

**Case article**                      The cuts? Just put on a brave face.

**Date**                                      December 2010

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## **The cuts? Just put on a brave face.**

Isn't it a bit curious that people are talking more and more these days about 'value for money' and 'fit for purpose' surveys in the public sector now that there is a recession and the big budget cuts have at last been announced? I would have thought that such aims should be embedded in the survey (or any other business) process regardless of the economic climate. But of course, the issue is not about the surveys themselves, it's about why we do them in the first place.

## **The vanity case**

Everything today has to be, or at least be seen to be, 'evidence-based'. But are there really that many decisions which have been influenced markedly by research findings? At its starkest survey results are received in one of two ways; there are results which support commissioners' predilections hence they are lauded, quoted and used; and then there are results which do not support such predilections, and these are rubbished and more often than not simply ignored. So why bother?

Let's be brutally honest for a moment and ask ourselves why it is that, for example in my field of public transport, the Victorians could build thousands of miles of railways across the UK, and hundreds of miles of tramways within their cities, while today it takes a generation or more to

build a new tramline or a high speed rail link to the Channel? It could be because the Victorians didn't go in for demand surveys and public consultation; rather entrepreneurs took business risks and just got on and got it done, and got it right more often than not, and certainly at least as often as we manage to do it today. Or it could be that the Victorians in power really wanted railways and tramways because it met their needs. Now I know we can explore such issues as the distribution of political power, benefit cost analysis, and winners and losers, but at the end of the day it does seem that nowadays we are quite unable to make the big decisions. Maybe it's because we confuse ourselves with too much evidence; the more 'evidence' the greater is the possibility of conflicting data, of differing interpretations, and of outright data manipulation....so that we arrive at the current position where 'evidence' is used, not to explain and evaluate, but rather to excuse, delay or evade decision-making. I'm sure you can draw parallels from your own areas of experience.

So let's be very clear; in the past many surveys in the public (and private) sector, were probably a waste of money....particularly those looking at options for action rather than those simply seeking to establish the current status of the market place or community. Many were **vanity surveys**, designed to promote commissioners' awareness of the marketplace and concern for everyone, designed to suggest that 'something was being done', but with little likelihood of being used to influence actions or decisions, supposing things got as far as the decision-making stage.

### **Buy cheaper make-up? No, just squeeze the tubes.**

In the true style of an old Pole my father's favourite saying bore all the hallmarks of reverse Polish logic. 'We were' he used to say 'too poor to afford anything but the best'. To be skint doesn't mean we have to scimp; rather it means we have to buy and use wisely.

And whenever we talk about spending it's always to do with fieldwork; shall we bring it in-house?; shall we use a DIY package?; can we cut sample sizes?; how would it work on-line?

Of course the real question is, do we need to do it all? And if we do, what do we really want to find out? Furthermore, do we need answers or 'facts', or will clues be good enough? For most of us, if we look closely

enough, there are lots of clues and existing information which can be marshalled to help up infer what is going on....and most of this we can have for free. So, before we try to save money, just try and imagine what you would or could do if you had no money to spend on surveys.

You could look at **all** the survey data you have already. I did some work earlier this year for a client who felt that their survey programme was not as integrated as it could be. While we did indeed find areas of streamlining, the exciting discovery was that in reviewing all their survey data, with a bit of realism, fundamental behavioural threads began to emerge, particularly via the analysis of fairly standard demographic and background service use statistics asked in most of their surveys, be it in-home, on-street, or by telephone. So, the first lesson, when reviewing what you have, is to **ignore individual survey titles and stated purposes, just look at the data.**

And the second lesson is, **look beyond survey data.** Organisations collect a surprising amount of data about their relationships and transactions with their customers and stakeholders. Interactions or footfall by time of day and day of week can tell you a lot if you are willing to infer. And of course customer satisfaction, the key measure for many, can be tracked more meaningfully (while perhaps not generating so much enthusiasm from the ever-comparing 'powers that be') if we simply visit the complaints department. Tracking dissatisfaction is the far more focused, and maybe even more reliable, approach to improving service delivery; to introduce complaints records to a rigorous survey data analysis regime will produce a rich stream of what some now term 'insight'.

### **Host a make-up party, but don't be too picky**

I once did work for a client which involved identifying everyone in the organisation who commissioned surveys, internally or externally. It was a smallish organisation, working out a few sites within not many miles of each other, yet over thirty people turned up to an exploratory meeting, and even more surprising, most had never met each other before. The initial perception of what the organisation's 'survey budget' was went right out the window! I'm sure this is not an isolated case.

Clearly, knowing who does what means that surveys can be co-ordinated and shared; but a more immediate benefit lies in bringing all their data and results together for some comprehensive analysis. Even if questions or codeframes are not exactly the same, infer and learn to live with it because such sharing is of immense value. If it can be achieved with other organisations then the gain is even greater since data will refer to more varied circumstances hence can support more and more cross-analysis, synthesis and inference.

## **Applying the foundation**

If you must actually do a survey, then again there are ways to save money and perhaps strengthen its findings; combine your surveys. Internally, stop thinking about specific departmental or service delivery issues, and think about the end-user; try and devise a survey which meets all your needs but requires just one contact with the eligible respondent. That's right, put the respondent first.

Externally, try and team up with other organisations to share costs and share results.

But of course there is a catch; such sharing means that everyone has to compromise; however, compromise is surely better than nothing, especially when reaching such a compromise forces all parties to think deeply about what they really need and what they can give up....yes, it prioritises the data needs of the organisation.

## **The final touches.**

So, first you should imagine(?) that you have no survey budget. Look at what you have, and what you can beg, steal or borrow.

Then, you should imagine that you can do only one, fairly significant survey, or one needing only half of your organisation's total actual survey spend. Your organisation's collective of survey commissioners would have a battle royal over this but out of it would emerge the real priorities for your organisation and its survey spend.

## **Mirror, mirror on the wall....**

So, let's face it, today you may be 'poorer' but you can still strive to achieve the best and look smart. Before you visit the make-up counter, look deeply into the mirror and decide exactly what you need, remember you don't always have to listen to what others say (and what do they know anyway), then rake around your cupboards and drawers.....you may find you don't need to buy anything at all.

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