Guidelines for commissioning an interview survey from a research company

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Introduction

These notes are designed to be of use to a researcher who decides that he must contract out the fieldwork and primary data analysis to a research company to do it for him. The aim is to ensure that the researcher does not stand aloof from the nuts and bolts of data collection, but retains control by knowing about and, where necessary, clearly specifying details at all the stages of a survey's progress.

This is necessarily a rather nit-picking document, but it is not intended to suggest that the commercial companies are not to be trusted. Most want to do a good job within the limits of the funds available to them, but survey research is costly and complex. Just consider what you are asking them to do for you; you want them to send off an army of housewives with highly formal questions which both they and the respondent will often find irrelevant or uninteresting to carry out an extremely difficult job of eliciting responses from the population at large, in such a way that they can be reliably coded and analysed. Unless things are spelt out in detail there will be bound to be misunderstandings.

But paying attention to all these details in the specification, contract or anywhere is no guarantee of satisfaction. The researcher must establish a good working relationship with the agency he is dealing with. None of the main research companies will resent detailed specification and the researcher retaining an active and close check on each stage of the survey, so long as he makes arrangements to do this through established communication channels with the company.

It is assumed that these notes will be mainly of interest to researchers who will want to be responsible for the content of the questionnaire and the analysis of the data themselves. Under special conditions people may want to contract out part of this also, so reference will briefly be made to some of the problems here, but it should be noted that if the research company is to analyse the data, their executives will have to be much more fully involved in the design stages.

The researcher may like to consider whether it is worth his while using the expertise in his university or establishment for the skilled design parts of the process, and train students for the more repetitive jobs of sampling, interviewing and coding. There will almost certainly be statisticians to hand to help design a sample, but there may be difficulty finding expertise in questionnaire design and layout, and there will almost certainly be no alternative to the researcher actually training his field-force himself.

This is a large undertaking and is only really worth the effort if you are convinced that commercial companies' training does not equip the interviewer for the kind of task you have in mind. For instance, people surveying income and expenditure have had to recruit and train their own fieldforce in special techniques for extracting accurate income information. Students need just as much careful training as middle-aged housewives, and care must be taken to remove those who are prone to be congenitally incapable of just listening and recording. Research findings have shown that inexperienced interviewers are less reliable than trained ones, and are certainly less successful at obtaining interviews. However, not many surveys warrant this amount of effort, and from now on, we shall assume that the researcher is going to approach a commercial company to do the fieldwork and related parts of the survey.

These notes start by making some general points about dealing with market research companies, and then go through the various stages of a survey, pointing to the kind of details that the researcher might not have considered, but which will affect costings and quality considerably. Not all the points made throughout the document need to be specified in detail in the tender, nor could they be; rarely is there such a well-planned survey that no items remained to be decided on at the fieldwork stage - such a survey would be planned to the point of being inflexible. However, the earlier thought is given to these details, the better.

How to draw up a short list of companies to invite to tender

If you do not know the names of any research companies, there are lists of companies which do this kind of research. The Market Research Society might be a good place to start. This is an organisation whose full members have recognised competence in the sphere of market research, and who are bound by the rules in the Society's Code of Conduct. This should be read by anyone unfamiliar with it; you will notice that there are rules of conduct which members must comply with, and suggested "good practices" which are recommended, but not compulsory. We suggest that you should think it compulsory to find a

company which complies with the "good practices" also. But this is a problem, because since organisations as such do not affiliate to MRS, professional control is only exerted through the rule in the Code which states: "where the Code refers to organisations, it is incumbent on individual members in these organisations to ensure to the best of their ability that the organisation fulfills the Code in this respect". In other words you never have a foolproof guarantee that any organisation will be following the Code.

The MRS annually produces a list, "Organisations providing market research services in GB" which may be obtained from them at 51 Charles St. London W1X 7PA. This will give you a brief introduction to commissioning research and then list companies in which members work, naming the members, listing the services offered and type of research performed by each company and the approximate annual turnover of the company. This last point is important - you do not want to lodge a £25,000 job with a £100 company. (See Appendix 1)

The list of members of the Association of Market Survey Organisations, (AMSO) will provide you with a set of the larger survey organisations, and their Rules of Conduct do have the advantage of binding the whole organisation. However their rules are not so stringent as those of the MRS. The Industrial Market Research Association (IMRA) also produce a directory of European companies offering these services. This can be obtained from them at 11 Bird St. Lichfield, Staffordshire. Social and Community Planning Research, a large company offering research facilities in this field, does not appear on any of these lists because they do not do specifically market research.

