

Is Your Research Good Enough for *The New York Times*?

By Joseph Hopper, Ph.D.

Whether your goal is getting research into the board room to influence top decision makers, or in front of the public to promote your brand, you need to know the standards of rigor against which the research will be judged. Is it good enough to withstand the scrutiny of industry experts? Good enough to stand up to the questions of an executive ready to make a multimillion dollar investment? Good enough to be quoted as an authoritative source in *The New York Times*?

Corporate executives and academic journals typically avoid setting up rigid standards against which to judge research because the most insightful research is usually an artful combination of standardized best practices and innovative methods. But news media face a different problem. It is far too easy to conduct biased public opinion polling, especially now with online panels and social networks, and thus editors and reporters are inundated with self-serving news releases based on bad research.

As such, some news organizations like the Associated Press (AP), *The New York Times*, and ABC News

have developed guidelines for what counts as valid and reliable research. It is worth understanding the guidelines even if you do not pitch to the media because the guidelines provide a fascinating glimpse into current methodological debates about probability sampling, inferential statistics, and the rapidly changing world of online data collection and analysis. If your organization does use research for public relations and marketing, then a deeper understanding will help you offer recommendations to your organization about conducting PR research.

THE CRUX OF THE ISSUE: PROBABILITY SAMPLES

We are often asked by our clients whether it is true that the AP refuses to carry stories from online surveys, and if so, why. Yes, it is true, mostly. Their standard is that for a survey or public opinion poll to be valid and reliable, it must be conducted by telephone. As odd as that seems, the reason is that most online surveys rely on non-probability samples. In contrast, telephone surveys (at least in theory) rely on probability samples.

In a probability sample, every person in the population has a chance of being selected into the sample. In a non-probability sample, not every person has a chance. For purists, this matters because non-zero, calculable probabilities underlie the statistics of being able to project from a sample to a population. It sounds complicated but it boils down to this: If you randomly dial numbers on your phone, theoretically it is possible to reach any adult American and have them participate in a survey. On the Internet, this is not possible.

The AAPOR (American Association of Public Opinion Research) Task Force on Online Panels noted in their March 2010 report that “there currently is no generally accepted theoretical basis from which to claim that survey results using samples from nonprobability online panels are projectable to the general population.” As such, *The New York Times* states in its Polling Standards, published in May 2011:

In order to be worthy of publication in The Times, a survey must be representative, that is, based on a random sample of respon-

dents. Any survey that relies on the ability and/or availability of respondents to access the Web and choose whether to participate is not representative and therefore not reliable.

And the current AP Stylebook says:

Only a poll based on a scientific, random sample of a population – in which every member of the population has a known probability of inclusion – can be considered a valid and reliable measure of that population’s opinions.

In a recent phone interview with the deputy director of polling for the AP, we confirmed this means the vast majority of surveys conducted online are not considered valid and reliable, and AP advises against reporting them.

IN SEARCH OF A TRUE PROBABILITY SAMPLE

The puzzling thing about this requirement is that very little social scientific, psychological, public opinion, or marketing research actually uses probability samples. They are an ideal rarely attained, and yet our research still produces robust findings. Indeed, there are three strong arguments against the idea that only phone surveys are valid and that all surveys must utilize probability samples:

First, *online surveys work*. Comparative research conducted over the last few years has shown that when rigorously designed, executed, and analyzed, there are few differences between phone surveys and online panel surveys. Indeed, the AAPOR report does not

say that online surveys are inaccurate, but that the theoretical basis for projecting sample statistics to populations has not been worked out. In our view, that is not a sufficient reason to reject methods that work and that have strong empirical support.

Second, *phone samples are not true probability samples*. A large majority of people reached by phone either do not answer their phones or refuse to participate in surveys; these people do not have a non-zero and calculable probability of being included in a survey. Advocates of phone surveys point to empirical research showing that significant levels of non-response do not necessarily affect outcomes. That is true, just as empirical research shows that non-probability samples from online panels do not necessarily affect outcomes.

Third, *not all research should be done with probability sampling*. A great deal of rigorous academic research, vetted by top experts and published in journals, does not use probability samples. We have done this type of work using a variety of survey modes and sampling strategies, and we have published it in academic and medical journals. In fact, *The New York Times* and other media outlets cite this type of research all the time, including some of our own work. Even their top polling experts publish research that uses online methods.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PASS MUSTER

But if your goal is to get a story circulating via the AP or The Times, or at least not have them reject it

out of hand, their standards rule. Debating those standards with an editor or reporter is not likely to help (yes, we have tried). As such, we offer these five suggestions for planning and pitching survey research:

1. *Conduct the survey by phone*. Rigorously executed phone surveys ideally rely on probability samples, which is key. If possible, sampling should include mobile phones as well (which may double your costs), but for a number of odd reasons, even 100% landline phone surveys are still viewed more favorably than Internet surveys.
2. *Use real people for interviewing*. Some firms conduct polls and phone surveys with automated interactive voice recording (IVR). But there is no way for IVR systems to randomly select a member of the household for interviewing, or to ensure that children that are not providing responses instead. Robo-polls and IVR surveys are not considered valid and reliable, so avoid them.
3. *Provide methodological details*. In your press release or when pitching the story, include information such as survey mode, the number of people interviewed, sampling procedures including any stratified design, weighting procedures, the dates of data collection, and the margin of sampling error both overall and for any key subgroups that are reported.
4. *Identify the sponsor and field-work provider*. Surveys are usually sponsored by organizations that have a business or political interest in the topic, so it is important to

identify that sponsor and, if necessary, to explain their interest. Most sponsors hire third-party research firms to actually conduct the polling. Be sure to identify that firm. It adds credibility to the research, especially if the research firm is a leader in reputable industry organizations such as AAPOR (the American Association of Public Opinion Research) or NCPP (the National Council on Public Polls).

5. *Be prepared to provide all survey data.* Besides wanting to know the key statistics that support the storyline, reporters and editors may ask for a copy of the questionnaire itself to see how questions were worded and whether the order of questions may have introduced bias. They may also ask for a marginal report that shows responses to each question in the survey. The research itself should follow a number of best practices as well,

including appropriate criteria for sample size, calling frequency, random digit dial protocols, and so on. For additional details on these, see our article on *How to Conduct a Telephone Survey for Gold Standard Research*.

THE STORY MATTERS MOST

Keep in mind that these are the standards for a small minority of media organizations, and that plenty of other publications do carry stories from online research. Moreover these standards are about methods that do not speak to issues of content. Even most phone surveys are not written about in *The New York Times* or the AP because what matters most is that the research be insightful and relevant, and that the statistical data have been skillfully turned into a compelling story that readers care about.

That's where we at Versta Research can help you most. Beyond advising you on the best research mode for your campaign strategy and conducting rigorous research that can withstand the highest levels of scrutiny, we turn data into stories. We guarantee that your research will come to life in a way that will grab whatever audience or internal clients you are trying to reach.

*Note: For a fuller exposition of specific standards to pass media muster, we recommend reading *The New York Times Polling Standards*, and the AP Stylebook (entry "polls and surveys").*



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