



10 Steps to Quality Research

There is little doubt that over the past decade company research staffs and budgets have constricted, while at the same time management is demanding more and more information in a shorter timeframe. Therefore, it is not surprising that there has been a significant increase in the amount of research that is based on compromise. It is common to hear things like: "We need something quick, what can you get for us by next week?" Or, "we only have \$5,000, what can you do for us?" Further, these challenges are compounded by a commonly held misperception that "Some research is better than no research at all."

The problem has been exacerbated by the amount of "convenience research" that is being conducted over the Internet. Sometimes it seems like every website has a survey running and every software developer and ISP is getting into the marketing research business.

If you are interested in getting the most out of your research dollars, the following ten steps are offered:

1. **Define your objectives and decision criteria upfront.** Be sure that you can answer questions like: "What is the purpose of the research?" and "What decisions will be made based on the results?" Make sure you have agreement with management on these issues before beginning any research effort.
2. It is also critical to **determine the criteria, which will be used in evaluating the findings.** Whether it's a certain level of top-box or top-two-box rating score, a statistically significant overall preference win, etc., the criteria should be established upfront.
3. Spend quality time and effort to **develop a concise listing of the information to be obtained.** This is not the time to throw in every question anyone in your organization has ever wanted to know. Focus your list down to only the essential information required to meet your objectives. Remember, shorter is better; the quality of the respondent's answers declines significantly after ten minutes.
4. **Don't let price or time schedule dictate your research design.** If budgets are tight or the timing is short, let the suppliers know it in advance, so they can design the research accordingly.
5. **Always pre-test the survey instrument.** No matter how much time is spent honing the survey instrument, it is still important to take some time to test it among potential respondents.

6. **Be sure you are sampling the correct audience.** Just interviewing anyone who answers the phone or visits your website, can lead to erroneous results. It does not have to take more time and effort up front to define your target and develop the appropriate screening criteria.
7. **Interviewers should be thoroughly trained and briefed on the project, including a familiarization with any technical terms.** Respondents are generally willing to give their opinions, but poorly trained interviewers tend to turn-off respondents and decrease the quality of the information.
8. **Monitor the progress of the data collection.** Regardless of whether it is a phone or online survey, never just put a project in the field and wait for the quota to be completed, conduct daily checks to make sure that the quotas, incidence, and data are all within specifications.
9. **Develop a detailed tabulation plan.** Much thought should be put into every tab plan and its development should begin before the data collection is completed. Avoid cross-tabulating every variable; focus your tab plan on the variables that will assist you in explaining the results.
10. **Be sure the written analysis is clear and concise and addresses the upfront objectives of the project.** Also, be sure that the decision criteria have been adhered to in supporting your findings. Finally, don't be afraid to report bad news.

Of course, each research project presents it's own unique challenges and, inevitably, unexpected complications. However, through careful planning, forethought, and adhering to these ten steps, impediments to the success of your project will be substantially mitigated.