Your initial task will therefore be to select a reasonable number of companies from whom or about whom you will seek more information, in order that eventually you will be in a position to invite a few companies to tender for your job. It is very important to go through this stage first; you cannot merely demand standards in your specification and expect any company to be able to meet them. Good quality comes from the continual process of training and retraining, monitoring and supervision over all the projects that an agency undertakes. Since the MRS recommend that only 2-4 invitations to different companies to tender be made, (companies will only produce shabby tenders if they are inundated with too many invitations), it is important that the researcher should feel happy that these selected companies are capable of doing the kind of job he wants.

There is a tendency for people to go for the companies that they have heard of; this leads to the large companies growing larger and less well-known companies who are forced into providing an excellent service in order to break into a competitive field being neglected. So do investigate companies that you may have never heard of, but it is probably best not to select any that are smaller in terms of annual turnover than your research budget. You can get advice from some areas. OPCS Social Survey Division may have time to give some advice, and the British Institute of Management does offer advice (to its members) on different companies. Local government employees may turn to the Local Government Operational Research Unit at 201 King's Road, Reading, for advice and help. Unfortunately the SSRC Survey Unit ceases to exist as a Unit in September 1976, but the staff will be happy to go on giving advice to individuals from their new bases.

What do you try to ascertain about your first short-list of companies?

You want to find out about the capabilities and experience of the companies in two rather different areas. First, you should discover who are their research executives, whose experience you might wish to call on to help you with the design of your project. Are there any full-time statisticians or psychologists? Have any of the research executives had experience of your type of enquiry before, and of the particular methods of questioning that you wish to adopt? Will this particular executive actually be doing the work on your project?

But you must also establish the quality of the organisation as a whole, functioning to collect and process data. This may well be much more important since the executives tend to move around very quickly between different companies, and very often the academic researcher will be able to draw on expertise required at the design stage within his or her own institution. You should establish also what kind of work the company has been doing recently in order to find out what sort of things the interviewers and coders are used to. Find out what questions and definitions they use for collecting basic demographic and classificatory material; you will have to spend a lot of money thoroughly briefing interviewers if you expect them to change the definition of a household that they have been used to. Discover whether they have any experience in the subject matter, particular attitudinal batteries or techniques of information-collection that you are interested in.

You should make very full enquiries concerning the recruitment and training of the samplers, (does anyone check that they are clerically accurate?), the coders and most importantly, the interviewers. Ask to see an interviewer training manual - if they cannot produce one you can draw your own conclusions!

Check they have enough interviewers on their books in the right parts of the country to deal with your project without having to train new ones from scratch - the results will not be very good, especially if your questions are open ended and require probing. You should make inquiries about how they train the interviewers - do they get special instruction on checking job details or income etc? - but the best possible thing would be to go out with some interviewers yourself (ones that you have selected) to assess their quality. You should establish how they make sure they don't recruit interviewers who have been sacked for poor work from other companies, and find out how long their interviewers have worked for them (to give you some idea of turnover). Response rates are a measure of the quality of a company's training of interviewers; although most market research companies have experienced a growing number of refusals recently, the Government Social Survey has managed to reverse the trend on their surveys by paying more attention to this aspect of training. So, beware low response rates, (see the Sampling section for a definition of real response rates) and especially be on your guard if the company has much experience of aborted schedules where the interview terminated mid-stream; this should almost never happen to a good interviewer. Check response rates on specific items such as income details.

Do these companies monitor the quality of their interviewers once they have received their initial training? Do they run refresher courses for interviewers who have consistently failed to collect adequate data to classify the occupation by? These are much more hopeful indications of fieldwork quality than assurances of multiple checks that the interviewers are not actually cheating.

But, having said all this, in our opinion there is less and less difference between different companies' standards of interviewing for one simple reason: there are a limited number of interviewers throughout the country as a whole who form a pool on whom every company draws. There is now no organisation providing survey research in Britain which can insist that its interviewers do not work for anybody else, and it is quite clear that most interviewers work for several companies. This means that any claims to very special and

individual training should be treated with some caution. Furthermore, since the rate of pay for interviewing is insultingly low, the kind of quality that can be expected is quite low. You have every right to know how and how much interviewers in a company are paid. In the draft report of a recent MRS working party on declining response rates, increasing the pay of interviewers was seen as a very important step to alleviating the problem. Finding out a company's experience with response rates (as defined in the sampling section) should be a guide to quality.

