

The Five Most Important Tips for Starting Market Research

While it may sound intimidating, “market research” doesn’t have to be. In fact, it can even be a little fun. (I know, I know, only a data geek says that... but it’s absolutely true.) Getting to know your customers better is at the heart of any market research project—and getting to know and understand your clients can be super fun.

Don’t worry. You definitely don’t need an MBA or to be a statistics wiz to get started.

In fact, the first steps are as easy as counting to five... but we’ll get to that in a minute. First, let’s take a look at what market research really is and why it can be SUPER helpful for any pet-business endeavor.

What is market research?

Are you thinking about adding a new service offering? Exploring new markets? Creating a new e-book?

Understanding what your customers want means knowing what problems they’re trying to solve—and why your service or product can help get them there faster or better than your competitors can.

Like using a minimum viable product approach ([LINK TO WHAT IS AN MVP ARTICLE](#)), ***market research is an act of inquiry.***

Market research moves you past the guess work to help you learn specific ways your customer’s thoughts, feelings, actions and pain points influence them in relation to your brand, service or product.

Before you build anything or spend any money implementing, marketing research helps you answer questions and focus in on the options with the best potential by answering:

- Who wants or needs your services?
- What sort of products are they already buying?
- What do they care about?
- What motivates them to buy?
- Etc, etc, etc.

Really, the options for what you can try to understand are endless.

But wait! There’s much, much more. (Can you tell I love it?)

The best thing about market research is that this can take place *before you’ve done anything else*, when all you have is assumptions, because it builds on insight that’s already out there or is easier to collect. As you saw with our most-[common pet industry](#)

[avatars](#), many of your clients fall into similar categories and have similar motivations, like *why* your potential customers seek out certain products or services, and *what* makes them more likely to come to you for those services or products. Doing just a little bit of market research ahead of anything else can give you some ***invaluable insight into where it makes sense to invest, and where it doesn't***, even before you start your MVP. [LINK TO WHAT IS AN MVP ARTICLE]

What is Market Research Good For?

Market research projects can help you discover answers about:

- The pet industry
- Competitors
- Market demand
- The best way to structure and operate your business
- And on, and on and on.

The key is having a burning question that you want to find the answer to—and then seeking it out. The process of seeking should touch on both existing information that's available to you (like our industry avatars) and, sometimes, *creating some insights of your own before diving into actual testing of your product or idea.*

We'll give you some simple steps to get started in your workbook and in the video, but here are the top five things to keep in mind when you're researching your question. (Let's count together!)

1) Be sure to mix both hard and soft data sources

When you're looking to answer a burning business question about the market or your customer it's important to gather as many *kinds* of data as you can. And, while these may be difficult to pronounce at times, the difference in the two main kinds of data you can pull are pretty simple.

- Quantitative data (aka the hard numbers): Quantitative data is the stuff with hard numbers and figures, often from a larger sampling of people and looking at very specific ***metrics, ie NUMBERS.***

So many petpreneurs shy away from these kinds of stats because they feel intimidating, or they just don't know how to find them. But they're super important to help you recognize trends and patterns like:

- How many people are using how much of a service, and how often?
- How much competition is out there?
- How many people in my target audience would be interested in my solution?

Surveys and previous research studies can provide much of this information. The key is making sure it's relevant enough to *what you're trying to do.*

Huh?

Unfortunately, lots of studies talking about businesses in general don't fully apply to the pet sector, while many others do. We're here at Working With Dog to help you understand and recognize the difference.

Aside from research studies, another great way to get this kind of data a little later in your process is through an MVP-development model. The MVP model tests business assumptions one at a time, giving you hard data and results *for your business, with your potential customers and in your area*. There's not much that's better than that! Be sure to check out this month's article on What an MVP Is [LINK] and the workbook on how to get one started.

