process. First, you need good interpersonal skills in pre-research consultation.
Second, you need to do a good job presenting the results. A problem here is that clients are often not sophisticated enough to appreciate a good presentation.

**Absorbing Uncertainty.** The final factor is related to trust in an indirect but important way. This concerns the ability of a researcher to absorb uncertainty. It is rare for research to provide all the essential information needed for important marketing decisions. A truly comprehensive research effort may not be feasible for any number of reasons ranging from budgetary and time constraints, to methodological limitations, to the inherent unresearchability of certain questions. Moreover, the research itself may identify but not clarify important but previously unthought of issues. Also, every research method has its limitations, particularly with respect to how the resulting data can be analyzed and interpreted. As a result, major pockets of uncertainty usually remain after research results are in hand.

A number of respondents suggested that the more important the issue or decision the more likely it is that some uncertainty will remain. As we noted earlier, trust is especially important in situations characterized by uncertainty. We also noted that managers prefer answers to their questions rather than still more questions and that researchers tend to raise more questions. Some researchers, however, appear to have a special ability to "fill in the blanks" where data are missing and to act confidently with respect to these "additional" data. Moreover, these researchers appear to be very competent in determining what the missing data would look like had they been acquired. This ability to absorb uncertainty rather than pass it along to managers is important even when data are available. Research findings often fall in a grey area where they neither clearly endorse nor reject a particular idea, proposition, or action being considered. The data are used along with other kinds of information to make a yes or no judgment. In both cases, i.e., with respect to either missing data or available but somewhat unclear data, the researcher's ability to act with confidence with regard to ambiguous data is important. There appears to be a kind of intuitive sense that is derived from both a formal, analytical study and from reflected experience with the product or relevant target market. That sense enables a researcher to extrapolate and to say that he or she has much more (or much less) confidence in particular findings than, say, what tests of statistical significance might provide.

Because managers must act as if data were clearer than they often are, they see as more dependable those researchers who are willing to wander from the data, i.e., researchers whose judgments are not tied narrowly to specific findings. When managers find they must make extrapolations from the research or use their reflected experience to make decisions, they need guidance as well as intellectual company from their researchers. Researcher guidance in these ventures enhances the likelihood of making the right decision and may provide a basis for future sharing of potential blame. In either case, when researchers help absorb some of the uncertainty about an important issue, managers sense they can depend on them to help out when most needed.

**Summary**

Trust is present in all healthy user relationships. Researcher and user relationships are no exception. This article has discussed how and in what ways trust is important, particularly with respect to the use of marketing research. We have defined the concept of trust and attempted to sensitize both managers and researchers to a set of factors that facilitate and inhibit its development and maintenance. These factors are grounded in the experiences of the managers and researchers interviewed. We think they offer a rich set of guidelines for researchers and users to observe as they develop structure in their relationships with one another.

**References**


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