You should find out if there would be any objection to you (or an associate) being around at all stages of a survey, doing spot checks on the fieldwork, coding or anything else. You should be very suspicious if the company is unwilling to allow this; furthermore, you should actually do it with the company that you have picked.

Be on your toes at all the stages of consultation for signs of apprehension on the part of the company about the kinds of questions you want to ask, or the kind of sample that you want to draw. Their doubts might represent perfectly genuine misgivings about the wisdom of, for example, doing a survey of urban deprivation from a sample drawn from the telephone directory, but it might also reflect a feeling that their fieldforce were not up to extracting from informants information about, for example, personal savings, that a more competent fieldforce would be able to collect without much difficulty.

Find out if any of the work which you would be contracting to the research company would in turn be subcontracted to specialist firms like computing companies. At minimum you must insist that you be told of all subcontracting and be given a chance to know what firm is doing the job and what their credentials are. You should then check these credentials. This might be enough, but you should probably try to get a company where all the stages of the survey will be performed in house, as there is much greater control then over what goes on. Discover if the company has a good routine for documenting and storing the details of all the surveys it does for a reasonable period of time. Will you be able to come back with a query about the coding scheme in 9 months time?

Hopefully at the end of doing all this research into different companies, you will have your final shortlist of those organisations which you will invite to tender for your job.

Tendering

The MRS recommends that if competitive tenders are required, "you should restrict the agencies you approach to a reasonable number (say 2-4) and inform them that they are in a competitive situation". It is common for the estimated costs provided by different companies for the same specification to vary by a factor of at least 2:1, and much wider differences have been known. Gane and Spackman conducted a piece of research which was reported to a seminar run by the MRS in April 1972 which consisted of a postal survey of leading research companies who were invited to quote for, among other things, a readership survey. (This was reported in MRS Newsletter of June 1972). Even though the companies knew the nature of the research and the specification was much more informative than many received by companies, the highest cost was £8,400 and the lowest just over £4,000. Different companies will also have different ways of costing alternative versions of a survey, so the more detail you collect the better. You may find it useful to consult the Unit's Occasional Paper 1* for details of how market research firms cost jobs.

It is essential that you have as much information as possible before deciding which tender to accept, in order to feel confident that you have compared like with like. One of the reasons determining the actual price a research company charges is undoubtedly how busy it is at the time; interviewers' work may be casual, but there is a core of research staff whose work is not, and whose wages the research company must treat as overheads; if, therefore, your inquiry comes at a time when their field work load is light they may, quite sensibly, put in a relatively low estimate. Another factor in the research company's mind when deciding how much to charge will be the likelihood of getting further business from this source in the future; they may decide to do a cut-price job now for the increased chance it give them of getting contracts in the future. And firms may quote high costs because they are really too busy to take on the work but do not want to turn the offer down flat.

But more usually the explanation is that different companies are interpreting the specified job in different ways, and are therefore quoting figures on different bases. It is to this source of variation that the researcher must pay a great deal of attention. If the job specification you provide is vague and incomplete, **picking the lowest tender is no guarantee of getting the best value for money at the end of the day.**

* G.E. Levens – The Use of Survey Research Organisation and the Costing of Survey Research. SSRC Survey Unit Occasional Paper 1, 1975 edition.

Apart from the sections of this document dealing with how to conduct business with the company once it has been chosen, the remaining sections deal with details that will affect the costing of a survey. As I have already said, you will not be able to include all of them in your original specification; you will want to take account of the experience and advice that the company has to offer you over many of the details, and you certainly should not want the company to abandon its own 'house style', for that would certainly confuse interviewers and coders.

Some of the points will be so crucial that you are already firmly decided on them, and you must specify them in your original invitation. But even though you have not made up your mind finally about the other points, you should get the company to stipulate what assumptions it has made on these points in order to quote you a figure. The most helpful thing of all is if the company shows the cost implications of altering the assumptions on the details which have not yet been fixed; for example you might get alternative costings for a longer or a shorter interview.

When you submit your specification to the different companies, indicate that you would like the costs broken down into as much detail as possible, as this will make your job of comparing them very much easier.

