

Case article Hard to reach groups.....really?

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Clients can be unrealistically demanding at times; like when they want a survey which is representative and which also seeks to encompass 'hard to reach' groups. Now, in my 'Big Ask' survey workshops I make a big play at the start of the day to get participants to really appreciate, to really really appreciate the importance of understanding why they are doing any particular survey. If it is to be representative of the local population, then fine; if it is to seek out (as well) the 'socially excluded', or to be more precise, more PC, and maybe even a bit post-election denialist, the 'non-socially included' then that too is fine, but it changes how we go about doing things. Because, to be realistic, one survey cannot address both angles without compromising its integrity and statistical basis – see my earlier Case Note on the Quota Quandary.

Hard ...?

Perhaps the hardest group to reach is that group we call 'the representative sample', the real Mr and Mrs Joe Averages. But just because it is relatively easy to collect their responses in numbers large enough to offer comforting statistical robustness this doesn't mean that the sample is as good as it could be; apart from looking at demographic quotas and clumsy classifications we have no idea of just how representative that sample is of the behaviour, attitudes and aspirations of the real Joe Public.

Maybe the one-legged Chinaman is hard to reach, not because there are so few of them, not because they don't want to be reached, but simply because they are easy to identify. The people who are difficult to identify, those who are difficult to differentiate from the herd, are the ones who are truly hard to reach. And they are not the drug addicts, nor the single parents, nor travellers, nor young people, nor ex-cons., but rather they are the 50+% of contacts who refuse to take part in our representative surveys.

And it should never be forgotten that these so-called hard to reach groups do not in general live in splendid isolation. Young people have music, magazines, text messaging; single parents have their mates; drug addicts have their networks.....they are all being 'reached' in some meaningful ways.

...to reach...?

So, if they are not that hard to find, why do we think they are hard to reach? The dictionary gives us the answer. A definition of 'to reach' is 'to make contact or communication with'. Does this mean then that our groups may not be that hard to contact, but may be very hard to communicate with? And since communication is a two way process, and almost by definition we are the ones wanting to do this communicating, then maybe the problem lies with us, the questioners, the 'powers that be' that seek answers.....to our questions. And there's the rub.

While I have always maintained that the four basic elements of survey design - survey universe, sample size, questionnaire, and fieldwork method - are all of equal importance in conducting a successful survey, it could be argued that the questionnaire may be just that wee bit more important because it is the direct interface between the commissioner and the respondent; it's the communication thing. What is more, it is not just about the questions, it concerns the opening words or sentences presented to target respondents where the reason for the survey is set out. In many instances survey execs. can be very remiss in both their positioning of the survey, and its questions, in that everything is designed and presented from the point of view of the commissioner rather than the respondent.

The more isolated or different or 'hard to reach' that people feel themselves to be then the less likely they are to engage in any meaningful way with a survey pitched at Mr and Mrs Average; from their

perspective the reason for taking part might be unconvincing, the issues could be irrelevant, and the means of contact, the fieldwork, may be uncomfortable or appear threatening. Perhaps we could think about having different introductions and question sequences designed for various types of respondent: this may seem like theoretical heresy but at least it forces one to consider just how important or not it is to get these 'hard to reach' on board.

And of course, it must be acknowledged that many 'hard to reach' people might choose to so be, and we have to learn to respect that.

...groups?

Perhaps the only 'group' we can be sure about in this context is that group of people who are pathologically opposed to surveys. While we don't know who these people are I hazard a guess that they are as likely to be white, middle-aged, middle class men as they are to be ex-cons., from an EMG background, or a teenager. To pick out the latter types of groups for special treatment is to ignore the large refusal rates amongst the 'easy to reach' group. Clearly such targeting is fine if the survey is concerned specifically with such people and their issues, but if it is related to achieving meaningful sub-cell sizes within an overall large sample then one has to ask whether a sample of 50 or a 100 is really enough to capture the average responses of a group which might share little or no real homogeneity apart from being Eastern European, or single or whatever criterion we have set for them. We have to be very careful: apart from possibly sharing attitudes towards prosthetics our 'group' of one-legged Chinamen may have very little in common.

There may be merit in replacing the term 'hard to reach group' with 'hard to reach individuals'; that is, it's not the contact that is the problem, it's our communicating – see my earlier Case Note on Incentives.

It's easy to make things hard, but hard to make things easy

Maybe we give up too easily and make things too hard. A properly drawn random sample will lead the research to (almost) all types of people. Forget the 'hard to reach groups'. Design the introduction and questions in such a way that they light up the eyes not only of the ex-con., the

addict, the loner, but also the 50+% of the general population who currently see no reason to take part.

Most of the articles written about hard to reach groups end up discussing the fieldwork options of snowballing (asking one respondent for the contact details of others like him/her) and using community groups, networks and leaders to generate contacts. While this is sensible and practical it implies that we must leave the arena of surveys and venture into the less controlled environs of consultation and engagement.

So, make sure that the aims of the survey and its method are clear and compatible. Then think individual, not group: that is, think respondent. Then decide whether it is 'survey' or 'consultation and/or engagement'.

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