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CANADIAN RESEARCH
INSIGHTS COUNCIL
LE CONSEIL DE RECHERCHE
ET D'INTELLIGENCE
MARKETING CANADIEN

10 questions journalists should ask before publishing the results of a survey

Whose research reputation is on the line?

It is important to understand who conducted the survey so you can evaluate their credibility. Does the organization follow the standards of a credible professional association such as the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC), ESOMAR, WAPOR or AAPOR? A reputable surveying company will provide the information you need to allow you to evaluate their survey and operates in an open and transparent manner. Research released by CRIC member companies should disclose that it complies with the CRIC Public Opinion Research Standards and Disclosure Requirements. The company will also be included in the directory of CRIC member companies who regularly release research publicly.

Who's the sponsor?

If another organization paid for the survey, it is important to understand who they are, why they commissioned it and what is their interest in the topic the survey is measuring.

What was asked?

Were the questions clearly worded, unbiased and balanced? Were the questions included on an omnibus survey? Were there statements or questions asked in the same survey that could have influenced the response to the questions reported on?

When was the survey conducted?

When did interviews start and when did they finish? Were there major events in the news during or after the completion of the survey that might have shifted opinions on the topic? In the case of election surveying, surveys conducted closer to the actual voting date are likely to be more accurate than ones conducted months earlier.

What were the quality controls?

The research company should describe the methods by which the survey was conducted. This includes by phone, mobile, in-person, internet, IVR, mixed mode, etc. They should also describe any strategies to encourage participation such as offering incentives. The research company should also be able to describe the processes they use to verify that those responding are legitimate respondents. This would include procedures used to identify fraudulent attempts to participate in a survey by lobby groups attempting to influence results or by individuals seeking to gain access to the incentives.

Who is the survey intended to be representative of?

Is the survey intended to represent a nation, province, region or specific group (teachers, doctors, firefighters, etc.)? That is, what is the "population" or "universe" that the survey aims to represent? And is this the correct population for the question the survey is seeking to answer? A survey of a specific group will not represent the views of the broader population as a whole. Sometimes a specific group might be better than the entire population for a particular purpose. For a pre-election survey, the

population should only include those eligible and likely to vote in order to predict the outcome of an election.

How were the people chosen to participate in the survey?

Did everyone the survey was intended to represent have an equal chance of participating (a probability sample) or was the sample drawn without everyone in the population having a chance to participate (a non-probability sample). A non-probability sample would include a panel where individuals were recruited to a list to participate in surveys. For non-probability samples, information should be provided on how the individuals were selected and any known biases.

What is the margin of error?

The margin of error is the likelihood that a randomly selected sample will represent the entire population (for example the likelihood that 1500 randomly selected individuals will represent a population of 30 million). A margin of error helps you interpret the results. It cannot account for those who should have been included such as hard to reach populations like those people without both a landline and a cell phone. A margin of error does not apply to surveys using a non-probability sample. Keep in mind that while the margin of error is often the first thing people think of when evaluating a survey, it is only one of many sources of error. For any particular survey it might not be the biggest source of error.

What measures were taken to ensure the survey reflects the population it intends to represent?

For both probability and non-probability samples, it is important that measures were taken to ensure the survey is representative of the population. Weighting should be used to correct the sample for ways it is not representative. When weighting is used, tables showing the weighted and unweighted number of responses should be reviewed to evaluate the influence of weighting on the final results. Known biases in a sample and other limitations that cannot be corrected for should also be stated. An example would be a pre-election survey where there is a large number of undecided voters. If the undecided voters all shift to one candidate, could that impact the prediction?

How can you triangulate research insight?

If other surveys have been conducted on the same topic, it is good practice to compare results. If the surveys were conducted at different times, differences could represent a shift in public opinion. If the surveys were conducted at the same time, see if the results are similar. If they are not, the differences should be explored further. Are they related to different survey methods, question wording or something else?

The survey looks good based on the questions above. Should I report on it?

Yes-absolutely. Reputable surveying organizations consistently do great work and public opinion surveys, when conducted correctly, are the most effective way of measuring the views of a population. While occasionally public opinion shifts after the close of a survey, an analysis of 11,000 polls from the last 4 Canadian federal elections prepared by Jon Puleston for ESOMAR found that the average absolute error for polls conducted within 5 days of the election was under 2%.

Additional Resources for Journalists on reporting on Surveys

CRIC Public Opinion Research Standards and Disclosure Requirements

ESOMAR/WAPOR Guidelines on Public Opinion Surveys and Published Surveys

AAPOR Journalist Cheat Sheet for Understanding Surveys

Poynter News University Course: Understanding and Interpreting Surveys

ESOMAR – Information and resources on polling