

Tip Sheet

Case Studies in Action

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Case studies are one of the more frequently misunderstood, valuable methods that organizations can apply to 1) market their message to stakeholders, 2) demonstrate impact, and 3) explain how and why effects happened.

Case Studies for Marketing and Messaging

“Where’s the BEEF?” was a popular saying during the 1980s, questioning the substance of an idea or product. That question continues to resonate in the business and non-profit worlds, as consumers and funders demand a return on their investment.

Case studies are a frequently used marketing tool to meet the demand for evidence that what you do is effective. People respond to stories. Radio ads and company websites describing stories or cases of a how a company made a difference for a customer are a frequently used marketing strategy.

Yes You Can Use Case Studies to Demonstrate Impact

A widespread misconception is that you can’t generalize from a case study and that you can’t use a case study to test hypotheses or to produce generalizable findings about your effects. In reality, it depends on what the case is and how researchers choose the case. For example, *representative sample cases* and *critical cases* can test hypotheses with scientific rigor.

As a 2013 paper by Woolcock (http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/centers-programs/centers/cid/publications/faculty/wp/270_Woolcock.pdf) noted, case study research can make causal inferences in a similar fashion as how courts determine causal claims are determined in courts every day. Good case study research looks at alternative rival explanations for observed outcomes and tests their credibility based on the best available evidence.

Case Studies to Understand Why and How

Case studies are known for their ability to provide valuable insights about how and why results happen. This is critical to enabling leaders to find the best strategies and strategically assess possibilities. For example, *unusual cases* can reveal information about the most highly successful or “cream of the crop” or the most challenged organizations or programs. *Maximum variation* (extreme) *cases* can be a good way to find out about the importance of different circumstances and strategies for achieving hoped-for results, e.g., urban/rural location, size/budget, or other characteristics that are likely to be important.

Can a Case Study Work for You?

No one research method is always better than any other. It's about devising the right way to get the job done. Often, choosing the right case study will get you as good (or better) results as using "Rocket Science." Unless you are building a rocket, why would you want to do that? A benefit of case studies is that they recognize the realities of multiple inter-related causes and effects affecting most of what businesses and non-profits do in the world.

A case study is not the best research method for every situation. For example, the United States Census Bureau could not accurately gauge the demographics of the country through an in-depth case study of your small neighborhood. Sometimes large random samples are more relevant and appropriate. The research questions and situation at hand should always determine the choice of research method. However, for many situations, a case study can be a cost-effective, fast way to get the answers you need. Before starting a new study, consider if a case study can work for you. Anything else will be...uncivilized.

Flyvbjerg's 2006 paper on "Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research" (<http://flyvbjerg.plan.aau.dk/Publications2006/0604FIVEMISPUBL2006.pdf>) and Yin's 1994 book on *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* provide example information on ways to design a case study to provide generalizable findings.

If you have any questions or would like assistance, contact us at:
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