

Maximizing Marketing Research Quality

High quality marketing research provides strategic and tactical guidance that can enhance a company's standing in the marketplace, provide it with competitive advantages and ultimately improve its profitability. Conversely, poor marketing research can irreparably damage a company's image and brands and negatively impact its bottom line. In fact, using poor quality research can be worse than not doing research at all.

Differentiating between good and poor research can be difficult and requires an examination of often overlooked elements that affect survey design, cost, and quality. These issues, which are rarely discussed in survey proposals, can reduce your survey response rate, sample quality and data accuracy, and the quality of the analysis and reports.

Marketing research is not a commodity and cannot be purchased on price alone. Its value to you and your company is highly dependent on the appropriateness of the design, the care taken in gathering the data, and the experience and abilities of the people who conduct the analysis. Before you conduct your next marketing research project, consider the following:

Ten Ways to Improve the Quality of the Marketing Research You Buy

1. Design: Your survey should be carefully designed to answer the specific marketing issues or problems you are facing. Research suppliers often push a pre-packaged technique or a hastily designed survey and questionnaire that will be much less effective for your needs than a well thought out customized design and questionnaire.

2. Sample: Just as customers are the foundation of your business, a high quality, properly designed sample is the foundation of an effective research study. The sample must reflect the population that you are interested in researching, be of sufficient size and use the appropriate methodology to insure that the study objectives can be effectively met.

3. Respondent Selection: Procedures for respondent selection need to be clearly defined, especially if there is more than one person who can be interviewed in a household or at a business. If no procedure is specified and the process of determining who in the household or business should participate is left to the interviewer, the sampling process will be degraded and the quality of the research results compromised.

4. Fieldwork Quality Control: It is imperative that safeguards exist to insure that all phases of data collection conform to study design specifications. Additionally, the research vendor needs to have systems in place that not only monitor the quality of the interviewing, especially the probing of open end questions, but also insure that the data is recorded accurately and completely.

5. Callbacks: "Burning sample," i.e., calling telephone numbers on a list without making any attempts to reach busy numbers or those that do not answer the phone, is much less expensive than making callbacks, but yields much higher response bias and a much less representative sample. To minimize non-response bias, four to six callbacks should be made to each business or household.

6. Validation: To insure honesty and accuracy each interviewer's work should be checked by re-contacting the respondents to confirm their answers to key questions in the interview. At least 10 percent of all interviews should be validated, and any interviewer that is found to have more than one problem should have all of their work checked.

7. Key Verification: If paper questionnaires are used, key verification (double entry) should be used when entering the data into a database used for analysis. All paper based surveys should be 100% key verified (the industry standard is 20%) to assure that the data analyzed is correct. Would you submit a report to your management that was only 20% proofread?

8. Data Cleaning: When problems are identified in the data (i.e. a brand identified as used most often and never tried in the same survey) many companies resort to "automatic" cleaning to rectify the discrepancies. While automatic cleaning is faster and certainly cheaper, computer algorithms cannot replace going back to the original questionnaire, or, if necessary, re-contacting the respondent to resolve the discrepancy.

9. Accuracy: No matter how well your study is designed and conducted, you need to be sure that the data presented in the final report is accurate. Double checking the data in the final report against the original tabulations is mandatory, as is making sure that all conclusions and recommendations presented are fully congruent with the data.

10. Project Staffing: Make sure that the people who will be responsible for your project are the same senior people whose abilities attracted you to the research firm in the first place. Frequently, and especially in larger firms, inexperienced junior researchers manage, analyze, and make the final recommendations, with only superficial oversight by the firm's senior management.

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research, help you define more effective strategy and tactics, make more effective decisions and achieve new levels of success.