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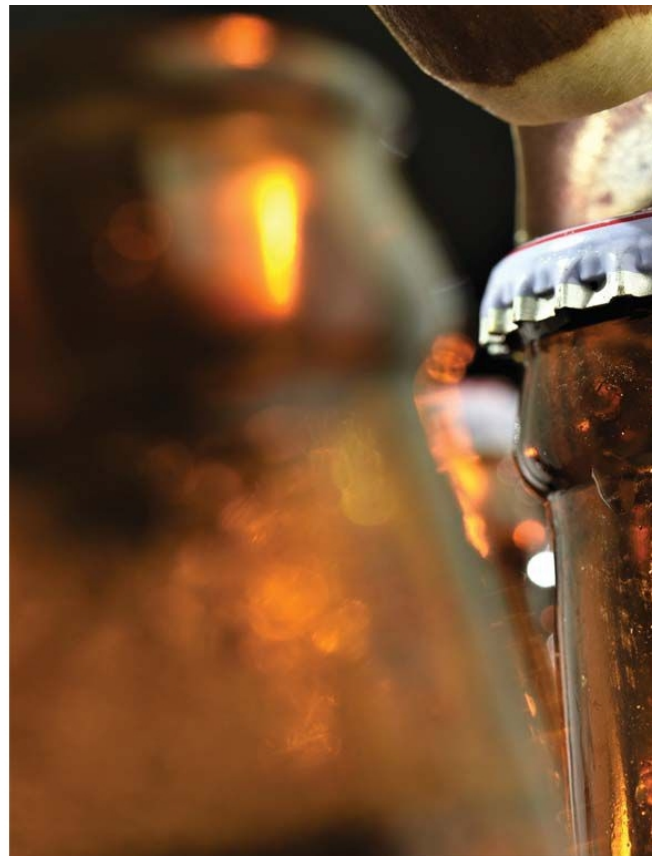
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••• b2b research

# Bring the beer and the étouffée

Meeting the often unique demands of B2B research

| By Mark Towery



## snapshot

Author Mark Towery explores the ABCs of B2B: access, business strategy and context.

In this article I will use anecdotes from my career to look at what I'll call the ABCs of B2B research: access, business strategy and context. There are certainly many other facets to the process of interviewing professionals and researching the markets and industries in which they work but these three form a framework that, when successfully applied, sets you up to attain the insights and information that you and your clients are seeking.

### A = Access

This will probably sound painfully familiar to my fellow researchers: Five weeks into the project and we had nothing. Two focus group facilities had already bailed on the recruiting and the third had only one qualified oil rig worker signed up, not counting some guy who said he once flew in a helicopter to an oil rig to drop off some supplies. And we promised the client 10 of these groups; six to be held in Louisiana and four in Scotland. And this was only Phase I. We still had to do a quant with these same elusive respondents. We were in trouble.

That's when my friend and fellow consultant Tom Beggs decided to get serious. Tom was the kind of guy you would send to take Hamburger Hill. A bring-'em-back-alive, goldmine-or-bust, Rooster Cogburn knife-in-the-teeth kind of researcher.

Somehow Tom contacted a job placement firm specializing in oil and gas that mentioned a safety conference being held at a Holiday Inn in Lafayette, Louisiana. Tom flew down and went straight to the conference, walking up to large muscular men in the hallway between sessions and offering them \$200 to go into a room with him for two hours. Although he almost got punched twice, he was able to assemble a group when he agreed to throw in a case of longneck Budweisers. I flew down and joined Tom the next day and these turned out to be some of the best focus groups we ever conducted.



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Access is sometimes what you make it.

Basking in the glow of our good fortune, we decided to press our luck and headed out the following day in search of onshore rigs. As we toiled down I-10 with a hotdog and a roadmap, we scanned the horizon for oil derricks. After a few false reads that turned out to be cell phone towers, we finally stumbled up on a genuine bona fide oil rig in the middle of a cow pasture surrounded by a few trailers and a lot of pickup trucks. We eased the Nissan rental car in among the four-wheel-drives and walked up to the office trailer like we owned the place. I grabbed the phone and asked for the tool pusher (the man in charge of a rig). Probably curiosity alone caused him to leave his job and walk over to the trailer to investigate this alien landing. After a brief explanation of what we wanted to do, he studied us a moment then said, "Come back at shift change and bring food," and turned on his heel and headed back to the rig.

