THE APPLICABILITY OF ACTION RESEARCH TO IMC

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Abstract

Action Research (AR) is a powerful method involving an iterative and circular process of planning, evaluation, intervention and assessment, to generate/test theory, and solve business problems. Although not yet widely used in marketing, it is well suited to our domain. Caveat Emptor is counsel for those who plan to adopt AR to be well prepared with appropriate skills and resources. We examine the decision processes behind the choice and application of ‘high level’ emancipatory type AR in the context of IMC. Our contribution is a broadly generalisable Action Research Risk/Reward Matrix.

Introduction

The advance of marketing as a discipline, the desire for new knowledge, and for thinking about how marketing is operationalised in business, has been a catalyst in the adoption and application of many different methodological approaches. Action Research (AR) is one such approach that holds much promise for generating powerful insights both theoretically and from a realist perspective (Perry 1992, Gummesson 2001). Nevertheless, AR brings with it implications for the conduct of good science, including the choice and applicability of research projects and the assessment and development of skills to undertake effective AR. The decision processes behind the choice and application of ‘high level’ emancipatory type AR to the context of integrated marketing communications (IMC), are examined and the quality criteria for conducting good AR in this context are highlighted. Based on the outcomes of the planning of an AR project a broadly generalisable AR Risk/Reward Matrix (ARM) is presented.

The Value of Action Research

AR has two interrelated cycles of activity: 1. Generation and/or testing theory (academic focus), and 2. Solving business problems (practitioner focus) (McKay 2001). The relationship between these two is often at issue when undertaking AR in that it challenges the researcher to understand and be objective in the application and use of marketing theory, and subjective and involved in the practitioner world. AR can be classified into 3 approaches; project action research, action learning; and interview/case research (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). Our focus is on Project AR, and within this area, a further delineation can be made on levels of researcher participation including technical expert, practical process facilitator or consultant, and at a higher level, emancipatory researcher. Emancipatory research is an idealised form, where both cultural and practical change, evolution, or
transformation is sought from any systems based intervention or action (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001), eg implementation of IMC in an organisation with poorly integrated marcom efforts. Each of these AR participation types requires different levels of cognitive and behavioural skills to derive maximum research outcome. An emancipatory researcher must be an organisational change agent, have the requisite skills/ knowledge to understand the theoretical base for change and implications of creating change (Carson 2001).

**Action Research in Contemporary Marketing Research**

Traditionally, AR has been associated with education, sociology, psychology, organisational development, information systems accounting, and management research (Gronhaug 1999). Although there are examples within marketing (Ballantyne 1997), it has not as yet been widely adopted. The marketing domain is continually changing, reflecting change in both markets and the complexity of business problems (Baker 1999). Consequently, there is great need for every aspect of research (Rossiter 2001) and a range of research lenses have been assessed including anthropology, ethnography and sociology, and a range of methods such as case study, grounded theory, interactive/ narrative and action research (Gummesson 2001). AR can be viewed as quasi-experimental research where the investigator observes a phenomenon (eg business practice), applies some treatment (eg change in structure/roles/responsibilities/processes), then observes and documents changes before applying another different treatment. AR can progress knowledge via the concentrated investigation of business problems and subsequent theory development. One area that could benefit is Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC).

**Relationship between Action Research and IMC**

The very reasons that make AR so complex and powerful, ie dealing with real situations, problems and solutions are the ones that make it so appropriate for IMC research. IMC is an area requiring extensive investigation both in terms of theoretical development and implementation (McArthur 1997, Farrelly 2001). Although scant, IMC research fits into 4 themes (Reid 2001):

1. What is it? Defining IMC and defining IMC constructs for measurement/evaluation.
2. Who drives it? Client vs. agency roles and relationships in driving adoption of IMC.
3. What can it do for us? Determining the impact of IMC on performance.

IMC is claimed to be in a ‘pre-paradigm state’ (Schultz 1997) and in need of all types of research to help build a solid theoretical and practical approach. Moving to ‘paradigm status’ will require solid understanding and formalisation of how to actually put IMC in to practice and AR would generate a rich theoretical understanding and appreciation of the practicalities. Providing it is well understood and managed, emancipatory AR can be leveraged in the IMC area where politically charged environments exist and where intervention is required to effect significant change impacting the organisational ‘way of doing things’; changing power
relationships, adjusting language and procedural systems, legitimising new ways of doing things, and disestablishing old procedures (Dougherty 1994). However, the complexities of AR in this emerging paradigm context lead to a call of caveat emptor; buyer (user) beware.

