

Survey Research Ethics

Individuals taking part in surveys should expect certain rights with regard to privacy, confidentiality, honesty, and respect. Yet, the lines are often grayed due to some who purport to conduct surveys and others who cleverly disguise their work as research.

A couple weeks ago a friend mentioned that she had received a telephone call asking her to take part in a survey on issues relating to the environment. Having some interest in this area, my friend agreed to participate. She told me that after just a few questions it became clear that this was not a survey for "research" purposes. Instead, she felt that the questions were leading and the real purpose behind the survey was to influence public opinion rather than to measure it. Coming from deep Scottish stock, my friend hung in there. "Sure enough," she said, "at the end of this so called survey they asked me for a donation." "I gave 'em a real Scottish blessing," she added.

My friend was the victim of what is commonly referred to in the research business as "frugging" - *fund raising under the guise of a survey*. Closely related are the problems of "sugging" - *selling under the guise of a survey* and "pugging" - *politicking under the guise of a survey*. All three are clear violations of the ethical practices of legitimate survey researchers and serve to make the acquisition of quality data from members of the public even more challenging than it already is.

Several governing bodies exist in the market and opinion research fields, and all have established likeminded codes of professional ethics and practices. For the more than twenty years I have been in the survey research business, I have followed the code of ethics of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). Above all, this code acknowledges the rights of survey respondents and makes it clear those practices that are out of bounds. Chief among these is the recognition that, aside from the decennial census taken by the U.S. Census Bureau every ten years and several other surveys, participation in a survey is strictly voluntary. The code further states that each person invited to take part in a survey shall be provided with a sufficient description of the study so that "an informed and free decision" can be made about participating.

Related to my friend's recent experience, the code of ethics explicitly states that no survey or research of a similar nature shall be

misrepresented under the pretense of conducting research that attempts to sell to the respondent, raise money, or campaign for a political candidate or issue. None of us should have to endure a sales pitch or a solicitation for money for something that has been presented as a survey. The sponsor of the environmental telephone survey appears guilty of at least one major infraction.

AAPOR, in its published code of professional ethics, also plainly states that a respondent's privacy will be respected. Responses given in surveys are generally considered to be confidential unless stated otherwise. According to AAPOR's code of ethics, "Unless the respondent waives confidentiality for specified uses, we shall hold as privileged and confidential all information that might identify a respondent with his or her responses."

A number of important legal proceedings have taken place in which surveys and their results have been a party. AAPOR's code candidly points out that even in the midst of legal proceedings a researcher remains bound to the obligation to hold in confidence any information that could identify a respondent or compromise his or her anonymity.

Moreover, the AAPOR code of professional ethics directs that researchers "avoid practices or methods that may harm, humiliate, or seriously mislead survey respondents." This item can take on a number of things, but its main point is that all survey respondents are worthy of nothing less than the utmost respect. This includes being truthful about the length of a survey, its content and its purpose. It also encompasses the careful handling of responses - including those of a sensitive nature.

Legitimate survey research organizations and the participants in their studies both gain when fair and ethical research procedures are practiced. The research organization collects sound and worthwhile data while respondents may subsequently be the direct beneficiaries of enhanced public policy, improved customer service, or better products. Unethical research practices pose a real threat to these positive returns! 

From the Field...

A summary of recent survey findings from across the country.



While more than three out of four American adults practice recycling in their own home, 23% still do not. It is generally thought that younger people are more likely to recycle. Yet, the survey shows that 30% of adults 18 to 30 do not recycle, while the proportion dips to 19% among those 62 years of age and older. The most prominent reasons given for not recycling are that it takes too much effort and it will not make that much difference.

Source: Harris Interactive



As Barry Bonds inches closer to the major league record for career home runs, a record currently held by Hank Aaron, U.S. adults are only mildly enthusiastic towards Bonds' accomplishment. Given the allegations about Bonds and his use of performance enhancing drugs - including steroids, only 18% of survey respondents believe that if he surpasses Aaron's record that Bonds should be the true record holder. Fifty-three percent say Aaron should remain the true record holder, while 29% are not sure or do not care.

Source: NBC News/Wall St. Journal



When considering the future care of aging parents, more children today have a greater concern with the **cost** of that care over the **quality** of available care. Fifty-seven percent of U.S. adults between the ages of 42 and 61 who have a living parent think the alternatives are good with respect to the choices of *quality* health care. This compares to just one-third who think their parents will have good choices when it comes to senior health care *expenses*.

Source: ABC News/USA Today