

# Junk Surveys and PR – A Common Problem

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“Let’s do a survey!” Whenever I hear a PR practitioner say this, I cringe.

Does the practitioner understand what it takes to do a statistically accurate survey? Does the PR practitioner know how difficult it is to draw a random sample of a population? Does the PR practitioner know that correlation is not causation, and just because two elements are linked doesn’t mean they have an effect on each other? Does the PR practitioner understand the way a question is asked will determine information received?

Too much surveying has ruined surveys. Junk data are a tsunami washing over editors. People are no longer willing to answer questions, even if a survey is short.

So what should a PR practitioner know about surveying BEFORE suggesting one be done? First of all, to maintain credibility, PR practitioners should be accurate. Accuracy in surveying is difficult to achieve. Surveys obey Murphy’s law – “if anything can go wrong, it will.” There is a reason why survey companies employ trained specialists to define, develop, administer and report surveys. Their job is to prevent bad things from happening on the way to finding answers. But, even then, they are dealing with unknowable “unknowns.” That is, they run afoul without realizing they are doing so.

## Four reasons to avoid surveys

There are at least four reasons for not doing a survey. The first is that a question one wants answered by a survey has been answered. Secondary research will find it inexpensively, and there is no need for a questionnaire. Unfortunately, ignoring existing information is a common failing among PR practitioners. They tend to look at the here and now and not at history. Past information is disregarded, as if it has no bearing on the present. But, often it does, because among other things, human nature doesn’t change much. A reason for an opinion in the past may be the same reason for an opinion today. The practitioner’s decision is not so much finding an answer but confirming whether an answer is still true. Is it worth doing a survey to find that out, especially if one wants to generate publicity?

A second reason for avoiding a survey is an inability to define precisely what one is seeking. It is astonishing how often clients and PR practitioners don’t know what it is that they want to learn. They have vague ideas but not specific data points in mind. A survey becomes Garbage Questions In and Garbage Answers Out. Secondary research or focus groups should help one define precisely what it is that one wants to know. A survey firm cannot develop an adequate survey instrument without it.

A third reason is that information one is seeking is not available through a survey. People may not be willing to report accurately whether they have HIV, for example, or

how often they have sex with a partner who is not a husband or wife, or whether they wear a toupee or other intimate data. Surveys depend on respondents. Subjects may not know the reasons for acting as they do. They may not give accurate answers. They may give answers that make them look good and are not what they believe. Those who do answer may not reflect the population at large but a subset for whom such information has no emotional burden. People also may not know the answer to the questions. This is a frequent problem in political campaigns, for example, where polls don't begin to "harden" and reflect voter intent until the last days of a campaign. Until then, polls can swing from one way to the other with a large margin of error because respondents are vacillating and have not fixed on their choice for office.

A fourth reason for questioning whether to do a survey is whether answers will advance communications or not. Will the survey have any interest to the media or target audience once it is done? Frequently, surveys don't and practitioners have spent time and money producing blanks. On the other hand, if survey answers are not for external distribution – say, an employee morale survey – getting the same answers back may be enough to show where a company stands with employees.

### **Representative sample**

Getting a representative sample size is difficult, but if one fails to define precisely the population from which responses are drawn, survey answers won't reflect the attitudes of the group. Randomness is essential in survey work because mathematically each respondent should be equally likely to be selected from the universe of the audience. But, today randomness is difficult to achieve with cell phones no longer tied to geographical areas, with voice mail screening, and with impatient respondents. People will hang up, throw away questionnaires and delete e-mail without a second thought, even if remuneration is promised for their opinions. Representative samples require much larger sample sizes to compensate for turndowns, but that means more time and money.

