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Case article	Reporting: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever"
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Dr Sandy Ochojna is an independent survey research advisor. Between 1986 and 2008 he was the Manchester-based director of several well-known international market research companies; for the ten years prior to that he was Passenger Manager at Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive in Glasgow. From time to time he feels compelled to set down his thoughts on topical survey issues.

Pearls

Doing a survey properly can be time-consuming, mind-numbing and soul-destroying. There is much to check, and check again, and throughout the process you must be always on your guard against becoming biased or leaning too much towards the 'views' or expectations of the client. So when you get to the end and have a written draft report there is the temptation, or at least I would sometimes succumb to the temptation, of giving it to the client with both barrels to let them see just how much pain and suffering had gone into their thirty pages of blood.

In my younger days I justified this action by claiming that 'Unless you dive for the oysters of knowledge you will never appreciate their pearls of wisdom."... so, forget an exec. summary at the front, read the whole thing! Now I know better.

For one, a research report is not a 'Whodunnit'. And for another, this is probably the only bit of the entire process in which the top brass will show even a modicum of interest. So while it might take you two weeks or even two months to analyse and write up the findings these guys will give it no more than ten minutes of reading time. Even I have learned to live with that.

The jewel in the crown

The final analytic report is the long term legacy of the survey, and is the measure by which the research and the researcher will come to be judged. It must be free-standing, clear, concise, unbiased and transparent; yes, just like a questionnaire. It is quite mind-boggling to think of all the separate pieces of data that make up even the simplest of survey databases hence it is the role of the report to take such myriad strands of data and turn them into a readable narrative.

We use statistics to spin the data into yarn, and we use analysis to weave the yarn into a story. And the pattern for this creation lies in the computer tabulations, not in the project brief or the client's whims. We must let the data tell the story. But with ten minutes of attention time, that story must be simple and convincing.

The rough diamond

The beginning of the report must establish succinctly two key aspects of the exercise;

- why the research was done
- and how it was done.

If you can define a problem then you are half way to solving it, hence the beginning of the report should set out a simple rationale for the survey. Summarising fieldwork method, dates, sampling, response rates, quotas, and any abnormalities encountered allows the reader to grasp very quickly what the research is about and to appreciate how apposite was the method used.

This helps the reader establish at the outset the degree of confidence he or she might place in the findings.

Cutting the stone; choosing the facets

Then you must set out to tell the story; and remember, the story line is defined by the computer tabulations, not by the order of questions in the questionnaire. And although it might not be a 'Whodunnit' every research report should have a plot, a thread that runs throughout seeking to tie everything together. If you can't find one, then your spinning or weaving

may be at fault ; your respondent (sub) groups or data sub-cells may be poorly defined, or your underlying story line doesn't work. A good way to check on this is to read your executive summary; if the sub-groups are easy to describe and the 'interesting' analyses emerges simply, then that's good. If however, you find you are talking about x% of those in group A who do B are just like y% in sub-group C with attribute D, then this is too complex to be assimilated in the '10 minute window' and is a sure sign that a simpler and more elegant segmentation lies undiscovered.

And you cannot steer around this issue by simply reeling off lists of statistically significant differences across sub-groups – that just smacks of laziness, and in many cases is just re-iterating some difference common to certain sub-groups. To conclude that a particular opinion or behaviour is more likely to be associated with respondents in one-person households, among respondents with a disability, among women, among social housing tenants, and among elderly people is really saying the same thing.....it's an old woman thing. Furthermore, many researchers find it hard to grasp that a statistically significant difference does not mean that the difference is of any analytic significance. So choosing and applying your reporting sub-groups, or segmenting the data, is crucial to the simplicity of your story.

The two major advantages that the report writer has over the reader is that the writer is much more conversant with the data, and the writer can run through several storylines before presenting the plot to the reader. Always apply the words of Keats and Occam. For Keats, in his Ode on a Grecian Urn,

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

..and with his razor Occam maintained that the simpler is the basis of the proof, the more likely it is to be correct. Therefore, the key to a good report is to ensure its simple elegance.