Caveat Emptor

Caveat emptor does not imply that AR is to be avoided, but rather that researchers need to be critical of themselves and their capabilities and be cognizant of the potential impacts on their subjects (organisational and individual). This is particularly so, when researchers desire to be involved in the emancipatory types of AR. Researchers are required to have the skills of data acquisition, analysis and interpretation as well as the ‘street smarts’ to encourage industry participation and to legitimise the change process; skills are only borne over time and through experience. Caveat emptor is also supported via the criticisms of the design and conduct of AR:

2. Limited application of theory and hypotheses – Failure to adequately address theory leaves researchers open to criticisms of AR being little more than a consultancy (Avison 1993; McKay 2001) – resulting in ‘research with little action’ or ‘action with little research’ (see Dickens 1999), theoretically bland outcomes, and poor interpretation particularly in complex projects (Baskerville 1996).
3. Causal ambiguity - Difficulty of ‘moving targets’, especially once organisations adopt new ways of doing things or as they respond to broader changes in their marketing environment (Dougherty 1994). This organisational reaction often heightens causal ambiguity that may not be recognised by the less skilled researcher (Baskerville 1996).
4. Implementation issues - Little guidance for new researchers on how to actually conduct AR (McKay 2001). IE, AR terminology is broad and often left undefined leading to ‘fuzzy’ categorisation of various forms of research subsumed into AR (Gronhaug 1999). AR studies sometimes aborted at stage of problem diagnosis or at strategy implementation, irrespective of whether problem is resolved. (Dickens 1999).

Researchers need to approach such projects with due diligence to ensure the basis for good science is adhered to in both the design and conduct of research. In the IMC context this may mean that mechanisms for measurement/analysis of IMC and researcher skills/competencies need to be developed/tested over a series of incremental projects. Our project required assumptions to be made about the potential impact of IMC on business performance. After auditing current marcom practice, changes were then to be instigated to create more integration. However without testing the theory we determined that management would be unlikely to buy-in, and if no change or worse, a negative change occurred, the organisational cost in poor business performance was potentially very significant.

Implications of Caveat Emptor
High level AR held great appeal, particularly in the context of testing the implementation of IMC, however despite having previously conducted major projects in industry, a self-evaluation identified the need for additional emancipatory-AR competencies for us to firstly consider. Furthermore a review of the theoretical and empirical research into IMC measurement and implementation also identified the need for more fundamental theory generation before proceeding to the theory testing types of AR design. The decision to delay the implementation of the program level emancipatory-AR project was bought about by:

1. **Emerging paradigm**: Arguably the most significant hurdle was the nature of the IMC paradigm. Significant debate exists as to what IMC is (eg Cornelissen 2000). Furthermore, there is debate over whether assessment should be solely based on the measurement of internal relationships in bringing about integration, linking internal and external groups and building internal and external relationships, or, should we be linking actual communications planning and implementation activities to group interactions. In effect, the emerging IMC paradigm, the relative infancy of the IMC debate, and the limited amount of empirical research on IMC, means that the theoretical knowledge - particularly with the implementation of IMC is quite limited (eg compared to Market Orientation) and thus could not provide a suitable level of sensitisation to theory and the development of well defined propositions for testing via emancipatory-AR. IE, despite having conceptual and anecdotal industry support, we did not have a sufficiently strong case to put to industry to convince them of the expected outcomes and benefits from modifying their organisational marcom program. Clearly, there cant be certainty that specific ‘treatments’ will result in given outcomes, but it must be a balanced risk.

2. **Longitudinal research is more difficult to ‘sell’ in to Faculty**: Given the ‘publish or perish’ mentality of many university systems, there is often a significant opportunity cost in conducting longitudinal research. This is compounded when, as in the case of AR, the researcher is highly involved in a change process that may extend over a period of 12 months or more. Given the highly involving nature of AR, it was decided that the emancipatory AR strategy was best planned for later in the research program when the program was more fully established with a more solid theoretical foundation in IMC.

3. **Project complexity and researcher experience / credibility**: The nature of emancipatory AR, involving program level change, often means that the researcher should have considerable and relevant experience (McKay 2001). In effect, the researcher is often required to have suitable consulting credentials before designing and recommending changes. To conduct AR at this high level without experience can be dangerous, especially if an inexperienced researcher recommends changes that might have significant/unforseen consequences for an organisation’s bottom line performance, or employment security. As already mentioned, given the paucity of IMC-performance link research, even experienced researchers may establish their AR study on potentially incorrect theory – a significant risk.

4. **Program vs. discrete project evaluation** – Program level evaluation is exponentially more complex than operating at discrete project levels. At the program level such as in overall IMC management within an organisation, the researcher must be able to orchestrate and interpret change in both processual and cultural dimensions. This is a significantly complex task and is why much AR is best undertaken with a team of researchers. The complexity of program level research means that a sole researcher runs the risk of missing or ignoring the subtle subtext of change (Ledford 1993). Similarly the complexity means that many
individual tasks need to be undertaken to operationalise any intervention, this is compounded if the researcher wishes to undertake such research across multiple organisations which is the intention of the authors in the IMC arena, adding to a multi-nation survey of Duncan (1993). Project or discrete team level AR is far more controllable but brings with it obvious minor incremental theory developments.