Finally, beware of the cut-price job. Firms rarely cross-subsidise projects in this "price-sensitive and competitive market"*; if you accept such a job you will find the whole team under financial pressure to cut corners to keep costs down, with the obvious deleterious effects on quality.

General points when planning your job with the chosen company

You must first establish who it is that you are dealing with in the company, and arrange that all matters relating to the job (with the possible exception of the accounts side) are to be communicated between one person only on your side and one only on theirs. You should always make a note of any telephone conversations and decisions taken.

You want to agree some fairly regular system of reporting on the progress of the work if there are likely to be whole weeks when the researcher is not going to be actively involved in the data collection. Weekly phone reports, meetings or reports at predetermined stages of the project, or formal written reports may be suitable.

* Levens op. cit

And agree a realistic timetable. Companies may have been over-optimistic
about the timetable when you were choosing a company in order to get the job,
but surveys cannot be speeded up dramatically at will; it will be difficult
to tell this of course, but investigate closely a company that offers a super-
quick job. You want the most precise estimates you can get of the kind of
time each stage of the project is going to take, so that you can see the minute
things begin to drop behind. There may well be delays especially if you are
asking the company to do something that they are not used to. Timing can also
be affected by the firm's other work, and it is often the case that a survey
will be commissioned in the last instance simply because they had interviewers
available at the time desired by the client. Since it is often very difficult
to be precise about so many of the details of surveys too early on, get a clear
understanding with the company about the stages at which revised proposals and
if necessary revised cost quotations are needed. A firm and formal way of
agreeing changes as the study progresses is vital.

Sometimes clients decide to share time on a survey with other clients doing
similar research. Establish whether there will be a shared subject with your
survey. If you don't mind this happening (it can reduce costs) make sure you
see the other questions and satisfy yourself that they will not bias your
responses.

Sampling

The cost effectiveness of different kinds of sampling strategies can be
quantified very much more readily than many of the other aspects of survey
research. Decisions about sampling methods will depend on the content of the
survey much more than on the size of the population to which the results are
to be generalised - generalising about parameters in the population which are
very variable requires a much larger sample, whereas you would only need a
sample of 1 to tell you how many of the population of GB were human beings,
or Martians!

But you should also question whether generalising within fine confidence limits
from your sample to your population is very important to you. In many sociolo-
gical studies, the aim of doing a survey is not to count heads on a particular
parameter, eg. to discover what % of the population are Roman Catholics, but
to examine the relationship between religion and party affiliation. In this
instance it might be that getting a truly representative sample would be a

waste of your money, and you should look for a theoretically relevant sample.
(see N. Denzin, The Research Act in Sociology: a theoretical introduction to
sociological methods, London Butterworths, 1970.)

You can expect companies to be conversant with drawing random samples from the
electoral roll and perhaps from rating lists. Most marketing companies will
also have experience of quota sampling, and they will be able to advise on
the practical difficulties that crop up with these methods of sampling. But
you should not automatically expect too much advice from them on complex
sampling strategies or non run-of-the-mill sampling frames - for this you may
have to seek advice from a statistician outside the company.

Specify the population that you want to sample, and stipulate the sampling
unit, - eg. individuals, households, addresses etc. You should give serious
consideration to using the electoral roll as a frame of addresses (rather than
electors), or to using the rating lists or GPO's postal codes. If you already
have an idea of what kind of sample you want, tell the company how much strati-
fication and how much clustering will be involved.

Quota sampling may be perfectly adequate for your study, but again make sure
that there are strict rules to ensure at least a representative distribution
on age, sex, social class, and other variables relevant to your study and a
maximum number of calls in one street. If you suspect that your sampling frame
is incomplete you must make provisions for corrections; for example if a samp-
ling frame for a cross-sectional survey of the adult population is to be the
electoral roll, correction will have to be made for those who are non-electors,
- new residents or whatever.

Establish which party to the contract is going to draw the sampling points
and the final contact list. Who will write, type and print the sampling
instructions?

You must inquire about the kind of checks on the sampling, from actually
drawing of names and addresses off the frame to checking that the interviewers
are correctly following any sampling instructions. This is especially impor-
tant with quota sampling.

You must be very clear about the response rate and final number of completed interviews you require. Obviously exact response rates cannot be specified in advance as each survey has its own peculiarities; however you can ask the company to quote their experience and predictions for your survey.

