

Marketing News

SEPT. 27, 1999

WWW.AMA.ORG

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION

MARKET RESEARCH • *It's all about relationships*

Design philosophies to support the front line

by JONATHAN SORENSEN

Here's the situation: Consumers don't want to talk to us. They perceive market research as an annoyance and intrusion into their busy lives; consequently, response rates have plummeted over the years. Compounding this consumer reaction are continuing legislative initiatives to squash telephone interviewing. We can't do anything about the fact that people have less free time, but—national lifestyle aside—we must find better ways to *sell the interview to the consumer*.

We know market research is a complex science, beginning with manufacturer needs in product development or even earlier. But consumer perceptions of market research are created by one little phone call, mall intercept, focus group or questionnaire. The greater portion of market research is out-of-sight, out-of-mind for the consumer, as it should be, making the interviewer and the questionnaire our front-line representation. To design more saleable interviews, we need to ask ourselves, "How do we look from the consumer's perspective?"

Let's face it: We're far more adept with the language and needs of the manufacturer than those of the consumer, and as a result, we often make great impositions on the consumer while attempting to please the client. We allow interview designs that are inconsiderate of the consumer's time constraints and use questions incomprehensible to them. For example, regardless of how badly a researcher wants to know 25 pages of information written in detailed trade jargon, it's abusive to insist that the consumer hold still to deliver opinions when they don't really know or care about the subject. People like to talk about their likes and dislikes; they don't like to prepare an on-the-spot thesis about product variations they never thought about before.

Interviews that wander over these lines contribute to consumers' negative perceptions of market research. Maybe there are other issues at play here, but why not honestly address these issues the next time we design an interview or accept an interview design?

Would cash incentives help? This is intelligent problem solving, but it doesn't improve the consumer's interview experience. Besides, this approach degrades data quality: People may be willing to invest a little more time if they are reimbursed; however, money changes motives. Psychologists have found that people feel obligated to produce "useful" information when money is the incentive. Furthermore, unless we never draw from the same pool twice, reimbursement gradually will develop a cadre of cooperative and motivated respondents. So in the short term, we may get watered-down responses, but in the long term, we probably will produce "professional respondents."

How about a public relations campaign? A PR campaign might convince the public of market research's theoretical benefits, but if the actual experience is annoying, what good would that do? Also, we have worked to draw a distinct line between market research and abusive lookalikes such as "sugging"—or "selling under the guise"—of market research, but has anyone shown that consumers really understand or care about the line between surveying and selling? Actually, a recent Council for Marketing and Opinion Research report finds that providing reassurance that the interview is not a sales attempt does nothing to lower refusal rates. So honestly, our attitude is wrong if we think we can solve the problem with a public relations campaign. We don't lack PR; we lack saleable interviews.

Also, we shouldn't forget that the interviewer is an intimate participant in the consumer's interview experience. The interviewers are the face and personality of market research, yet these people often are the industry's lowest-paid and least-trained employees. Most interviewers competently can deliver a question, but few are trained in the basic human relations that sell the consumer on the interview. The quality of field teams is a complex issue, but this shouldn't stop us from training the interviewers to approach the consumer as quality control representatives or as consumer advocates.

Beyond human relations training, designing saleable interviews really would help our field teams. While the interview is designed in office time and space, it's presented by the interviewer in consumer time and space. With some interviews exceeding 50 or even 100 questions, who are we kidding? The prophets of old couldn't hold peoples' attention that long, and they had miracles and divine messages. Our interview designs must acknowledge that our field teams are facing the real live consumer, not a paper ideal. A short, relevant interview enables our field teams to better engage the consumers' opinions and interest for the interview's duration.

An excellent method for developing consumer-friendly instincts and language is to spend some time in the marketplace where they shop. Here, the fragility of our relationship with the consumer helps reassert consumer reality and reasonable interview expectations. This is "consumer country"; if we come speaking a foreign language, we're ignored. If our interviews are not designed to fit their language and experience, we fail as translators and place undue strain on our front line. It might sound rough, but if we can succeed with consumers here, we can succeed anywhere.

We want the consumer, after an interview, to feel that we will represent their hopes, fears and aspirations to the manufacturer; after all, that's what the manufacturer wants, too. To avoid souring the population, don't bring absurdly lengthy questionnaires to the consumer or prod them about minute gradations or variations of product qualities. Be kind to the interviewer, and design interviews that are reasonably presentable. Train the interviewer to act as both a sympathetic ear and consumer voice. With this reality and understanding in mind, the consumer may come to realize that we really *are* the consumer advocate, not a pesky, inexplicable intrusion.

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