

Newsmaker Survey: Designing Research for Public Release.

Research created specifically for public release does not look or feel like traditional market research used for internal proprietary strategic planning. The ultimate goal of the “newsmaker” research is to release the results into the public domain to create conversation. Creating news isn’t easy, often causing the initial phase of survey design to be more time-consuming and challenging as well as more creative (and maybe even fun)!

This article will set aside what tends to be the common dogma in the research world – and instead consider research in a new light with the key aim to create content-rich marketing materials. The goal is to design strategically sound but widely appealing data that attracts and engages a target audience. So, no more open-ended questions. No more ranges. And no more lead-in descriptions.

by Laura Light, VeraQuest, Practice Leader: Public Relations

Inspire Action

To obtain the desired results it is critical to understand the definition of newsmaker research. Newsmaker research – also called leadership surveys, promotional surveys, research for public or media release – is typically focused around issues that the client and their key audience(s) care about. It is designed first and foremost to generate public attention and build a brand’s reputation by:

- Creating interest in a product or service
- Strengthening a company’s image as a leader in a particular field
- Improving a flagging reputation
- Emphasizing key messages from sales and marketing materials
- Supporting advocacy work with public officials
- Addressing the needs of a new constituency or audience

The data that emanates from the research must be relevant and valuable and ideally move a consumer to action.

Learn and Have Fun

In general, research design is often the most challenging, but most creative step in the research process. It’s challenging because once the questions are written (and finalized) and put into the field, there is no turning back. Therefore, it is extremely important not to short-change the design process as the questions form the foundation of the entire project.

The questionnaire establishes the framework for everything that a client wants to know, and the brainstorming process – while time-consuming – if done well, is also illustrative and worthwhile. It is critical to understand what is relevant to the target audience; what information is missing from any already conducted research on the topic; and ultimately how the research will support the client’s needs. In any market research study, a valuable exercise is to write down a few of one’s provocative headlines or key messages (i.e., imagine anything coming out of the data, what would it be?), and work backwards to the survey questions. While this process appears self-evident, many clients do not do it, and the data is always richer and more meaningful on the back end if they do.

Move Consumer to Action

Create interest.

Strengthen
leadership image.

Improve
a flagging reputation.

Emphasize
key messages.

Support
advocacy work.

Address
audience needs.

Reach for the Stars

Specifically when thinking about the design of newsmaker research (and listening to feedback from focus groups and anecdotes from clients), words consistently emerge like:

- Fresh
- Meaningful
- Powerful
- Surprising
- Long-lasting

Honestly, with newsmaker research, clients want it all. And while their dollars may be thin, their aspirations remain deep.

Think Fresh

We will focus specifically on the word “fresh” – by definition a key goal of news-maker work. The need to be innovative or original has a huge impact on the actual design of the questionnaire. A newsmaker survey needs to stand out to make news, and therefore one cannot divert back to the “same old same old” in design. That’s why it is essential to be inventive on the question wording, the response choices and the overall survey structure. You may want to encourage others to review the questionnaire (maybe even hold a brainstorm session) to generate new ideas.

Consider: Scales

The questionnaire content needs to be appealing both to the public and the media who are looking for a hook, and the words that are used will be reflected back in all marketing materials. Therefore, it is worthwhile to take the time to consider each and every scale, and abandon standard scales for something fresher and more compelling that will give a study some flavor that others don’t have.

Take the following question that was drafted for a large pharmaceutical client using a fairly standard 4-point scale:

How would you rate your doctor’s bedside manner – excellent, good, fair, or poor?

While this question might work well for internal purposes especially when comparing bedside manner to other characteristics, ultimately the PR team decided to change it for newsmaker purposes to read:

How would you rate your doctor’s bedside manner on a scale in which “A” means excellent, “B” means very good, “C” means average, “D” means below average, and “F” means failing?

The second option offered more flexibility on the back end for how the team used the results.

By collapsing words together, as in:

Most Americans rate their doctor’s bedside manner as very good or excellent,

and using a grade-point scale with which most Americans are familiar:

Most Americans rate their doctor’s bedside manner as a “B+” or higher,
the target audience is more quickly engaged.

