

HOW TO FEEL MORE
CONFIDENT IN YOUR
AUDIENCE INSIGHT, BY
MINIMISING THE RISKS OF
RESEARCH BIAS.



AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

WHO CARES?

BUILDING AUDIENCE-CENTRED ENGAGEMENT
STRATEGIES IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR

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Audience research is a fragile thing. The wording you choose for your questions, the order you ask them in, or even – in the case of a survey – how they're laid out on the page can have a significant influence on the results you get back.

Some people might respond to your questions in ways that appear contradictory or implausible, and while these results – however puzzling – will often be valid (humans are irrational – get over it), equally they can be distorted by a poorly executed survey or focus group. There are countless best practices you can learn from to make your research as robust as possible, and if you're interested in getting good at this, I'd urge you to read around it as much as you can. Meanwhile, here are some points to get you started.

■ **SOME PEOPLE MIGHT RESPOND TO YOUR QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT APPEAR CONTRADICTIONARY OR IMPLAUSIBLE**

THREE COMMON FORMS OF RESEARCH BIAS

There are risks with both qualitative and quantitative techniques that you'll need to understand when designing your research.

Research respondents, whether in focus groups, depth interviews, or surveys, are prone to giving misleading information. They don't usually mean to – they're not actually lying – but there are all sorts of psychological factors in play that can result in bias. Unless you design your research carefully, your respondents may tell you more about the person they'd like to be than the person they really are. Here are three common forms of bias. By recognising these factors, you can find ways to control for them:



BIAS 1: ACQUIESCENCE BIAS

This is the tendency to respond positively to questions – to be more likely to say 'yes' than 'no'. There are various causes of this, including a simple instinct to be an agreeable person. Often, when asked whether they agree with a statement, a respondent will look for evidence from their past that confirms the statement. For example, they might agree with two apparently contradictory statements, such as 'I distrust NGOs' and 'I trust NGOs', placed at different points of your survey or focus group. They're not being dishonest, they're just recalling times when they have held each of these points of view.



BIAS 2: SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS

This is the desire to give a good impression to others, or even oneself, by over-reporting positive characteristics or under-reporting negative ones. This may be caused by research respondents' innate denial of their own imperfections or by a wish to win the approval of the researcher. This explains why many people underestimate how much alcohol they drink, and overestimate how much they donate to charity.



BIAS 3: ILLUSORY SUPERIORITY BIAS

Most of us have a tendency to overestimate our own qualities and skills. This gives us confidence and optimism, which are necessary for our survival. Illusory superiority explains why 80 per cent of drivers consider themselves to have above-average driving skills, which is impossible when you think about it. It even explains why many of us think we're immune to bias (even illusory superiority bias) or believe that advertising works on other people, but not us.

Good researchers understand these challenges, so if you're thinking of working with a research agency, ask them what they do to control for research bias. If they don't have an answer, don't hire them.

The three forms I've listed here are probably the ones researchers grapple with most, but there are others. If you're as interested as I am in the psychology of research, try searching for some of the terms I've used here and see where it leads.

■ ■ MOST OF US HAVE A TENDENCY TO OVERESTIMATE OUR OWN QUALITIES AND SKILLS

TEN TIPS FOR DESIGNING GOOD RESEARCH

If you decide to design your own research, try these tips for controlling for research bias:



1 ASK RESPONDENTS TO 'TAKE A PLEDGE' OF HONESTY

A research company I partner with conducted an experiment by running a survey packed with highly sensitive topics. The entry page of its survey showed a picture of a person with one hand raised as if taking an oath, beside the statement: *'I promise to be as honest as I can in this survey.'* The company ran a split test to compare its survey to an identical one with the pledge removed and found it produced quite different and more credible results. You can use similar strategies in focus groups by appealing to participants to be as truthful as possible and giving reassurance that they are in a safe, confidential space.