5. **Soft vs. hard outcomes**: Issues were also raised on how the outcomes of any project should be evaluated. Arguably, if the researcher wishes to improve the management of IMC then they should be able to identify concrete effects – sales, brand image, customer loyalty, channel response. Debate exists however over the effect of various communications impacts in a concrete sense and was going to be difficult to assess (eg Kitchen 1999; Cornelissen 2000; Low 2000). Therefore a call had to be made between subjective or objective measures of performance. Our concerns were corroborated making it evident that building a stronger base was necessary (eg case studies, expert panels, small scale trials).

### Implications: AR Risk/Reward Matrix

The value of AR lies in its ability to get inside organisations and deal with the realities and complexities of organisational and individual behaviour and change (Carson 2001). It moves beyond description, driving to solutions; hence is a most complex and powerful approach, the action researcher is often faced with more challenges than traditional researchers, thus requiring an advanced level of investigatory skills. In analysing the opportunity for conducting AR it was determined that there is benefit in delineating different types of projects from less to more complex and incorporating different risk profiles and resource requirements as well as research capabilities requirements. Figure 1 is a proposed typology of Action Research Projects (ARM) based on a reward and risk profile in the conduct of AR, where academic risk/reward is related to effect on credibility through failure/success of intervention to achieve desired outcomes and business risk/reward to impact of failed/successful intervention.

#### Figure 1: Action Research Risk/Reward Matrix (ARM):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE I</th>
<th>TYPE II</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program Level Research</td>
<td>Project Level Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPE III</td>
<td>TYPE IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter Team Research</td>
<td>Intra Team Research</td>
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Each quadrant Type has associated resource and conditional requirements. The researcher must commit to or have access to sufficient resources ie financial, time and skills as failure to do so heightens the associated risk profile of the research. Resources and conditions include:

- **Time availability** – Type I requires significant time and involvement with the organisation, where as type IV requires small incremental involvement and time allocation. In type I projects researchers should be totally focussed and committed, and not be sidetracked by other tasks, for instance teaching loads and other administrative tasks.
• **Level of organisational commitment** – Organisational commitment and buy-in to the research and intervention is highest in Type I projects and lowest in Type IV projects. The risk that the level of organisational commitment will change over the course of the research is also highest with type I projects, where the organisation is subject to more significant intervention or is subject to organisational changes as a result of the marketing environment, eg key employees leave (they may have championed the researchers involvement).

• **Level of academic institution support** – Support from senior management of the researcher’s department must be forthcoming as AR often requires significant periods of time away from the Institution, particularly for Type I. Similarly, researchers undertaking projects with higher level academic/organisational risk must be confident in support of the institution before any undertaking. Failure can have significant consequences for both parties.

• **Level of research team experience** – Different Types have differing skill and experience requirements. It is more acceptable for the inexperienced researcher to conduct Type III and Type IV projects, whereas Type I and Type II projects require greater experience/research management skills. Planning should include teams based resource planning so skills are available/utilised appropriately in the intervention and in reflecting/analysing stages.

• **Degree of formalisation and contractual obligation** - Involves the degree of ability to renegotiate the AR structures. Type I require higher level of formalisation of project structure and may involve contractual and formal confidentiality. Letter of agreement or contract is recommended for all projects, particularly for Type I. Then, if situation changes (eg personnel move on) and project is in danger of being cancelled, the researcher can renegotiate. A contract might also specify conditions of researcher engagement, team composition and compensation.

**Conclusions**

AR is a valuable means of gathering data, building knowledge, and changing organisational practice and a positive step towards building academic and practitioner reunification. It is only this union that can establish/re-establish our academic community as the driver of thinking – leading the way for industry in 2003. We hold firm to *caveat emptor* and believe those taking on emancipatory AR, should be well prepared for the potential implications. This is particularly so for the projects described as high risk; Types I and II in AR Matrix; they will need highly skilled researchers, effective communicators and possess the street smarts to be seen as credible by industry. They may also need to be effective trainers to re-educate the organisation; committed and patient – prepared to put in the time over many months or longer, and finally will need to be excellent trouble shooters/problem solvers to overcome the potential obstacles – many of which will be industry based and beyond their control. Are many academics adequately trained this? AR *does* hold significant promise for IMC - we look forward to having a more solid theory base and strong argument to win over Faculty and Industry support.

**Bibliography**


