

CLASSIC SURVEY RESEARCH: STILL RELEVANT?

A quick way to answer that question is to read *The Superpollsters*. Author David Moore operates a state-of-the-art, university-based surveying facility while teaching political science. His book exposes the misuse of polls while defending the basic technique. Its many down-to-earth stories give a fascinating glimpse inside the research fraternity -- and help non-researchers grasp the real issues.

Difficulties posed by question order & question wording effects, respondent refusal, media manipulation by pollsters & many other issues are presented in a historical & case-study setting that makes this one of the most practical books yet on research.

JUDGMENT IS STILL KING, NOT STATISTICS

Research can provide only a model of reality. Users must apply their knowledge & judgment -- which can be done either at the front end in short-cutting around unnecessarily formal design, or at the back end in interpreting the findings.

Often even a small percentage of respondents who see a problem or oppose your position require action -- so all the 42.6% vs. 12.5% is meaningless. If 5% of customers are mad, it's no good saying, well, a larger percentage is happy -- unless you want to risk losing 5% of your business.

PR research, in short,

... doesn't just ask what people believe, think or feel ...
but **why** they do ... **how** they developed these positions ...
and, most critically, will it **translate** into behavior, & when?

As early researcher John Scott Davenport told *pr* a decade ago, "Informal research studies *known universes* (customers, employees, shareholders) for which there are *benchmarks of observable reality*." This knowledge is "the crucial ingredient for saving time & money in public relations research."

Purists may never give up demanding random statistical samples & "projectable" results. But then, research firms have a vested interest in selling "statistical calisthenics": it ups the price. Anything that gives practitioners some better data than the zero they often have now, should be pursued -- and embraced, so long as its level of validity is known.

¶ **It's time to codify pr research as a distinct category -- then promote its widespread & continuous use by practitioners.**

Truly, all sound pr practice begins -- and should end -- with research.

First of the Year Issue**PR NEEDS ITS OWN RESEARCH MODES, NOT BORROWED ONES**

As the need for adding "science" to "creativity" becomes clear in pr practice, interest in research is increasing manifoldly -- to add precision to decision in both spheres. But this raises a number of questions about what constitutes *public relations research*.

All research is a function of **time & money**. When are the findings needed, what's the budget. Insufficient availability of both is cited as holding back research usage. Practitioners need data immediately, in many instances. Research allocation in most budgets is embarrassingly slim. Does this inevitably push pr research toward quicker, less formal methodologies -- at least for "everyday" use?

PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH IS DIFFERENT, BECAUSE ITS USES ARE

There's confusion about pr research -- partly because vendors of specific types naturally want practitioners to buy theirs, even if it may not be well suited to pr needs. PR research must be differentiated from:

- **Opinion Polling:** Often offers untrustworthy projections -- latest example is miscalling key Colorado referenda questions on the Nov. ballot. Usually surfacy in its probing & its findings. Measures the wrong things for *actionable response & decisionmaking*, by & large. Has become a politicians' tool -- an ethically questionable one -- whereas 99% of pr issues don't get settled with a vote on a date certain but are fluid over periods of time. (For a packet of independent critiques of polling, call *pr*) (Also see *pr* 4/20/92)
- **Academic research:** Seeks underlying theoretical causes, rather than useful data for immediate application. Timeframe is semesters, not ASAP. Must be replicable by other scholars, whereas pr research is usually very proprietary. Statistical overkill is the current norm. Vital for pr's body of knowledge but rarely for use in a pr project.
- **Market research:** Has become a catchall name, but the original type seeks common denominators or norms among large, diverse publics who are potential purchasers of a product or, as marketing concepts became applied more widely, of an idea or position. Number crunching to the point of silliness is a problem. Everything is *not* quantifiable -- and for pr use qualitative, evocative data is often more useful anyway. Marketers don't care specifically *who* buys as long as projected market



share is achieved. But pr practitioners must deal with *static* publics: employees, actual customers, shareholders, public officials et al.

- **Audience research:** Main problem here is inaccuracy. What gets measured basically is whether the set is turned on. Diary or people meter methodologies are outmoded. Buyers of tv/radio research apparently don't want accuracy because it would show far fewer viewers/listeners, paying much less attention, than they claim. After all, every ratings point supposedly represents 931,000 households. (For a transcript of the "Nova" program, "Can You Believe TV Ratings?", call pr)
- **Advertising research:** Talk about ethical problems...have you ever seen ad "research" that didn't show the campaign, theme or layouts were sure to do the trick? Tho leaders in **pretesting** messages & materials (which pr could use far more widely to its benefit), ad studies on "most noted" or "recall" tell nothing about whether the action objective was achieved (& are being criticized by ad leaders).

