

Research quality in the real world: how can quality measures raise value for money for clients?

This paper has been adapted from an academic piece authored by Alpa A. Viridi.

Why is measurement of research quality important?

Commercial market research methods are rooted in hypothesis testing and research methods designed for academic social and psychological research. The world of academia requires exemplary rigour and measurement in research design so that important concepts can be examined, validated and applied - to policy-making, for example. To that end, these academic theories are statistically tested in a systematic way and qualitative research is systematically documented. In contrast, the commercial world of market research lacks the twin luxuries of time and money that scientific testing requires. Our work is often fast and furiously turned around – and that is as it should be, to meet the client’s demands for timely and practical research. Furthermore, commercial research tends to ‘bend the rules’ on academic standards - using purposive, small or panel samples, untested questionnaires and including, at times, inexperienced researchers. This goes for both qualitative and quantitative commercial research, particularly *ad-hoc* (i.e. one-off rather than tracking) studies.

Without quality controls, the research is in danger of being seriously compromised, resulting in unusable data, wasted client money and damaged reputations on both sides of the fence.

To my mind, these commercial pressures increase the importance of laying down a foundation of good business practice and quality controls to ensure that researchers provide the best quality possible within the project parameters. Without such quality controls, the research is in danger of being seriously compromised, resulting in unusable data, wasted client money and damaged reputations on both sides of the fence.

Limited application of existing quality standards to commercial market research

Industry standards, such as MRQSA, ISO 20252 and codes of conduct (MRS, AQR etc) are important in ensuring minimum quality requirements. However, they do carry their own limitations if reduced to a ‘box-ticking’ exercise and they lack criteria for assessing research design. Furthermore, as discussed above, straightforward academic standards are not appropriate to the convenience approach of commercial research.

So, a framework is required to assess the quality of commercial research design and execution, but what shape should it take?

Having reviewed academic and experiential articles, we have formulated three umbrella criteria:

- ⦿ audit trail,
- ⦿ descriptive validity and
- ⦿ pragmatic validity.

The role of the researcher is vital in raising the quality, effectiveness and value of market research

Furthermore, we believe that the role of the experienced researcher is vital in raising the quality, effectiveness and value of market research.

The audit trail

This is important in demonstrating how the research has been designed and conducted. If the audit trail can prove the existence of quality control procedures (valid, rigorous process) and enable peer review and replication, the quality of the research is likely to be high. In practical terms, this could mean that if the key researcher for a particular project is replaced, would the newcomer be able to look at the paperwork, know that the study is designed to measure what it needs to measure and confidently complete the study, or replicate it the following year to track changes in market opinions?

Descriptive validity

This is particularly important for qualitative research and commercial (i.e. untested, non-standardised) quantitative research. It refers to whether the research findings can be judged as 'true' or credible based upon 'thick' (i.e. deep or extensive) reporting of respondent opinion to support conclusions and recommendations provided by the researcher. The better the reporting, the more effective the research.

The old definition of value for money: 'quality versus cost' is no longer acceptable – the real measure of value for money is to what extent the research produces tangible benefits for the client.

Pragmatic validity

This is the ultimate measure of the value of the research - has it prompted the research buyer to act, has it provided a return on the investment? The old definition of value for money: 'quality versus cost' is no longer acceptable – the real measure of value for money is to what extent the research produces *tangible benefits* for the client. Ideally these tangible benefits can be measured or quantified.

How do we put this framework into practice?

At Spotlight, we have identified 21 key steps in the research process across five stages: business planning, research design, data collection, interpretation of data and communication of findings. Each of the steps requires quality control activities and ours can be viewed in our [Quality Statement](#).

Below we present several examples of quality measures and the resultant gains in quality, effectiveness and value for money. For a full description, please [contact us](#).

Examples of quality control measures

1. Business planning:

Use an experienced consultant or agency with quality controls in place to enable an audit trail and increase your trust and confidence in them.