The sample sheet instruction should record the types of non-response:-

a) non contact, ie. no reply at any call, out at all calls, temporarily away from home

b) refusals at outset, broken appointments, and unusable 'partial' interviews

c) situations where an interview was not possible for reasons of old-age, sickness or language barrier

d) permanently moved, house empty or address no longer in existence.

Some companies may subtract a) c) and d) from the original figure before calculating response ratios, thus appearing to show higher response rates.

You should agree a contact population figure and the effective number of complete interviews you expect. If the figure for completed interviews is not obtained, are you expecting the company to continue to issue more names or addresses until the target figure is reached?

Tell them that you will want a report on how the sampling was conducted by the company, the method used, the resulting primary sampling points etc. If you want the company to do a check from other sources to see how representative the sample turned out to be on some demographic variables then this also should be included in the specification.

Questionnaire design and piloting

Piloting is a word used to describe many different activities from in depth interviews with people to discover the main relevant aspects of a problem to the final timing and dry run of a completed questionnaire and testing the coding frame, card layout and analysis. The importance of spending time and money at the pilot stage can hardly be overstressed. However, since requirements here will be so specific, it is assumed that the company will only be expected to pilot the final questionnaire to check the lay-out and questionnaire, the comprehensiveness of any pre-coded replies and to time the questionnaire for precise costing.

By and large it is best if the researcher does the stages before this him/
herself. But if you want the company's interviewers to do some of this,
specify details of any pre-pilot group discussions or depth interviews - how
many, with how many people, where in the country and what sort of people should
be included. Try to be as specific about your main pilot as you are about
your main survey. (And try, wherever possible, to use already tested wordings
of questions).

Make sure that you allow sufficient time between your piloting and the main
study for you to learn all the lessons that your piloting can teach you. It
is assumed that you the researcher will take responsibility for the wording
of the questionnaire, although you may find that the executive in the research
company has experience here which you might use.

Tell the company how many questions will be open and how many closed; will they
be factual questions, opinion questions or knowledge questions? Will there be
any self-completion? Will there be any special equipment like cards which have
different responses on them to be shown to the person being interviewed?

Ask the company to say in their estimate how long they think each interview
is going to take, if you are not going to do a pilot to establish this.

Agree on the predicted strike rate per interview day as this is an important
element in costing, and make sure this is based on timings given by interviewers
who have become familiar with the job. This you can check during fieldwork.

Make clear who is going to do the exact wording of the prompts and pre- codes
to be used. If you agree to the company doing this, make sure they are doing
what you want.

Specify who is going to design the final lay-out of the questionnaire with all
the skip instructions (which route the interviewer round the questionnaire) made
clear, and who is going to type and print the final version of the question-
naire. You should attempt to have your column allocation for the computerising
of your data actually on your questionnaire for punchers to work from directly
without a transfer sheet. Each step of transferring information brings with
it more errors.

Specify who is going to lay out, type and print the questionnaire instructions,
and who is going to handle queries as they start to come in during fieldwork.

Proof read absolutely everything very carefully indeed. Reprinting is expensive.

You should request that the interview schedules are handed over to you on completion; these can be of inestimable value when problems or queries crop up in analysis, and they are a record of the quality of the company's work to some extent. This request may have implications for questionnaire lay-out (it may be best to have the name and addresses written on a detachable top sheet) as the respondent's identity should be removed before they will hand them over. (See MRS Code) They may only be prepared to give you duplicates, which would be much more expensive.

Questionnaire content

This is of course not easily separable from questionnaire design and lay-out; It is assumed that the researcher takes full responsibility for this.

Spell out how much classificatory information you will want in detail. This is often called "standard classification" but it is certainly not standardised. You should always collect a bare minimum, even if you do not think you will need it. You may be wrong, and researchers reanalysing your data in years to come may also want it.

You may find it helpful to look at a publication of the MRS called Standardised Questions which will give you some suggestions here. There is also a joint British Sociological Association and SSRC publication called Comparability in Social Research (Heinemann 1969) which gives a more thorough, less cook-bookish approach to the problems of standardising information on education, family and household, income and occupation, which is edited by Margaret Stacey. It is less definitive in its recommendations unfortunately.

Remember all those other things that you will probably want from your question-naires - an interview sequence number, an area or primary sampling unit code, and interviewer identification code, the duration of the interview, the date of interview, the interview call-record. Many of these things should be standard procedures but are not.

Fieldwork

Will you want a letter to tell the respondent in advance that there will be an interviewer coming? If you don't, specify that you don't want this.