The survey methodology -- in-person, phone bank, internet, surface mail or e-mail – also makes a difference in whether one achieves a representative sample and what one can ask. Each method has positives and negatives. The challenge with in-person surveys, including mall and store intercepts is expense, but there is no other way to get sensory data such as smell and taste. The challenge with telephone banks was mentioned above. To use the internet, one must establish a group that reflects the population at large. Only large surveying firms have done that. Mail surveying depends on those who respond. Few do whether by surface mail or e-mail. On the other hand telephone interviewers can encourage people to answer questions, which can lead to higher response rates. There is a challenge as well with self-administered or researcher-administered surveys. There is no chance in self-administered surveys to explain ambiguous questions. Self-administered surveys require questions in the survey to be tested to see if they are understood accurately across the board. If not, two respondents will answer in two different ways and skew results. Or, if a questionnaire is asking forced choice questions,

it precludes a nuanced reply. On the other hand, a researcher can introduce bias into a survey by how the researcher asks questions and guides the respondent.

There are optimum random sample sizes to determine what people are thinking. However, samples cannot be broken down indefinitely and maintain accuracy. This is a frequent cross-tabbing error where one finds samples of such small size that they have no validity. If one wishes to cross-tab results to see inner comparisons among respondents, then one has to increase sample size to populate cells adequately.

## Errors and more errors

Even if the survey is statistically accurate, the way one reports it can be inaccurate. Survey reporting requires careful use of language to express accurately what was found without inferring implications that are the opposite of what one intends or in the case of publicity, more than what was there. As a result, a survey report can seem boring but better boring than misleading. There is a series of articles from the BBC that go into survey error, which are summarized here.

- **Spurious counting and misstatement.** This error combines categories that shouldn't be put together and uses imprecise terms to express respondents' state of mind. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7542886.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7542886.stm) The problem in the example used was an effort by a PR writer to create meaning that wasn't there.
- **An illusion of accuracy.** This error expresses an underlying environment that is fundamentally innumerable in percentages that purport to be precise. The BBC example use the case of GDP. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7554022.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7554022.stm) Contrary to public understanding, there are plenty of areas where sampling methods cannot be precise.
- **Percentages out of context.** This error often seen in medical reports will give an X percent increase in the risk of a disease or a Y chances in a million that something might happen, but are not tied to anything that an ordinary layperson can understand. When they are, data are often insignificant. Or, to put it another way, the number of potential ways to get cancer based on studies released over the years are enough to lower the average lifespan by several years, but they haven't – not yet anyway. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7568929.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7568929.stm)
- **Misunderstanding of averages.** This is a common problem. People take a mean of data without checking to see if the data is skewed in some fashion. An example of this is the average tenure in office of S&P 500 CEOs. When we first started calculating this for a client, we were baffled by the average remaining the same year after year even though more CEOs were stepping down from office. When we calculated the median age of CEOs, there was a dramatically lower

difference between the median and average. Sure enough, a percentage of CEOs who remained in office a long time had skewed the average up. We started to provide both the median and average tenure after that. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7581120.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7581120.stm)

- **Spurious causation.** Correlation in data is misunderstood even among academics who should know better. That two items move together does not mean one item is the cause of the other. There may, in fact, be no causal link whatsoever. The BBC example uses a correlation between ice cream eating and shark attacks. When ice cream eating rises, so do shark attacks in the UK. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7592579.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7592579.stm) If there is any link between the correlates, it is highly unlikely to be direct. The same kind of error occurs with statistical regression where a researcher will find two variables that appear to be related but aren't. Correlation and regression give one an area in which to look for more information. They are not explanatory in themselves. To use a term from mapping, one has to "ground truth." After mappers have taken aerial images of a locale, they put a surveyor on the scene to see what is there and to measure what imagery appears to show.

## Summary

Perhaps the best suggestion to a client who wants to do a survey is to skip the idea unless the client has time and money. The world doesn't need more junk data. There is enough landing on the desks of reporters and editors daily. What editors want is accuracy and insight that tell them what is really happening. Junk data tells them nothing and skews perception. For PR practitioners who only care about getting ink for clients, it matters little whether publicists produce crappy data or not. For the rest of us who believe in correct, long-term positioning of clients, such practitioners ruin surveying for everyone.

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