- Qualitative data (aka the squishy stuff): Looking at numbers and charts alone can give you some of the picture, but not all of it. That's where Qualitative data comes in. Often found in a Q&A format, qualitative data looks deeper, asking questions and reading full responses to find out things like:
 - *How* do users seek out a service?
 - How do they *feel* when they use that service?
 - What can they tell you about how likely they are to use that service again, and why?

While you can indeed ask some of these questions in a multiple choice survey and get quantitative results, qualitative results intentionally allow things to be a little more free-form. This helps you uncover deeper meanings you might not already know about, and (sometimes) problems in the quantitative data.

For example, you might ask in a survey which of 3 feelings does your new logo convey. However, only qualitative data can help you understand if there's a fourth option you've left out.

You can gathering qualitative data can help add context and nuance to your research, invaluable stuff when it's helping you pick the right path for your business.

2) Ask the experts: Identifying publicly available research

Ok, so we know we need both some kind of hard numbers and softer data to go off of for our new product or service offering, but how can we be sure we're not reinventing the wheel? Can we find existing datasets to help us? Yes We Can!

First, be sure to search Working With Dog, ask a local librarian and your small business development center for help with researching your market. You have highly trained, incredibly knowledgeable experts whose services are available just for the asking!

While pet-industry specific information can be hard to come by, librarians and small business development associates can be sooooo great at helping you get your hands on free reports that show basic things like profit margins, expenses, amount of competition, etc.

It can be hard, even scary, to try to describe your project to a librarian or small business development associate, but you'll be so glad you did. And many of them are free!

3) Try a variety of sources and types of people

After you've gotten your hands on the latest and greatest research that's available, it's time to fill in the gaps with some of your own. Just keep in mind that you'll want to get a decent variety of respondents, whether you're doing a survey, watching behavior of a friend you've asked to try out a landing page or conducting a personal interview. If your sample size is too small, the data you gather won't give you a full picture of your potential customer base, which can spell big trouble.

It can also be super easy to assume that, since you may be similar to your target market, they will see and use something the way you do. Don't let yourself fall for this:

Chant with me, "I am not my customer. I am not my customer."

So be careful to test whatever assumptions you're bringing to the table in some way, whether it's something as small as a favorite image you want to use or the larger market need for your offering.

For surveys or broader quantitative efforts, be sure to include a large enough population to give you a clear picture of who your ideal customer might be. There are several free online tools that can help you estimate a representative sample size for your market, including this one from [Survey Monkey](#).

4) Be sure you're getting accurate representation

Since you can't include *everyone* in your research, be sure to select a group that accurately represents your ideal customer base. For example, I recently created a new landing page to attract dog walkers. After showing it to a few, I realized that I was asking the wrong sub-segment of walkers—I was asking those who already had large and vibrant businesses and not the newer walkers who were just learning their business.

Well, scratch that and time to start again.

Consider your ideal client. Who purchases and owns similar products to what you're trying to sell? Who seeks out the services you intend to provide? What do you know about their age, their knowledge base, their occupation, their interests? Be sure your sample matches as many of those attributes as possible.

Keep in mind that a too-narrow sample can skew your results (and it can also be expensive!), while a too-broad sample might not accurately reflect your target consumer audience. And it's crucial that *your* research be industry-specific. After all, a new Doggy Daycare owner won't learn many specifics from a sandwich shop proprietor's customers!

5) Know that you don't know what you don't know

When all is said and done, keep in mind that you'll still have gaps. It's just not possible to know ahead of time what you're overlooking – that's why they call them blindspots. Consult an expert who does research on a regular basis, and who can help you notice what you've missed. (This is a great subject for a Fast Lane call, if you're a Working with Dog member!) Someone familiar with conducting research can talk you through solving for anything you've overlooked in both the short- and long-term. Likewise, don't feel like you need to do this all on your own - 'cause Digital's team and others can help.

By tapping your resources, blending your data sources, and considering your sample, you can ensure that your market research is representative – and that you're off to the right start with your new offering.