We drove back out to the main road where we came upon a Cajun café in the back of a Texaco station. In said establishment we were able to procure an bounty of étouffée, gumbo, brisket, rice and boiled crawfish. A quick stop at Walmart for a plastic folding table and soon we were laying out a spread in the laundry trailer. Workers would come in from the rig, shed their greasy and muddy clothes, toss them in the washer, then saddle up to the buffet line, all the while answering questions about personal protection equipment. Access achieved.

Identifying, accessing and engaging the right decision-makers is the foundation on which all B2B and industrial projects are built. Fail to access and engage the right respondents, fail to garner the right insights and you fail to craft an informed go-to-market strategy.

So, when a prospective client calls and asks if we have a panel of industrial or B2B decision-makers, I think of Tom and that oil rig. Not only are panels blind but they almost never include the non-indexable

decision-makers like materials engineers buried deep in a factory in charge of non-destructive testing; or the application engineer who knows where to install a thermocompressor in the steam plant; or private equity executives managing alternative assets; or decision scientists at investment banking firms or electrical linemen wearing high-voltage gloves; or, in this case, oil rig workers.

Many of these respondents are not in the company directory. In the case of oil rig workers, they are either on a rig or on a bass boat or in a deer stand.

The point is that you need to develop target lists organically, custom to each project and you have to be creative in how you identify, gain access to and engage with these valuable decision-makers.

Certainly, if you have multiple projects that target similar respondents you might get some overlap but more often than not, there are a couple of peculiarities or nuances that make the new project targets a little different. You don't necessarily have to drive across Southern Louisiana or stand at a heliport in Aberdeen, Scotland, to ambush workers coming in from rigs in the North Atlantic (yes, Tom did that as well). There are other tools at your disposal, from LinkedIn to industry associations, to annual conferences, to placing ads, to calling your brother-in-law, to good old-fashioned cold-calling and snowballing and screening your way through.

In any case, developing target lists organically and custom to the project takes time but it also ensures you are getting to the right people. Further, the journey of identifying accessing and engaging with these decision-makers and influencers helps you understand their perspective that much better.

Access. It's essential but it's not easy to do it right. But in industrial market research, the hard way is often the right way.

## **B = Business strategy**

Market research can get very sophisticated. From quantitative statistics and decision-sci-

ence to qualitative natural-language analysis and behavioral science. In the world of B2C those tools need to be very sharp because moving the needle a fraction of a percentage point in large CPG markets can mean enormous profits or losses. In the world of B2B and industrial market research we use all the same tools but apply them perhaps a little more bluntly, because it is more about go-to-market strategy rather than market research tactics. In the consumer world, the product is typically something we use every day and is easy to understand. More to the point, in the world of B2C, you better know your research methodologies to pit Coke against Pepsi but you don't need to know how to make Coke's secret syrup, or how Apple's supply chain integrates, or which paper mill makes the Charmin tissue. You don't need to concern yourself with supply chains, market size, competitive dynamics or the need to inform the path to a comprehensive go-to-market strategy.

In B2B and industrial market research, go-to-market strategy is often the point of the exercise. The people running a mid-size civil engineering firm wanting a growth strategy for municipal markets aren't going to be particularly fixated on an NPS or a brand funnel. They want to know how to grow into new markets and compete and win in existing ones. Or the chemical manufacturer who wants to test a new adhesive concept in a specific aerospace application before investing heavily in R&D and product development doesn't care about your latest laddering technique; it wants a product launch strategy. A software-as-a-service provider wants to get inside the head of private equity investors and asset managers to determine how best to commercialize its products. It wants a sales approach that will resonate. In short, B2B market research is typically more strategic than tactical and focused more on products and markets than margins of error.

That being said, you still have to apply the fundamental market research tools but you have to go further to understand your client's core competencies, to size and assess the market opportunity, to analyze the

competitive landscape and to determine the strategic alternatives available. This sometimes, and in fact quite often, means you have to tell the client that the baby is ugly; there is no opportunity; or the potential win is not worthy of the investment required to exploit it. You may need to recommend an acquisition or a divestiture. But if you do the market research and strategic analysis right and you make the market opportunity and competitive landscape transparent, the strategy reveals itself and is as apparent to the client as it is to you.

A memorable and highly effective focus group was with pipeline welders to develop a new welding glove. Right before the group, a couple of orange Home Depot buckets were procured. A gathering of grown men took great delight in kneeling and crouching on the floor to demonstrate their hand position when welding two pipes together. That's how our client developed the next-generation welding glove. This was not textbook behavioral science but perhaps the kind of behavioral science somebody should write a textbook about.

