

••• public relations research

Survey says...

How to design research for public release

| By Laura Light and Peter Gold



snapshot

Planning on using survey findings as fodder for a press release? Take these tips into consideration to make sure the information has impact, relevance and longevity.

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 “newsmaker” research – also called leadership surveys, promotional surveys, research for public or media release – 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.

To obtain the desired results it is critical to understand the definition of newsmaker research. Newsmaker research 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; and 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.

No turning back

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



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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.

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

We will focus specifically on the word "fresh" – by definition a key goal of newsmaker 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 brainstorming 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 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, which was drafted for a large pharmaceutical client using a fairly standard four-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.

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 straightforward demographic differences by age, gender and even region. But you 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, partnering 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

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 is that 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 bird's-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.

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 Web site 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 involves celebrity questions. These questions are like apples in the Garden of Eden – they're tempting but ultimately lead to regret. Here are a few recent examples:

- A CPG 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 and often are not newsmakers (i.e., they're not long-lasting, powerful or often even that 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.

Never be bland

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.

To recap our top tips, you should:

- 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; and
- 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 the key is to ensure that any research created by PR professionals is fresh, meaningful, powerful, surprising and long-lasting. 🍏

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