The way in which the interviewers are briefed for a survey makes a tremendous difference to the quality of the work and the commitment and interest of the interviewers; it can also make a tremendous difference to the cost. You should be prepared to pay for every interviewer to attend briefing sessions where the survey is explained and the schedule gone through by the executive in charge of the project unless you have cast iron reasons for believing this to be un-necessary. Many companies will recommend postal briefing or two stage briefing whereby the executive briefs the supervisors and the supervisors brief the interviewers; both of these are much cheaper, but in most cases inadequate methods of explaining to the interviewers the purpose of the whole survey and individual questions within it.

You should attend the briefing sessions but should not interrupt, as this will be confusing to the interviewers. You should of course have hammered out the points which you think need special emphasis with the executive in charge beforehand. Any points of doubt or disagreement with the briefer are best taken up at the end, before the interviewers leave. You need not explain your research hypotheses to the interviewers (this might even result in bias) but you should give them some understanding of the purpose of the survey and the aim of individual questions. Interviewers do not always grasp that some apparently factual questions like 'what are the member countries of the E.E.C.?' are designed to discover how many people know this, rather than to elicit the true answer.

Specify who is to be responsible for writing, typing, printing and mailing any briefing documents. This is especially important if you ever do postal briefings.

Some researchers have found it useful to specify that fieldwork should be split up into two periods. Each interviewer assigned to the project should do two practice interviews, and these schedules should then be returned to the researchers to go through and look for things going wrong. Further briefing (probably by post) could then happen before the bulk of the survey got underway. If 2-3 weeks' pause were timetabled for this purpose, many errors would come to light before it was too late.

You should stipulate if you only want fully trained and experienced interviewers working on your project.

The poor quality of fieldwork in Britain today cannot be unrelated to the fact that interviewers are expected to do a very demanding job for an insulting rate of pay. You might like to stipulate that the interviewers be paid per day or week; they may then take a little more time over your interviews.

Although it is a very poor substitute for positive reinforcement and training schemes, you should specify the kind of checks you want that an interview has taken place, and has taken place under the conditions you specified.

Do you want accompaniment by supervisors, call-backs by supervisors, postal checks, telephone checks, accompaniment by your own staff? Specify that accompaniment should consist in supervisors accompanying interviewers for routine checks over and above accompaniment for training. You should arrange to do some genuinely random checks yourself.

Specify the minimum number of call-backs that an interviewer must make to a named person in order to secure an interview. Although 3 is fairly standard, it is not really adequate, and 4 is recommended. However, the main thing is that the call-backs should be made at intelligent times; you could stipulate that after two failures interviewers must return in the evening or at a week-end. Response is important, but you must be prepared to pay to achieve good results. You should specify if you want the interviewers to make appointments rather than interview people 'cold'.

The most difficult area to sort out is what to do with obvious interviewer errors, some of which may be trivial and disproportionately expensive to correct; others could ruin an entire schedule. You will have to come to some definition of what constitutes a completed and satisfactory questionnaire. But if incomplete or unsatisfactory questionnaires are to be returned to the inter-viewers this means that you must have close contact (through some agreed channel) with the field supervisors, who must keep up to date with checking (known as 'manual editing') the questionnaires. Problems must be dealt with immediately and you must be kept informed.

Specify who is going to write, type and print the letters of identification and letters of thanks to the respondents.

It is good practice for respondents to be left with a letter which tells them the interviewer's name, the name and address of the research company and the name of the responsible executive and the individual sponsor's name and address.

The public have a right to know why they were interviewed and to what purpose
the information will be put. They should also be reassured of the confidentia-
lity of their replies; many will not admit to doubts while being interviewed
but worry once the interviewer has left. Unless these rights are acknowledged
and acted upon, we should not be surprised at dwindling response rates.

Tell the company that you will want a fieldwork report from them with an
analysis of the non-response, and an account of any problems that were encoun-
tered during the fieldwork and how they were dealt with.

You should expect to be kept fully informed of the results of any checks that
were done, and a report should be submitted on these.

You should have satisfied yourself that the questionnaires are satisfactorily
completed by reading through some of them as they come in and again before the
data processing begins.

Data processing

There are two stages in data processing, often called coding and checking on
the one hand and analysis on the other. But these two stages are not qualita-
tively different and it is best to think of both of them as ways of producing
accurate summaries of the information and drawing correct inferences from it.
Coding is really the first stage of analysis.

