

TRUE RESEARCH STORIES IN MARKETING RESEARCH

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Some of the fun things about marketing research are all the varieties of experiences we encounter. Here are four true stories.

1. **"I did it exactly the way you told me to."** Back in the days before the Internet, questionnaires were on paper. Our assignment was a basic awareness, trial and usage phone questionnaire. The category brands varied by market, with the exception of our client's brand. Since the client's ad agency was handling the research, and they knew the various brands across the markets, we listed the national brands and added "LOCAL BRAND NAME," so the agency would print different versions in each market using the local brand names there. Imagine our surprise when we got back the completed questionnaires: The ad agency, instead of putting in the names of the local brands in each market, or leaving a space to write in the name, simply printed our line LOCAL BRAND NAME. If any respondent happened to name a local brand, that brand name was forever lost! At least we knew what percent gave a local brand name in each market, even if we don't know the specific local brand.



2. **"What - not trust my wife?"** For a litigation study, the opposing side commissioned a study presumably to show that their name was confusingly similar to our client's name. The professor hired by the opposite side paid his wife to do the phone survey. One of the questions was "Do you know the location of the store?" and if so, "what is that location?" One would think that the answers would be recorded, such as "Fourth and Main," "on Highway 82," etc. Instead, the professor's wife simply recorded "Correct answer," or "Incorrect answer" based on her own interpretation of what were correct answers - without any way to determine what the respondent actually said. When questioned about the competence of his wife to do the survey, the professor admitted that he did not validate any interviews, citing "I trust my wife to do the survey correctly." The judge in this case threw out the survey, saying it had "no probative value whatsoever" in the case.



3. **"I couldn't leave any evidence."** The local police in a small southern town heard that someone was going around asking confidential questions. When they found the interviewer, they threatened to put him in jail for "soliciting" (information in this case) without a license. When the interviewer sent in his bill, he did not include any completed

questionnaires, saying that he burned them so that there would be no evidence that he was breaking the law.

4. **"I am an unhappy non-user."** A bank did a customer survey and found that in its small rural markets, customers were apparently very dissatisfied. Usually, the opposite is true since smaller rural markets tend to have older residents, who are generally more likely to be satisfied. In examining the questionnaires, we discovered that the questionnaire used a "1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)" scale. However, if the respondent did not use the service, the interviewer marked a 1, which, of course, meant all non-users were shown to be very unhappy. This meant that for any response, we did not know if the customer was an unhappy user, or just a non-user. All survey results had to be thrown out.

Send in your true story in marketing research and watch for it in a future column.

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