



AIRFOIL

Elevating credibility through  
**research:**

Gaining the trust of your audiences

Back in the days of the ivy-tipped campus and ivory-tower characters, few Americans questioned the validity of research. The nation's leading universities, medical centers, think tanks and government agencies were the respected sources of facts concerning how we live, work and play the way we do; how we will do so in the future; and what should or could be done about it all.

Today, however, research results are released by just about every corporation, association, agency, political party, social-action group and aspiring entrepreneur around the world. Their reputed findings are always at our fingertips, populating every news site on the Internet and filling every broadcast news and entertainment program. Instant, non-scientific polls are positioned next to meticulously developed research studies. Even polls on the results of other polls are not uncommon.

To make matters worse, the compacting of news stories and attention spans in today's media sometimes makes the source of the research difficult to identify; and the weight assigned to research projects by broadcast and print media generally is determined by the degree to which the survey topic or results appear bizarre, entertaining or threatening, rather than by their validity or importance. Much less often do media outlets revisit research results that are later called into question or directly refuted.

Consumers and business buyers have become increasingly skeptical of all research as a result of the voluminous, vivid and too-frequent vacuous research findings to which they are exposed. In this type of environment, how can organizations elevate the credibility of their research projects to gain the trust of their audiences? In addition, how can consumers and businesses determine if the research they are examining is reliable?

"The value of research extends only as far as the audience is willing to extend its trust," says Christopher Yoon, director of research for Airfoil Public Relations. "Individuals and businesses should and do take into account a number of factors

for analyzing and validating research. Companies that are able to build on these factors, work diligently and cautiously on their research projects and intelligently market the resulting information can stand out from the pseudo-research that produces background static in the media environment."

When preparing a research project, marketers can build more credibility into their endeavor by asking themselves a series of questions that position the research appropriately with the consumer, and consumers can judge the value of the research results by considering a separate, but related, series of validity factors.

"It's all about credibility," says Dr. Matthew Seeger, professor of public relations and chair of the communications department at Wayne State University. "Research projects must be carefully constructed so that both bias and unintended sources of variance are removed or reduced."

## Marketer's overview: Success factors

### Getting back to basics –

Too often, companies are caught up in the speed of daily operations and will jump to conduct research even before the most fundamental questions are asked:

What are the goals?

How will the results be used?

More often than not, answering these questions will direct the design of the research project, such as a survey questionnaire, in addition to determining the methodology for execution. As a rule of thumb, broader statements and extensive projections necessitate a representative sample of the whole universe of respondents. Moreover, research often is viewed only as an expense when marketers also should be considering the additional profits it can generate. Therefore, they should ask:

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### Finding the right partner –

Where, then, do you begin? Budgetary constraints are always a concern, but engaging research requires an open mind. If you knew the results from a research study would provide your company mission-critical information, how much would you be willing to pay? Certainly, the larger firms (e.g. ACNielsen) will bring a considerable degree of credibility to the table as a result of their brand awareness. Smaller organizations, however, (e.g. Michigan-based Intellitrends) can provide the same data at a lower cost and higher customer-service levels.

### Managing the process –

Companies often feel that, once the process has been started, it is time to sit back, relax and wait for the data to roll in. That attitude is certain to hinder a productive outcome. Research projects should be managed like any other client/customer project. In managing the process, keep these tips in mind:

- Keep records for the editing process of the survey instrument. It is easy to confuse various versions and implement the wrong one.
- Schedule weekly update calls. It is important to stay ahead of unpleasant surprises. Therefore, it is critical to maintain regular and open communications among all parties. Depending on the timeline of the project, more frequent calls (even daily) may be necessary.
- After you have had a chance to review the results and the research team has presented the findings, follow up with additional questions. Researchers are too close to the data; and, for the most part, they don't understand what's interesting to the public or media. Determining that is your job.

### Going to market –

The approach for disseminating the information will be dictated largely by how it will be used and to whom it is targeted. If the

intent is to use some of the statistics for consumer lifestyle publications, for example, the information should be “fun” or engaging with little focus on academic validity. However, if the intent is to produce white papers for sales and marketing support, the content should be more academic, with reference to sample size, validity, and other factors that support the research findings.

## Consumer and business buyers overview: Smart shopping

### Getting through the clutter –

As the consumer or buyer, what should you be examining in research you encounter? The answer to this question really depends on what you plan to do with this information and is closely related to the credibility of the results. Will you use it simply for leisure reading or for critical business decisions? The more important the decision, the more time you should spend reviewing the validity of what the marketer is proposing with the research. Other areas for consideration include:

- Who is funding the research, and what biases might the funding source generate in the findings?
- What methods and procedures were employed, and how might these influence the conclusions?
- What kind of research has this same organization carried out in the past that pertains to the current topic and marketplace?
- How old is the data, and might more current data produce significantly different findings?
- Was the research qualitative (based on relatively large numbers of people) or quantitative (small groups giving opinions and suggestions)?

### It's all in the words –

Terminology used by researchers sometimes can appear ambiguous to the average business person, but the following

terms have specific meanings for the researcher—and for the validity of the results:

- **Mean** – The sum of the values for a criterion divided by the number of responses. This is also referred to as the average.
- **Median** – The value below which 50% of the values fall.
- **Mode** – The value that occurs most frequently. This is most useful in reviewing the frequency of responses.
- **Validity** – The degree to which a study measures what it was intended to measure. Systematic and random errors (e.g. in the sample or survey instrument) must be eliminated to ensure validity.
- **Reliability** – The degree to which a study is consistent from one application to the next. In other words, how consistent are the results time after time?
- **Significance** – The degree to which the results are not just a chance occurrence. Conclusions that are significant are more likely to have applications in other circumstances.

### What does this mean –

Don't be afraid to contact the researching organization.

Most organizations are more than happy to answer all your questions and will send you the full study in some cases.

You may wish to present clarifying questions like these:

- Is the sample size not only large enough but also relevant to the conclusions? (e.g., does medical research on men apply to women?)
- Can the results from this specific research be generalized or not?
- Is this a baseline study, or can results be compared to a previous baseline?
- Was an appropriate control group used in testing-oriented research?

Specialized types of research may demand additional validity factors. For example, a study of the sound quality of one manufacturer's portable music players versus those of competitors might carry more credibility if it simulated the highly variable real-world environment in which such players operate, rather than the output from a lab-bench test.

Professor Seeger notes that using research that later turns out to be flawed or biased can actually harm a company's image: "If a company is using results that are biased or, worse, intentionally misleading, they risk damaging consumer trust."

Companies that employ validity factors extensively in their research are much more likely not only to be heard and believed in the marketplace, but also to find their marketing messages accepted by their customers and clients, gaining a tremendous competitive advantage. •

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