The audit trail is intended to monitor and improve the rigorous conduct of the research and should run throughout the research study. Process controls can be used effectively to document major decisions and processes and ensure communication between yourself and the consultant/agency at key stages of the project. Furthermore, I would look for clear lines of communication and regular updates from the consultant/agency, including adherence to the project schedule and audit trail.

Look for clear lines of communication, regular updates, adherence to the project schedule and an audit trail

Proposals from consultants/agencies should, as a minimum, address the objectives set out in the brief, discuss and recommend appropriate research designs within budget, highlight

relevant research experience and provide details of the proposed project team and their roles. In the 1990's, a market research paper (Brace & Spackman, 1993) found 'timeliness' to be ranked topmost as a quality measure by research buyers and I don't think this will have changed much over the years, with the possible exception of 'value for money'. Therefore you need to ensure a research schedule is drawn up and agreed, which addresses any critical dates - for example, the Board meeting at which the research findings need to be discussed. This would contribute to pragmatic validity and therefore value for money of the project.

2. Research design:

The research design should include sufficient controls for the marketplace to be studied: for example, including differing age-groups, geographic regions, or business sizes. We should also apply 'control' groups where necessary – for example, if users of a product are to be profiled, then include non-users to compare against. If medium businesses are to be profiled in terms of strategic and tactical behaviours, then compare them against small and large businesses. How each sample group differs from the general population should be documented, and not solely in terms of traditional socio-economic measures, but also respondent attitudes, lifestyle factors and other 'psychological' measures. These measures (if applied with expertise) contribute to the rigour and usefulness of the research.

For the audit trail, the final agreed design and deliverables should be fully documented, it is often necessary to adapt the design during data collection and I would allow for this flexibility, ensuring that any key changes are agreed and documented.

3. Data collection

The ethical conduct and sensitive treatment of survey participants is of paramount importance, requiring adherence to relevant industry Codes of Conduct and an experienced researcher overseeing the data gathering process. Such measures contribute to trustworthiness between the consultant/agency and client, and also between the consultant/agency and survey participants.

The ethical conduct and sensitive treatment of survey participants is of paramount importance

4. Interpretation of data

The researcher who conducts and interprets the research findings needs to be experienced in remaining 'open' to new information - seeking to test their own theories about the 'story' that is emerging, adjust them and re-test them until the most appropriate conclusion is arrived at which explains the data. This is not a scientific process, but one which relies heavily on the knowledge, experience and objectivity of the researcher. To account for the limitations of the research sample, an important ingredient of the research report is the inclusion of 'thick description'. That is, detailed information on contexts, settings, processes and unique cases. Furthermore, the research report should be easy to read and navigate and include only sound assertions which are substantiated by the data and appropriate verbatim comments from survey participants. The inclusion of actual comments from survey participants also brings the report to life and helps you to get more in touch with the marketplace in what can otherwise be a somewhat sterile process (contributing to pragmatic validity).

5. Communication of findings

The client de-brief and written report should be written and presented by someone present at some of the interviews at the least, as they would need to credibly demonstrate the rigour of the research and the logic of hypotheses to explain the data. The skilled researcher will simplify complex concepts and jargon without losing any of the meaning by using a range of illustrative techniques. They will also demonstrate tact and sensitivity when presenting findings, being aware of internal politics and the potential impact of negative findings or recommended actions.

The skilled researcher will demonstrate tact and sensitivity when presenting research findings

For business consultancy projects, after the de-brief, there would ideally be a cross-functional action planning meeting to decide on the business strategy and seek positive changes in the business, even if the decision in the light of the research is to not go ahead with a proposed business plan.

'...trust is not established once and for all; it is fragile, and even trust that has been a long time building can be destroyed overnight in the face of an ill-advised action.'

Oka and Shaw (2000)

Finally, trust and integrity are important: in the real world, things often 'go wrong' in market research, and how the agency handles those incidences will define the strength of their working relationship with you. Regular customer satisfaction assessments are needed to monitor client satisfaction with the agency, but also, each project should be formally reviewed (using the audit trail) to discuss what went well and what could be learned for the betterment of future projects.

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