2 USE PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES

Projective techniques, a broad term for a lot of different methods, are used in both quantitative and qualitative research. **The basic principle is to avoid asking respondents direct questions about themselves**, thus giving a more accurate picture of *'what they think'* as opposed to *'what they think they think'*, and avoiding bias. The Schwartz survey does this brilliantly: instead of asking *'Are you this sort of person?'*, it describes, in the third person, a series of people with certain characteristics and asks *'Are you like them?'*, allowing respondents to answer objectively without feeling judged. Some focus groups my agency ran for the charity Mencap included researching how respondents felt in the company of people with learning disabilities. We asked them to complete a story, which began: *'Jane and her friend arranged to meet at a coffee shop, which was being used by a disability group for their social meet-up. As she walked into the café, Jane felt ...'* Respondents were able to project their own feelings on to 'Jane', making it easier to surface any awkward feelings they may have had.



3 ASK ABOUT PAST BEHAVIOUR INSTEAD OF ASKING PEOPLE TO HYPOTHESISE ABOUT THE FUTURE

Few of us know what we'll be doing next month, let alone next year – but we can happily imagine our future selves in a positive light, unencumbered by the stresses and distractions we're experiencing today. This means that it's easy in research to commit ourselves to all sorts of things that, in reality, we may never actually do – and we find this is particularly the case with younger respondents. So, where possible, ask people what they have done and not what they would do. A question such as, *'How much did you donate in the past 12 months?'* will in most cases be more useful than, *'How much will you donate in the next 12 months?'*



4 AVOID ASKING RESPONDENTS TO MAKE ESTIMATES

Sticking with the 'how much?' theme, avoid questions like *'How many hours do you exercise in an average week?'*, which are bound to result in social desirability bias. If instead you ask a thousand 40- to 60-year-olds, *'How many hours did you exercise last week?'*, they'll give you a more accurate answer because it will be based on recent recollection. Then, if you average out the results, you will know how much 40- to 60-year-olds exercise in an average week. It's your job to do the analysis, not the respondents'.

IT'S YOUR JOB TO DO THE ANALYSIS, NOT THE RESPONDENTS'



DON'T ASK QUESTIONS THAT RESPONDENTS WON'T KNOW THE ANSWER TO

If you do, they're more likely to guess and choose the option they like most. For example, I had a client who asked the survey question: *'Is [our, charity] influential in policymaking?'* Twenty per cent of the UK public answered 'yes'. It made the charity board feel good about themselves, but think about it: the overwhelming majority of respondents couldn't possibly have known the answer. They just said yes because it sounded like the right answer.



FORCE CHOICES BETWEEN OPTIONS OF EQUAL SOCIAL DESIRABILITY

If you ask survey or focus group respondents if they a) eat healthily or b) eat unhealthily, social desirability bias means you're bound to get over-reporting on option a). Instead try: *'Are you more likely to a) eat healthily or b) take regular exercise?'* Answering yes to either option will make the respondent look equally good, so they're more likely to choose the more accurate answer.



OFFER NEGATIVE OPTIONS FIRST

If you use a Likert scale (answers on a scale, for example, from strongly agree to strongly disagree) in a survey or a focus group, respondents may be drawn to the first option shown, because it may appear to be the default. Offering the negative options first will counteract acquiescence bias. So, the first option should always be *'strongly disagree'* or some variant of it.



AVOID USING SOCIAL MEDIA DATA FOR AUDIENCE INSIGHT

Most of our social media behaviour is motivated by the wish to create a good impression of ourselves, whether that be the stories and posts we like and share, the quizzes we take, or the brands we follow. By definition, therefore, social media data is heavily skewed by social desirability bias. It's good for targeting in social media, of course, but it can be very misleading as a source of insight on public attitudes or behaviours.



NORMALISE YOUR SURVEY RESULTS

This one is a bit technical. Sometimes it's necessary to control for research bias by making adjustments to survey data. Ask your data analyst or research agency about it. For example, if your survey includes lots of questions with rating scales (for example, agreement on a scale of 1–10), you'll find respondents answer at higher or lower ends of the scale, according to their tendency to bias. This can make interpretation of the 'raw' results difficult. If you 'normalise' each respondent's answers, so that all are centred to the same point of the scale, you'll eliminate acquiescence bias and be confident in comparing results across the whole survey. One for the data nerds.



COMPARE DIFFERENT GROUPS

When you come to analysing your research, if you suspect research bias, be less concerned with the numbers themselves, and instead pay attention to how different groups compare. For example, if you think your survey respondents are over-reporting how much they donate, look instead at which group gives more and which gives less. That way you'll find the higher- and lower-value donation groups, which is usually more useful than the actual amounts.

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