When presented with a less than optimistic market opportunity and competitive assessment, the president of a large Korean company replied, "Don't tell me go or don't go; tell me how to go." The strategic business imperatives drive the bus in B2B and industrial markets. Consider your research methodologies as tools in your kit to be applied in a custom manner as necessary to illuminate the strategic path forward. Often this means being flexible enough to change your methodologies midstream. Think of it as an exploration where the final destination is not known. The fun part of B2B research is you don't always know where you will end up at the completion of the project. But it's the business objectives not the research objectives that should guide your way.

Taking a strategic approach to market research allows you to add value in different ways, such as mergers and acquisitions. When you understand supply chains and competitive dynamics, you understand strategic fit. At that point, you can apply traditional go-to-market strategy research to an acquisition search

or a company sale. Because you never know what is going on in another company's boardroom, it pays to cast a wide net and market research fits that bill better than a financial approach from an investment banker.

B2B research really means searching for the strategy.

### C = Context

It was my first real job. I must have done well in the interview because my soon-to-be boss told me I would be receiving an offer to work in international procurement on the F-16 international coproduction program. Today I would be called a global integrated supply chain logistician but at the time, I was happy to be called an associate buyer and spend that \$17,000-a-year salary any way I wanted. However, I did have the presence of mind to thumb through a copy of Jane's All the World's Aircraft in the vendor lobby on the way out to remind myself I did know what an F-16 was.

Shortly after I began work, there was a machinist strike and volunteers were sought from management to keep the line moving. I volunteered. Those were long 12-hour days standing on that concrete floor riveting wing boxes (and unriveting wing boxes after the inspector made his rounds). But in the 30 years since, not a week has gone by when I haven't reflected on what I learned about manufacturing in that two-and-a-half months. Knowing the difference between shop planning and engineering drawings allows you to speak the language of industrial engineering. Witnessing how raw material is converted to fabricated parts that become subassemblies that go into the final assembly of an aircraft makes you better at analyzing supply chains, factory ergonomics or product applications. Hearing a programmer explain how to set up a computer numerically controlled five-axis milling machine is a great point of reference for an industrial automation and robotics project 20 years later.

It may be becoming obvious that there is no bright line between access, business strategy and context. They are a Venn diagram pinpointing strategic positioning. Knowing the context and understanding business

strategy allows you to convert access to engagement because speaking and understanding the vocabulary of the subject matter expert is how key insights are discovered. How do you achieve that engagement? You need knowledge of the topic and a professional demeanor. Strategy and context are the knowledge part but don't underestimate the value of a professional approach.

Most business executives detect a call-center survey approach before the receiver is halfway to their ear. You need a knowledge-based, professional approach and excellent listening skills. I like to bend the Ritz-Carlton mantra "We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen" to say, "We are business professionals talking with business professionals." Your mission is not to "interview" (read "interrogate") a respondent; rather it is to engage them in a dialogue. Never forget: unlike in the consumer world, these respondents are experts in the area that's the focus of your research. Let them talk and they will eventually il-

luminare the path forward. And why do they want to help you? Most of the time it is not for an incentive; their time is often worth more than you are offering for it. It is because 1) everybody likes to talk about what they do; and 2) most business executives and technical experts believe giving a little something back to the market or the profession comes back around – a little like throwing a quarter in a wishing well or setting a fruit basket afloat on a slack tide in Thailand. Business karma is a real thing.

In B2B and industrial markets, the context in which you conduct your research is everything. It informs how you target decision-makers, provides the knowledge for moderators and interviewers to engage with subject-matter experts and is the canvas against which you paint the go-to-market strategy. To be truly effective at B2B and industrial research, you have to be conversant in wearable sensors, the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, cloud-based ERP, alternative asset management software, private equity and more.

Since no one can be an expert on everything, how do you stay intellectually nimble? You have to incorporate an iterative discovery process into your methodology. You have to be willing to adapt and change research methodologies midstream if that's where the discovery process takes you.

In other words, you have to immerse yourself in the world where products are applied to applications, where competitors meet and compete and where value is created. And you need a flexible methodology that will allow you to evolve or pivot your approach as you learn more about the market. In B2B, you don't conduct research in a vacuum, you apply it in the context of a competitive marketplace. <sup>11</sup>

*This article is dedicated to the late, great Tom Beggs – a stalwart qualitative researcher who left this world way too soon.*

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