Needs for Newsmaker Data:

- *Fresh*
- *Meaningful*
- *Powerful*
- *Surprising*
- *Long-lasting*

**Cannot divert back to the
“same old same old” in design.**

Similarly, a fairly standard frequency scale like “often, sometimes, rarely, never” is made more appealing if switched to more captivating language like “obsessed, interested, intrigued, indifferent.” These words may need to be clarified with some descriptors so respondents are all thinking about the choices in the same way, but in the long run it’s important to look for opportunities like this to freshen a survey’s scales.

Consider: Analyses

As with the question wording, fresh analysis can also drive a newsmaker study to be a success, and in general, it’s a useful strategy not to rely on demographic analysis alone.

Everyone (who has ever looked at or been responsible for analyzing a data set) reports on the total sample and then delves a little deeper to look at fairly straight-forward demographic differences by age, gender and even region. But, one can set a study apart by throwing in some psychographics for contrast. These can range in tone and complexity and should relate in some concrete way to the overall topic of the study. Some examples might be: how do doers differ from thinkers? Or technophobes from technocrats?

Psychographic questions often have an attitudinal feel that cover interests, opinions and values, such as:

- How well do the following characteristics describe you?
- How important are the following ... to you?
- Do you prefer or ...?
- How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Questions can also cover or be combined with behaviors and more factually objective information like hobbies, activities, lifestyle and product usage to create a profile of who a respondent is.

As an example, a non-profit client recently aimed to demonstrate excellence in the social media space and obtain a more complete understanding of social media usage to make smart decisions about its own marketing endeavors. The research firm (partnered with the non-profit) organized the data to create a set of segments based not only on how frequently Americans access social media, but also the quality of their interaction. A behavioral and an attitudinal question (shown below) were combined to arrive at the final set of segments (architects, creators, transmitters, spectators and bystanders) that helped explain *how* social media and personality intersect:

- About how often do you... ? Scale: several times each day, once each day, 3-5 times each week, 1-2 times each week, 2-3 times each month, once each month, once every 2-3 months, less than once every 3 months, never
 - Create and post something online (e.g., on a social networking site like Facebook or a personal blog)
 - Critique or comment on something you see online (e.g., news article, blog post)
 - Forward something you see online (e.g., video, news article)
 - Collect or store something you find online for future use
 - View, read or listen to something online without actively commenting, saving or forwarding

Psychographics

Defines “respondent”.

Used to create population segments that are not demographic.

Frequently relates to overall topic.

Covers attitudes like interests, opinions, and values or behaviors like hobbies, lifestyle, and product usage.

- How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Scale: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree
 - I am very well-informed about the world and current events
 - I am confident in my ability to get things done and be successful
 - I am very happy in my life right now
 - I have a lot of influence over decisions that affect me
 - I am strongly connected to my community

In the end, the social media segments were used to shed light on the rest of the data about online activity, privacy, security, happiness, anxiety, isolation, and a whole host of other variables – and offered key insights into the world and decision-making of social media users.

An important and perhaps self-evident note when planning to use a psychographic filter (such as that above) as a lens by which to analyze results, it is essential to think through and incorporate the appropriate question wording in the design phase of the project. It is nearly impossible to do so using hindsight.

Consider: Indices

Trends are extremely powerful in the world of data because they offer fresh insights that are unique to one company. Trends can emanate from a single question or a series of questions, perhaps rolled together in some sort of index.

Speaking of the latter, indices can be especially constructive to get a birds-eye view of an issue that only one client owns. An index offers innovative and somewhat cost-effective information, but also provides longevity as the index is measured over time and reports trends in attitudes and perceptions as they rise and fall. Even when an index remains static, it offers useful information about the world. While outside forces like the economy or politics may change, the public’s “feel good” attitudes or consumer confidence in an index may stay the same – or vice versa – which can be very illustrative when making predictions about spending, saving or other consumer behaviors.

However, in order to leverage an index successfully, a client must have a clear understanding of exactly what needs to be measured (e.g., loyalty, commitment, satisfaction). The most important part of creating an index will be to determine the core set of questions that will be asked on a regular basis (and what they will measure). The scale for the index can vary (for example, from 0 to 10 or -100 to +100) but as with everything in survey research, the wording matters.

