

SAMPLE GUIDE: Starting Your Own Research

1. Identify the country/market you are interested in studying. Some companies seek to enter multiple markets at one time. The World Trade Center St. Louis (WTC) recommends focusing your energy on one market at a time and keeping things simple at first. When you are getting started, you are guaranteed sufficient complexity understanding just one market.

2. Once you have selected your market, there are usually three sources of information on practically any given topic:

- Government agencies
- Industry associations
- Business periodicals

3. Government agencies are sources for finding basic data such as demographics, income, population and import/export figures. Virtually every country in the world has a statistics bureau (much like the US Census Bureau). Government information can be very detailed but also generic. Odds are you will not learn a great deal about your industry from a government source, but you should be able to learn about a country's macroeconomic environment, and whether not entering the market is worthwhile (for example income per capita).

4. Industry associations are organizations that promote/protect the interests of their specific industry. If your industry is animal feed, shoes or septic tanks, you can be almost guaranteed there is an industry association for you in your country of interest that will help you learn about your potential market there. Foreign industry associations are also useful places for learning about companies active in those markets (via their membership directory), and regulations/laws controlling the market (sometimes through a "helpdesk"). Additionally, industry associations are often organizers or major sponsors of trade shows, which are great places to find buyers or suppliers.

5. Business periodicals are journals, magazines and newspapers that sometimes provide fresh news and concerns specific to an industry. Whereas government agencies and industry associations typically report on information that is generic or respectful to their constituencies, business periodicals are (usually) a good “check” against non-controversial reporting as they will report on any story they feel is interesting for public consumption. So, if you are speaking with a foreign company and you find out from the local newspaper your company of interest is eliminating workers, dealing with pollution concerns or facing corruption charges, this may be information that saves you from making an unpleasantly expensive decision.

6. The WTC recommends distinguishing between formally conducting market research and seeking market intelligence. Simply put, seeking market intelligence is a process by which you record interesting (and often anecdotal) information about your market, customers and competitors. Companies typically record market intelligence in a customer relationship management database to be retrieved later (when needed). If your company has not setup a process for collecting market intelligence, the WTC highly recommends doing so.

7. In contrast, engaging in a research project is unlike collecting market intelligence in that research projects have a start and a finish with very clearly outlined tasks and phases. A critical part in designing a research project is defining the specific problem in need of an answer, and the questions that will lead to finding an answer. The typical tools of market research are media searches, interviews, surveys or focus groups. Special note, sometimes it is easy to confuse a symptom for a problem, therefore the WTC recommends spending substantial internal time identifying and isolating your critical problem before spending resources on research projects.

8. During the course of researching foreign markets, you are likely to come across two types of descriptions of research: “secondary” and “primary”. These terms (used by research firms) connote the difference in how information was compiled and how they are used.

9. Secondary research is information that was compiled by somebody else that happens to also be of use to you. The fact that the information is useful to you is “secondary” to why it was compiled. All information from government sources, industry associations and business periodicals is considered secondary research. This information is secondary because these sources “primarily” compiled their data either to educate political constituencies, inform association members or to sell newspapers.

10. Primary research is information that has never been compiled and often is highly specific. Its “primary” because the benefit of the data is primarily intended to help you (the person who asked for it), and probably will be of no use to anyone else. More precisely, primary research is assembled through interviews, surveys, focus groups or some other form of direct contact with a group of people. Primary research typically takes longer to assemble and can be expensive.

11. Performing research is an on-going part of any good business practice. The WTC recommends including regular research (secondary or primary) in your business operations to maximize your potential and identify as many opportunities as possible.