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Survey Process
White Paper Series

20 Pitfalls to Avoid When Conducting Marketing Research

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Since the usability of any market research depends upon the accuracy of the results, it's critical to avoid marketing research errors.

Even experienced marketers and market researchers easily make several common mistakes while taking the six steps of the marketing research process (reference the Polaris white paper: Six Steps of Marketing Research). Avoiding many of the simpler marketing research errors takes only common sense, but avoiding many of the more complex mistakes requires a much deeper level of awareness. The more common marketing research errors are highlighted in **red text** below:

Pitfall #1: Sampling error – the estimated inaccuracy of the results of a study when a population sample is used to explain behavior of the total population.

Pitfall #2: Non-Sampling error – all the sources of bias or inaccuracy in a study besides sampling error. Examples: leading by the interviewer, recording/data entry errors (see below)

Pitfall #3: Non-Response error – the estimated inaccuracy that results from a systematic difference between those who do and do not respond to the measurement instrument.

Pitfall #4: Response errors – the estimated inaccuracy that can be introduced potentially by the researcher, the interviewer or the respondent.

Pitfall #5: Researcher errors – the error that the researcher can make in survey design & execution throughout the Six Steps of the research process.

Pitfall #6: Problem definition – the error made during Step 1 of the research process when the researcher misinterprets, misunderstands or does not properly define the issue/problem and related information need.

Pitfall #7: Population definition error – these common marketing research errors involve the difference between the actual population relative to the issue/problem and the population as defined by the researcher. For example, estimating that the total target population is 50,000 when it is actually 10,000.

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Pitfall #8: Sample design error — the estimated inaccuracy between the properly defined actual target and the population sampled. For example, mistakenly assuming an out of date telephone directory contains all current businesses, when many new businesses will have started/move into the area and others will have closed.

Pitfall #9: Questionnaire error — the total of errors made when creating the survey instrument (see below).

Pitfall #10: Questionnaire structure error — another kind of marketing research error occurs when the structure and layout of the survey instrument leads to inaccurate responses. For example, when aided brand recall (brand identified to the respondent) questions are asked before unaided recall (brand not identified to the respondent) questions are asked, you have a questionnaire design that will significantly impact unaided recall results. Another example would be asking probing questions regarding viewpoints on potentially negative experiences before asking an overall satisfaction question, where overall satisfaction would be incorrectly affected by the recent recall of potentially bad experiences.

Pitfall #11: Questionnaire language error — the error made when the researcher uses incorrect language (ambiguous, leading, assumptive, etc) in the survey instrument so that respondents are influenced in their answers. Language errors severely limit the validity and usefulness of those questions and are the most common error for inexperienced marketing researchers.

Pitfall #12: Questionnaire measurement/scale error — the estimated inaccuracy that occurs when improper measurement and scaling techniques are used in the survey instrument. There are far too many measurement/scale errors to list here — the key is that for each type of question, there is a measurement/scale that is most appropriate, and sometimes it is intuitive and sometimes not. The right type of measurement/scaling question to use will depend upon the information being collected and the analysis that will be performed. A very common measurement error is not controlling order bias, which occurs when a list is not randomly rotated for a given question and respondents may exhibit a tendency to select the first few answers from a list over others.

Pitfall #14: Data analysis error — the error that occurs when analysis is incorrectly executed. Simple mathematical errors are common, which is why data analysis should be checked over by more than one qualified person for quality. A

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more significant data analysis error is when simple frequency reporting (straight number percentage reporting) is executed when far greater information can be mined from the results (often inexpensively) through additional analysis such as cross-tabulation analysis, multiple regression (driver analysis), cluster analysis, factor analysis, perceptual mapping (multidimensional scaling), structural equation modeling tests, etc.

Pitfall #15: Reporting error — marketing research errors can wreck the best approach and program design combined with the best analysis, which are only as good as the researcher's capability to synthesize and report on the results. The most common reporting error by far is the improper representation of the significant findings in a format conducive to creating management understanding and buy-in of survey results. It could be something as simple as poor language syntax to as complex as choosing the wrong results to report or not choosing the best way to graphically represent the results. More common in the current environment is not selecting the best delivery vehicle. For example, a quality online reporting system is much preferred when distributing results across a company that is geographically spread out.

Pitfall #16: Interviewer error —when a live interviewer improperly affects responses (see below)

Pitfall #17: Questioning error — when the interviewer improperly leads the respondent in any way through personal bias or any other improper delivery of questions.

Pitfall #18: Cheating error — when the interviewer falsifies any results.

Pitfall #19: Population definition error — when the interviewer does not randomly select potential respondents according to the methodology specified.

Pitfall #20: Respondent error — when respondents purposefully or mistakenly give incorrect answers to survey questions.

Some marketing research errors are common, while others are more subtle. All of them are dangerous, and Polaris helps you avoid them all.

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