Setting the stone

A good report wins over the confidence of the reader from the outset. The best way to do this is to present what I call 'comfort statistics' in the opening chapters. These are results which the survey has produced but which the reader is likely to be aware of anyway. It normally takes the form of behavioural background data about say frequency of using a

service or doing something alongside basic demographic breakdowns. If the reader can accept these findings, then he or she will be much more amenable to consider any subsequent more 'exciting' results.

Again, the issue is one of gaining the reader's confidence. If you cannot achieve this, then you might as well 'cast your pearls before swine'.

Beware of the pasting of costume jewellery!

When I worked for Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive in Glasgow the Director General at the time 'taught' me one lesson that I have never forgotten and always apply. He told me to look at every paragraph, every sentence, every table and figure in a report and ask yourself "If this line were extracted from its context and printed on the front page of the Glasgow Evening Times, could you defend it?" That really does control the creative juices! It influences report writing in two ways. For one, every table and figure must be self-explanatory, with base sizes, the question, and axes defined. For another, it means that your analysis must be faultless; always write your report on the basis that the 'obvious' news story is the one that attacks your conclusions, so be cautious.

In my days in academia, when you could think at leisure and publish only when ready, it was common practice to write a paper and then lock it away in a drawer for six months. Coming back to it after that time was almost always a humbling experience. Written in the white hot heat of total immersion in the issue the paper would make assumptions, contain mistakes, make curious leaps of logic, and not always end up making sense. Nowadays such luxury has gone, and in the world of commercial research it was never there. But there are golden rules to apply.

Always, always have two people read your draft report; one should only be checking the data and checking the typing....that is, checking the quality of the yarn. The other should be checking only for sense....that is, checking the quality and elegance of the weaving. And this second reader should, ideally, have nothing to do with the project so that he or she can question inherent assumptions, spot gaps in the narrative, and generally assess how convincing or not is the plot.

And being cautious is a good thing. Being cautious means that you offer up your take on the analysis, but you also offer readers enough data in your report for them to test any hypotheses of their own. One sign of a good report is that the same set of respondent characteristics are shown

in all tables and figures, regardless of whether these sub-groups record differences or not. There are many instances when reporting that there are no significant differences can be just as important as identifying when there are. And showing the same set of sub-groups goes a long way to helping readers develop their own threads or go along with your own.

Polishing the stone

No matter what you do reports can be fairly tedious and boring affairs; that's the nature of the beast, the cloth can only be a strong or gaudy as its yarn. So, at all costs avoid the temptation to spin the story. The main report must be a free-standing and defensible account based on the data presented. If it turns out to be boring and pedantic, so be it. Indeed some clients like that. If you want to push the boundaries and go into flights of fancy, if you feel the need to gild the lily, then all you do is have a final section headed 'Discussion'. This makes it clear that it is separate from, but based upon, the report; it is an interpretation of the findings, not the findings per se. It is crucial that this distinction is made clear.

Diamonds are for ever

When setting out the executive summary, make sure that it demands no reference to the full report. Many readers' 10 minutes will confine them to your executive three pages, so this itself must be totally comprehensive in its own right. And it should set out both the objectives of the exercise, and the survey's findings with respect to these objectives; this is an excellent way of ensuring the key issues are addressed.

If your executive summary is a stilted series of observations or percentages, if the main story line is not coming across clearly, or the reader is left asking "So....?" then do the right thing, and start again, from the very beginning. The survey design might be masterful, the fieldwork method might be inspired and the questionnaire might be brilliant, but if the report is not elegant then it can all just turn to dust. But if it is, then perhaps the reader might reflect on some other words from Keats' in 'Written on a Blank Space',

> "Oh! What a power has white Simplicity!
>
> What mighty power has this gentle story."

He may have been talking about the empty page, but since I cannot see clients buying into that one, maybe we should concentrate on the second line. A report with an unforced and natural story line can indeed hold 'mighty power'!

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