Each of these may have a role at some point in pr -- usually to sketch in details. None provides the basic fabric of strategy-building, **actionable** information practitioners require in order to a) build **relationships** that b) earn **trust** & c) motivate mutually supportive **behaviors**.

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES PR RESEARCH? BASICALLY, NEED FOR ACTIONABLE DATA

1. **To answer questions essential to planning projects, programs, campaigns,** e.g. who are the real target audiences, what's their latent readiness to behave in certain ways, how do they get information & make decisions on the topics involved, where & how can they be reached for awareness or participation etc.

These are action-oriented, not descriptions of "feelings" or "opinions".

2. **To test &, if possible, deflate assumptions.** Conventional wisdom (perhaps of senior management) is so often wrong, yet too seldom checked out. Maybe we're going in the wrong direction. Perhaps we should do nothing. Possibly they do understand our position, and that's why they're opposing it.

This is essential strategic information, and the methods listed above do not elucidate it.

3. **Baselines to permit accurate evaluation.** Where are we now vs. where we want to be? What's the gap, how can we close it? Is the process working, & why/why not? Are we achieving behavioral goals?

The only acceptable way to show pr adds value.

PR research cannot just measure "public opinion" & feel it has done its job. It must provide specifics on how to reinforce or change it. Explain the linkages, *if any*, between opinion/attitudes/feelings and behavior. And most importantly, **always find out why**. Says longtime pr researcher Walt Lindenmann of Ketchum: "For most practitioners, 'why' is far more important than 'what' or 'how'"...because we have to do something about it.

SOME TECHNIQUES (AMONG MANY) THAT MEET THE PR RESEARCH CRITERIA

- A. **Open-ended questions that provide verbatim responses.** Researchers dislike them because they're harder to code & analyze, compared to pre-determined response options. But nothing rivals *respondents' own words*.
- B. **Mendelsohn Effect.** Shows how to make mass communication into a dialogue using intermittent surveys of target audiences. Woefully underutilized.
- C. **Pretesting.** Fog, Flesch & similar techniques eliminate ineffective communications at the front end. Lindenmann's '88 study of actual use of research found only 8% apply pretests regularly. (See pr 10/19/92)
- D. **Survey feedback.** Basic OD data gathering method in which a facilitator interviews group members or key decisionmakers individually, then feeds back results anonymously to the group. Provides rich data that objectivizes emotions, lets people know they are heard, shows where positions are shared or dissimilar, stimulates collaborative decisions.
- E. **Gyroscope.** Research design that follows respondents thru a decision cycle or process, so mid-course corrections can be made to ensure effectiveness. First used for college enrollment campaigns to find out whether materials & personal contacts were working.
- F. **Rolling research.** Rather than surveying the entire sample at one time, spread interviews out at key dates, quarterly, monthly etc. Provides a measure of change over time, allows comparison that shows direction.
- G. **800 numbers.** Better than a random sample because it *sorts out those who feel strongly enough to do something*, i.e. call. When responses are charted, comparison over time gives valuable data -- as do topics discussed & semantics used by callers.
- H. **"Agree & disagree" asked.** A response category that captures a cell of opinion which is often determinative -- since respondents who both agree & disagree on a point have clearly given thought to the subject. In addition to noting who agrees, disagrees & doesn't know, this adds "both agree & disagree" -- and then records the reasons.
- I. **Environmental scan.** First step in any planning. Charting what else is happening that will divert attention or indirectly influence behavior & thinking is crucial information. Not doing a scan implies there's a vacuum out there just waiting to deal objectively with your topic -- a circumstance rarely recorded in human history.
- J. **Force-field analysis.** Formal listing of facilitating factors & barriers to provide an overview of pressure points & opportunity areas. The more research findings available to include, the more useful it is. Some researchers make it the end product of baseline or other broad studies, to put the findings in actionable perspective. Helps answer the question, exactly what should we do/not do. (See pr 2/3/92)
- K. **Delphi studies.** Discovers willingness of participants -- usually but not necessarily opinion leaders -- to alter behavior or opinion to conform to the group. (See t&t 6/29/92)