Establish whether the firm will be doing its own data-processing or sub-con-
tracting any portion of the work. You will probably feel easier if all the
primary analysis is done "in house" up to the point of getting the data coded
up on to cards. But computing is one area where sub-contracting may be
desirable, and be prepared to let a specialist company check and clean your
data on a computer (known as 'machine editing'). Make sure you get a report
or a listing of the errors discovered at this stage.

Specify who is going to be responsible for drawing up the coding frame, writing
and typing the coding instructions and dealing with conding queries as they
arise. Who is going to keep a record of every coding decision taken?

Do you want the open-ended questions listed or coded? For questions using an
"other" category you may want a listing of that category. Who is going to do
any post-coding? (You should aim to do this yourself, as the categories must
be theoretically relevant).

Do you want any coding done in the field? Some companies are trying to bring this in since it saves costs; usually it is not very satisfactory.

Who is going to do the office coding, and what consistency checks will there be?

Find out about your local computing facilities and plan how you will analyse the data. Do you want any blanks, x's, y's or multipunches in any columns? The majority of social scientists in UK use SPSS, (a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)* which is very well documented and easy to follow, in the analysis of their data. If you want to be able to use SPSS or any other of the major packages for analysing survey data you will find yourself restricted to numeric and alphabetic characters, and you may find for simplicity that it is best to stick completely to numeric data. Multipunching may save you a bit of money at the beginning because you can get more data on to one card, but if you have to go back to the company to separate the different items for analysis, this may lead to greater expense in the long run.

In any survey there will be some information that was not collected for one reason or another. How do you want this missing data handled? You must make sure that 'no' responses are always distinguishable from 'no answer' and you probably want more than one code for 'no answer', you might for example wish to be able to distinguish a clear refusal, a failure to understand/don't know, inapplicable/not asked because of a skip instruction, and missing (presumably the interviewer forgot it). This breakdown tells you a lot about interviewer quality.

Estimate how many cards you think it will end up as, if you have not already planned this on the questionnaire. Remember to leave space for all those items mentioned in the section on questionnaire content, and leave spaces on every card for your own job number so that the decks are identifiable. Leave space for additional codes where you think there is a danger of unanticipated replies that you might want to code, rather than allowing a residual 'other' category. Leave blank columns periodically throughout your card layout anyway; the commonest punching error is to get displaced a column, and this is immediately visible on a print-out of cards, as a character in an otherwise blank column.

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* Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (2nd edn.), Norman H. Nie et al. McGraw Hill, N.Y., 1975.

Do you want the data on cards, on tape or what?

You still hear horrifying stories about what has happened to magnetic tapes of data, and it is preferable always to have at least one solid set of tangible cards! If you are receiving the data on tapes check compatibility of these tapes with your computer installation. Always keep duplicate copies of data.

Specify any new variables that you will want the company to create for you on your data; eg. you may have collected information about all the people in the household, but total household size still needs to be created.

Specify exactly what kinds of cleaning you want done on the data; you should take the company's advice on how this could best be done. You may find 100% cleaning not worth the cost, but specify what range of residual error you will accept. You will probably want a manual edit of the questionnaire, the punching verified (ie. punched twice and corrected where differences occur) and a machine edit including a check that the values of variables are in the correct range, logical checks (eg. no married 3 year olds), checks that the skip instructions have been properly followed, and a check that any blank columns which were left on the cards now appear in the correct place.

Tell the company that you will want a piece of computer output which will give a complete record of the holes punched on all the cards in your data. This holecount is your best immediate guide to your data, but it is only the first port of call; very serious errors may never come to light through an examination of this piece of computer output.

If the company has been taking responsibility for coding decisions, you should request a coding report from them. If the company is to check the representativeness of the sample, do you want them to re-weight the data accordingly?

Most academic social researchers will want to do their own analysis and have the ability to freely explore their data; the distributions and patterns of social variables and processes are much less well established than in the marketing world. The existence of packages like SPSS, makes quite complex analysis possible to non-programmers.

However, if you do want the company to do some analysis for you, you will have to specify exactly what you want done, and the earlier you do this in the project the better. You should make sure that they are not going to present you

with percentage tables alone - _always_ report the numbers as well as the percentage, (row or column percentages depending on what you want) and specify how missing data have been handled.

