

I need to know more

You can't open a newspaper today without learning that economies and businesses worldwide are slowing down due to increased energy costs, turmoil in financial markets and political uncertainty. The global slowdown is also affecting the marketing research industry.

One area of our industry that is experiencing unparalleled growth in 2008 is Web-based marketing research training and education, also known as distance learning. Our organization, which provides this type of training, has seen a 38 percent increase in student enrollments this year.

Student comments indicate they like the distance-learning approach to marketing research education. "The material is optimal in terms of depth of coverage, i.e., thorough in the important areas, yet brief enough to be interesting," said Corazon Nolasco (retired), International Consumer Products Company, Philippines. "The online approach and independent study are excellent since one can manage study time versus other priorities. I am glad I pursued and completed the program."

Online or distance learning is done via the Internet. Students typically take their classes while they maintain other activities such as a full-time job. When education is online, students can be located far from the educational organization - essentially any-

where in the world. Students can enroll in the courses any-time throughout the year. They proceed through the courses at their own time and pace. Such professional development graduates typically receive a certificate showing that they have completed their course and passed all tests.

Continuing education is different from academic education in that students do not work toward a degree such as a master's in marketing

research or MBA. Because students are not working toward a degree, they do not have to go through an application/admissions process and take time out to attend classes. Students must simply meet course prerequisites and have time to devote to the course material.

Why is continuing education suddenly of such interest to our profession? There are several factors at work.

Globalization has had a major effect upon marketing research and research-focused continuing education. As international companies



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Interest increasing
in distance learning
for marketing
researchers

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open offices all over the world, they hire excellent employees to staff those offices. But many firms are finding that those employees, while well-educated and -qualified, have different frames of reference. As a result, multiregional studies do not run as smoothly as the companies would like. To enable their employees to work seamlessly across the world, multinational companies are enrolling groups of their employees in online courses. This practice gives them a common terminology and frame of reference, so they will approach projects in similar and efficient manner.

As research becomes more global, client-side companies are increasingly conducting research in countries that are new to them. As those firms discuss research with local providers, sometimes there is uneasiness as to whether all parties fully understand what is required. Common training lets both parties be confident that they are communicating accurately. This is especially true in developing and emerging nations. By completing an online research course, suppliers in developing countries become familiar with the projects and terms used by foreign research buyers. In turn, research buyers can have more confidence when they buy from someone who has earned a research certificate.

Cost-cutting

Another factor is the pressure that cost-cutting measures are putting on companies' internal training and tuition reimbursement plans. As in-house training is cut, employees find they need alternate sources for furthering their education. To meet employee demands, companies are enrolling their employees in distance learning courses.

Online marketing research courses cost about \$1,300 for a comprehensive course (\$1,000 in tuition/fees and \$300 for textbooks). External marketing research training usually involves higher tuition, travel and lodging expenses. Traditional in-house training involves course development, internal or external trainers and classroom/meeting room time.

The biggest drawback to online education is that students tend to become distracted and fail to complete the course. To overcome this problem, companies enroll multiple employees and organize those students into study groups, which are becoming a modern version of in-house training. Typically, study groups are led by a senior researcher or HR personnel within the company. These groups meet on a regular (generally monthly) basis to discuss the latest module or chapter of the online course. Discussion of the material enables the group leader to know each student better and is an opportunity to provide company-specific examples to augment course material. Meeting with a senior researcher or company HR representative also places gentle pressure upon students to progress through the course.

More sophisticated

As new forms of electronic data collection develop and computer software becomes more sophisticated, the collecting, analyzing and reporting of research information has become easier. But that doesn't always mean the reporting and analysis is being done correctly. In addition, there are more and more situations where non-researchers are tasked to collect and sell marketing research-like information.

To ensure research is done correctly and represented properly to buyers, it has become increasingly important to certify marketing researchers. Strong certification efforts are under way in North America, in the U.S. with the Marketing Research Association's Professional Research Certification designation and in Canada with that country's Marketing Research & Intelligence Association's Certified Marketing Research Professional designation. The U.S. and Canadian efforts were preceded by similar certification programs in Europe.

Generally-accepted certification designations entail four elements: education, experience, ethics and a certifying body to test the student.

Online comprehensive market-

ing research courses provide the education needed to take and pass the certification exams. As a result, researchers in the United States and Canada, as well as those in other parts of the world, are turning to online courses as they prepare for marketing research certification exams.

Fast-growing

A final factor is the influx of non-researchers who are gravitating to our industry because of its high growth. Despite this year's slowdown, marketing research is a fast-growing worldwide industry. For example in the U.S. marketing research has a 16-year average growth (1988-2003) rate of 8.1 percent¹. In 2007 and 2006, total U.S. marketing research expenditures grew 6 percent and 6.6 percent respectively². ESOMAR estimates global marketing research is growing faster than it is in the U.S. market. In 2006, the global research growth (currency-adjusted) of 6.8 percent³ was 3 percent higher than the growth of the U.S. market.

Newcomers to the industry enroll in online marketing research courses because they find it is a quick way to become familiar with our industry and the certificate that comes with graduating from an online course is a way to establish their research credentials.

Prepared for the challenges

The current boom in marketing research continuing education stems from globalization, expense control, technological advances and industry certification efforts. These factors are causing our industry to turn to online marketing education for its employees. In addition, the attractive growth rate of our worldwide industry is drawing new people to our courses. The current boom is good for our industry because it means future professionals in our industry will be well-educated and prepared for the challenges we face. | Q

References

¹ *Inside Research*, May 2008, Issue 240, P. 1

² *Ibid.*

³ See full ESOMAR report at www.esomar.org