Two very well-known indices are: the Consumer Confidence Index published by the Conference Board and the University of Michigan Consumer Sentiment Index run by the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. Both measure the degree of economic optimism that consumers express through saving and spending.

Ultimately, as with these two examples, the index yields a single number, which as mentioned offers a “bird’s eye view” of the core issue, but it can also be valuable to include some peripheral questions that evolve with each wave. These other questions will lend greater texture or depth to the data and help illuminate a client’s editorial viewpoint on why the index may (or may not) be changing.

An index offers a bird’s-eye view of the issue. It is cost-effective, innovative, flexible, long-lasting, and owned by one client and one client only.

The most powerful part of the index is that the media, the public and other key audiences will come to expect it, and it can be published in many flexible ways, such as creating a website quiz and automatically populating the results for individual visitors to compare their own responses to the total sample.

Consider: Celebrities

One of the most common and enticing (but often misconstrued) design choices in the “fresh” category involve celebrity questions. These questions are like apples in the Garden of Eden, tempting but ultimately lead to regret. Here are a few recent examples:

- a CPG (consumer package goods) client wanted to ask consumers “which celebrity’s health care regime would you most want to copy?”
- a fashion magazine wondered “who is America’s celebrity style role model?”
- a restaurant chain wanted to know “which celebrity would you most want to share a meal with?”

Clearly, all of these questions on the face of it are interesting and may have some immediate media appeal. However, celebrity questions are “fresh” only in the most narrow and obvious sense of the word, but often are not newsmakers: long-lasting, powerful or often even surprising. While topical, celebrity questions have a short shelf life, and therefore it is often best not to use celebrities in this type of research

Stand Out in a Crowd

Finally, newsmaker research should never be bland. The research company, the PR firm and the client need to think first about what is most important to say on the back end and make sure to reflect these goals in the brainstorming around design. Then as a second step, get creative either in the question wording or the response choices, and/or the way conclusions are built from the data, for example:

- Abandon standard scales for more original wording
- Throw in psychographic questions to liven up the analysis
- Consider questions that can be trended for future insights
- Create indices to own data that no one else has
- Think long and hard about the use and shelf life of a celebrity question

These are just a few of the ways to spice up research and create content-rich design and analysis. But there are certainly many more...

These learnings will continue to be shared throughout this series on newsmaker work to ensure that any research created by PR professionals is... fresh, meaningful, powerful, surprising and long-lasting.



About VeraQuest

VeraQuest is a global provider of consumer and shopper insights. By using a creative blend of online omnibus data collection, comprehensive consultation and “un-omnibus-like” flexibility, VeraQuest furnishes incredibly rich, customized solutions for a fraction of the price charged by traditional custom research companies. Moreover,

our keen understanding of how to leverage omnibus surveys to create effective newsmaker studies as well as other studies for public release enables our PR clients to maximize their research investment.

VeraQuest provides a standard sample of 1,500 respondents in three business days, with a complimentary PowerPoint report two business days later.

Celebrity questions are “fresh” only in the most narrow and obvious sense of the word.

Get Noticed

Abandon standard scales for more original wording.

Use psychographic questions to liven up the analysis.

Include questions trended for future insights.

Create indices to own exclusive data.

Question the use and shelf life of a celebrity question.

Peter Gold, CEO, VeraQuest

With more than 25 years of syndicated and custom research experience, Peter possesses a broad scope of research expertise. He is the chief architect of several research products, including one of the country's leading omnibus services. His broad range of research experience lends itself particularly well to the world of omnibus research where clients tend to have an extremely diverse set of needs.

Peter's background as a practice leader has enabled him to develop a business model that is rich in client-centric benefits while simultaneously being very cost-effective. Peter earned a BSBA from the University of Florida and holds an MBA from Boston College.

**Laura Light,
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With almost 20 years in the research industry, Laura Light has developed a unique specialty around designing surveys and analyzing data for public release. Formerly the Vice President of Public Relations Research for a well-known public policy survey organization, Laura is an adjunct consultant for VeraQuest in support of social media endeavors for PR and research.

Prior to her role as vice president, she worked at a smaller boutique market research firm and at several non-profit organizations spearheading internal and public research. Laura graduated from Harvard University with a Master's in Public Policy in 1996 and from Northwestern University with a Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies in 1991.