Similarly, you may wish the company to prepare a manual for the survey that shows the text of the questions asked and the marginal distributions of the responses obtained. You may even want them to decide for themselves what analysis to do, and get them to write the final research report; however if this is your intention you need a rather different relationship with the company at the earlier stages to the one described here, as the executive will need to have a much fuller understanding of the research problem and closer involvement with the survey design.

Specify how many complete sets of documents you need for reports etc; remember that you will often find one of the easiest ways to handle queries about what you did is to send someone a copy of your questionnaire, so make sure you have enough to do this.

Legal and accounting

After you have received quotations from a few companies for the cost of your project, you pick the company which offers the best value for money. (You may of course have to return to companies and rediscuss and renegotiate points before you settle on one company and a provisional budget).

An agreement will be drawn up whereby you formally contract the company to do a piece of work for a specific sum of money. If this involves getting your institution into contract, you should get advice on this. You can only reasonably expect an absolutely fixed price contract with no provision for altering the charges if the job is firmly agreed and will not be long in the field. Otherwise, you must establish an agreed procedure for altering the costings, establishing clearly the circumstances which can lead to a change in the contract price; eg., who has to pay increased subcontractors' costs?

You must establish a method of payment that leaves you enough in hand to complete the work elsewhere at any time and to act as a satisfaction safeguard; however profit margins are low at the moment, and firms simply cannot wait for their money until the end of a long job.

There are many different practices over the payment of accounts: some companies bill monthly in arears, some prefer $\frac{1}{3}$ on agreement of project, $\frac{1}{3}$ on completion of fieldwork and $\frac{1}{3}$ when the job is over, and some prefer you to pay up all but

10% which you keep back as a form of retention. Whichever method you opt for
in the end, ensure that payments are reasonably related to work _already_ done
and that you are satisfied with. The word "satisfaction" naturally needs to
be operationally defined in some way.

It is often as well to check with the company at an early stage the cost of
returning to them at some time in the future to do something further, some more
tables, for example, or a different coding of open-ended questions. Even if
you don't envisage it happening, it very often does, and then you are a captive
customer, cost-wise.

Check whether the price for the survey will include V.A.T. or not. Some of the
larger research companies have a separate section of their organisation to which
non-profit-making organisations may award a 'grant' to carry out a specified
piece of research. Where this happens, no V.A.T. is payable.

Copyright is an area in which misunderstanding or dispute may arise unless the
rights of both parties are clearly stated at the time the work is commissioned.
Academics who undertake research on a contractual basis for government or other
agencies, and the agency commissioning the research, should always reach a
clear understanding on copyright in the early stages of negotiation.

Conclusion

However, none of this ensures quality of the final product.

The present situation is unsatisfactory. Market research companies are what
they say they are, and with a handful of exceptions, their employees do not
have much experience with academic social research. Bodies like the SSRC
should give consideration to the fact that in many other countries much
academic research is undertaken by a specially trained, non-profit organisation
funded centrally. In the long run, this has to happen in Britain.

Until then, survey research will continue to be criticised as an unreliable
research tool when the real point is that it is an expensive research tool
which needs very careful maintenance.

APPENDIX 1

Sources of companies providing market research

'Organisations providing Market Research Services in Great Britain', in Market Research Society Yearbook, published by M.R.S., 51 Charles Street, London. Price £1.05p plus postage.

'European Guide to Industrial Marketing Consultancy', 1975. Published by the Industrial Marketing Research Association, 11 Bird Street, Lichfield, Staffs, WS13 6PW. Price £3.00.

'Directory of British Associations', by C.B.D. Research Limited, Beckenham, Kent, England. Third edition. Price £6.00.

'International Directory of Market Research Organisations' published by M.R.S., 51 Charles Street, London. Price £3.25p to non-members, obtainable from the Society.

'Directory of British Market Research Organisations and Services', published by Crosby Lockwood. Second edition, price £1.50p net plus postage.

'Marketing and Management' - a world register of organisations. Edited by Ian Anderson and produced in co-operation with the Institute of Marketing. Published by C.B.D. Research Limited, 240 pages. First edition, price £3.00.

'The B.I.M. Management Consulting Services Information Bureau'. Records details of over 1,000 Consultants. Enquiries to B.I.M., Parker Street, London, W.C.2.

'Directors' Guide to Management Techniques' - section on how to select a Management Consultant. Available from Universal Subscription Services Limited, 4 Footscray Road, Eltham, London, S.E.9. Price £6.00.

It is advisable to consult as many sources as possible to find out about the company you are considering.