

# Mixing art with science

Seventy-two depth-interviews, 45 minutes each, in three cities, with four different respondent cells, and at least four primary objectives. How do you report these findings in a meaningful way that is detailed enough to include all of the key information, yet is succinct enough that it will actually be read?

Finding the correct balance between concise reporting and information overload is as much an art as it is a science. Include too much information and the key findings are lost; include too little and the words are meaningless and the findings unsubstantiated.

This is a particularly difficult balance to strike in qualitative report writing. Unlike quantitative reports, where the data tables are generally the star of the page, a qualitative report starts with a blank canvas. The amount of detail and the structure of the report are completely up to the report writer. Mastering this delicate balance often means the difference between writing a good report and a great one.

In the past, it seemed that the longer and more detailed a report was, the more it was appreciated. Market research managers and analysts wanted all the details. The report from the market research professional served the critical purpose of providing the analyst with all of the information necessary to write his or her own report or presentation for senior management. However, times have changed. As a result of mergers and layoffs, our direct clients have experienced an increase in their workload and responsibilities, leaving them little time to do their own reporting. They

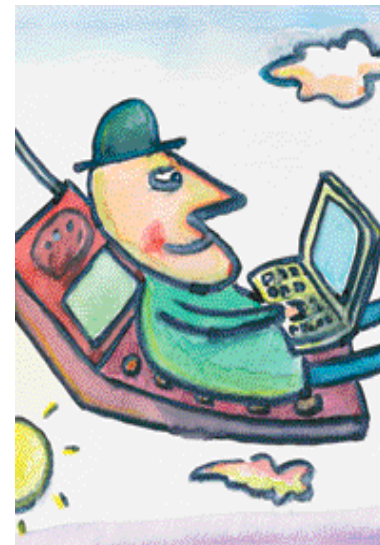
look to the market research supplier to provide a report deliverable that is executive-ready.

In a world of Blackberries and instant messaging, our direct clients expect to have answers provided to them quickly, powerfully and in an easy-to-comprehend format. Executive-ready reporting is a style that simplifies the end product for the reader. It takes reporting beyond shelf

## A guide to executive-ready reporting

research and into an integral part of the decision-making process. The report becomes an interactive tool as well as a thorough documentation of all findings relevant to a specific market research study. It can be used and understood by everyone in the company, based on its simplicity, accessibility and multiple levels of information.

However, in the move from the traditional narrative format to a more condensed, bullet-point style, some report writers have fallen prey to oversimplification. In some cases, the need to provide quick and easy-to-



By Carla Penel and Will Leskin

*Editor's note: Carla Penel is research manager, qualitative services, and Will Leskin is vice president, qualitative services, at the Greensboro, N.C., offices of M/A/R/C Research. They can be reached at [carla.penel@marcresearch.com](mailto:carla.penel@marcresearch.com) and [will.leskin@marcresearch.com](mailto:will.leskin@marcresearch.com).*

read findings has led to thin and hard-to-support reporting. Many of these market research reports are scarcely more than a few slides of unsubstantiated bullet points with a quote or two thrown in for good measure. In diluting the context to make the relevant points fit on a slide, the report writer has essentially diminished the quality of the report, detracting from its ability to inform executive-level decisions. The report writer has created a report that is not executive-ready.

### **How do you make a report executive-ready?**

An executive-ready report differs from a traditional narrative in both its format and its analytical approach. A narrative report is what can be considered a “bottom up” approach in that the foundation leading up to the conclusion is laid first to give context and meaning to the conclusions. This is how we were typically taught to write compositions in schools and how most books and movies are written. Who wants to know how the movie will end before seeing the beginning? Well, marketing executives do. In order to be a good executive-ready report writer, you have to conceive your entire analytical story and then write it backwards in a cohesive, succinct manner. This makes the report-writing process particularly challenging, but very rewarding to the reader.

The concept behind an executive-ready report relies on four basic principles: conciseness, adaptability, readability and balance.

1. What is a concise report? To understand what a concise report is, it is first necessary to understand what a concise report is not. A concise report is not one that simply relies on short phrases and liberal use of abbreviations. A concise report is not one that hits on the major findings and leaves out the minor ones. A concise report does not try to reduce the number of slides in a PowerPoint presentation by cramming too much information onto a few slides.

Concise is simply the elimination of all unnecessary or repetitive words. Similar to headlines on a newspaper, all headlines and sub-headlines use sparse wording to communicate the key find-

ings as simply and pointedly as possible. This allows the reader to immediately grasp the key points of the slide.

The advantage of a concise report is that it spotlights the essential information and ties it together in a spatially relevant way so that it is easy to identify and retain key findings.

2. What is an adaptable report? A great report provides value to different types of readers at different levels within an organization. By skimming the headlines only, the busy executive can understand all the key findings from a study. By reading the executive summary only, the CEO has all the strategic recommendations needed to execute the next step. By reading every word on every page, the diligent market researcher can obtain all the important information, including the secondary findings. The breadth of the report is also such that, months from now, a new product manager can quickly understand the context of the research and its results.

Adaptability not only means that the report can be read in different ways, but it can also be used in different ways. It used to be that reports and presentations were two separate entities, but now these lines have blurred with the shift from Word to PowerPoint as the application of choice. An executive-ready report should be a visually stimulating presentation that is also easy to read as a report. This offers the end user a multitude of choices on how to use the report to best suit his or her needs. The entire report can be presented, the executive summary alone can be used as a quick debrief of the key findings, or the report can be circulated as a stand-alone documentation of the entire project.

The advantage of an adaptable report is that it can be used for different purposes by people at various levels within the organization.

3. What is a readable report? The findings from every market research study have a story to tell. The key is to make that story as interesting as possible by making one point flow effortlessly into the next. To do this, all the relevant information must be woven together in a tight package – not only

verbally but spatially as well. The reader does not have to think about how one fact is related to another or flip from one section of a report to another – the report writer has already connected the dots. A readable report is also visually appealing. Visually interesting elements are more effective in capturing a reader's interest than a laundry list of bullet points.

The key advantage of a readable report is that the report is read. The value of any report is in its utility and a report that lacks interest is rarely thoroughly read, fully comprehended or properly utilized.

4. What is a balanced report? Creating a balanced report is one of the most important cornerstones of executive-ready reporting and is among the most difficult things to accomplish. Balance encompasses a couple different aspects. First, a good report strikes the appropriate balance between visual interest and professional presentation. While visual images aid in the comprehension of a report, including too many, or inappropriate ones, detracts from the report's integrity. For example, while cartoon images may have a place in highlighting certain points, too many of them takes emphasis off the key findings and undermines the credibility of the report. Next, balance must be achieved in the findings themselves. With sparse wording, every word in an executive-ready report is important. It must be evident what the key findings are and minority opinions should not appear more important than they were in the research.

The advantage of a balanced report is that all the information is placed in the proper context, allowing everyone who reads it to have a similar comprehension of the key findings.

### **Pieces fit together**

How do you know if you have succeeded in making your report executive-ready? It takes hours of labor to create a top-notch, executive-ready report. But in the end, if all the pieces of the puzzle fit together, if all of the dots have been connected, if the report is simple and easy to read yet is deeply insightful, you know you have achieved your goal. | Q