

<http://www.casro.org/survandyou.cfm>

- **Survey Research: What is it. . .? Who does it. . .?**
- **How does it involve you. . .? How does it help you. . .?**
- **When did marketing and public opinion research start . . . and why?**

The first known survey done in the United States was the U.S. Census of 1790. While some organized survey research was performed between then and the early 1900s, the real growth of the industry came after World War II.

In the first part of the 20th century there weren't enough consumer goods available for everyone. Most of what manufacturers made could be sold easily, and therefore they were not concerned about "marketing." For example, soap was made a batch at a time in kettles and sold in chunks from door to door. There was no variety in color, fragrance, or performance. Soap was . . . just soap.

The Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II changed that. Technological advances during and after the war greatly increased manufacturing capacity. Consumers had more and better products to choose from, and manufacturers had to pay attention to their customers. Soap makers, holding unsold chunks of "just soap," began to respond to demands for better cleaning soap and more fragrant soap.

It was at this time that the industry known as marketing research came into its own as the consumer's voice to the manufacturer. Today, the gathering and analysis of public opinion for business, political, and social issues is sponsored by government agencies, academic institutions, and business organizations. The growth of survey research has enabled these sponsors to develop specific programs and strategies to satisfy what Americans really want and need. Your opinions do count. Surveys are how your opinions are collected.

How is marketing and public opinion research done?

Most survey research simply involves surveys among a representative sample of individuals. Very carefully designed questionnaires, usually administered in a structured manner, are used to guide the interview. They could be about attitudes, needs or preferences. The questions could be "closed-end" (requiring a simple "yes" or "no" answer) or they could be "open-ended" ("what do you think of . . .?"). There are not right or wrong answers in survey research. We are only interested in the opinions of the people being questioned.

How are the interviews conducted?

In a variety of ways. The most popular method today is via the Internet. Survey research is also conducted by telephone and mail. Some interviews must be done in person when there is something that must be seen by the respondent (the word used in our industry to describe the person interviewed). In-person interviews are conducted door-to-door or in shopping centers and other high-traffic locations. Sometimes groups of respondents are invited to the research company's office or other location for a session known as a focus group.

Why do some surveys include some questions that don't sound very sensible?

In order for the answers to a research question to be usable, the questions have to be asked in exactly the same way of everybody – even though certain questions may be more interesting, or seem more relevant, to some people than to others. This sometimes causes a situation where a specific question may not seem meaningful, or is difficult to answer, to a specific person. But the answers are always important to the research company.

What are some of the products or services that market and public opinion research has helped develop?

Practically everything you can name. Marketing research is one of the reasons why America has the highest standard of living in the world. Manufacturers are very responsive to what they learn from research. We have plastic containers in the bathroom, instead of breakable glass, because the public preferred them. We have child-proof closures on medicines because research helped define the most workable designs. We have warning labels on products because of public needs and demands for protection. The location of stores and shopping centers is based on research. The list is endless. The product or service that you like best probably came to you with the aid of marketing research. Public opinion research determines the best mass transit systems, what social service programs are needed, what special services school children and senior citizens need, and the list goes on.

Who are the "research companies?"

There are more than 2,000 research companies in the United States. There is usually at least one in every major town or city. Most are fairly small companies of two types. One type is data collection or "interviewing services." Their principal job is to interview people. The second type are "full service" research companies. They do such things as designing the questionnaire to be used, tabulating the answers, analyzing what the tabulations mean, and reporting the results to the study sponsor. Some "full-service" research companies also do interviewing, but many engage the services of data collection firms for some of their projects. Universities and colleges and local, state, and federal governments also frequently conduct surveys.

How can a sample of people for an interview represent everyone?

It does, if done carefully, and is more efficient than interviewing everybody. Even the U.S. Census Bureau interviews a small, but very carefully chosen sample at the end of its regular Census, and uses the results to adjust the findings of the whole Census! Smaller samples are obviously much more economical for research purposes and, because they are small, can be controlled better for fewer errors. It is an established fact that a properly chosen sample can be perfectly representative of the whole. For example, a doctor takes only a sample of blood for a blood test. He doesn't need to take it all.

How are names selected for a sample of research interviews?

First of all, "names" are almost never selected. E-mail addresses and telephone numbers are usually taken at random for an online or telephone survey. Street locations of houses or apartments are often systematically selected to give proper representation of the area when door-to-door interviews are to be made.

Why do interviewers ask for names or addresses or other personal information?

Interviewers often ask for what is called "demographic" information to help define the interest that the sample is likely to have in the product or service being studied. Soft drinks, for example, are more likely to be consumed by young people than by older people, so that in a survey about soft drinks, it would be important to ask the respondent for his or her age. For the same reasons, it is important to ask for such "demographics" as family income or education levels, etc.

This information is never looked at by individual answers. Instead, each person's answers are combined with those of many others reported as a group to the client who requested the survey. Most research companies destroy individual questionnaires at the end of the study and names and addresses of participants are separated from the answers if additional tabulation of the results is done.

In some studies, interviewers might ask for your name or address at the end of the interview. This could be for several purposes – to send a new product to your home to test, or perhaps for a later check by the interviewing supervisor to be sure the interview was carried out exactly as specified. Again, all of the personal records are destroyed after the study is completed or the validation check has been made.

The important thing to remember is that respondents' names and other identifying information are kept strictly confidential. CASRO's Code of Standards for Survey Research, which must be followed by all CASRO members as a condition of membership, requires survey research companies to protect the identities of respondents, and to insure that individuals and their responses cannot be related.

Do marketing or public opinion research companies sell anything?

No. They are interested only in summarized information on the attitudes, opinions, market practices, etc., of the sampled groups. Occasionally, survey research companies will offer a gift to the respondent in appreciation of his or her cooperation. Such a gift could be a cash donation to a charity, a product sample, or a nominal monetary award. But, sales or solicitation is not acceptable or permitted in legitimate and professionally conducted survey research.

Again, CASRO's Code of Standards states that "deceptive practices and misrepresentation, such as using research as a guise for sales or solicitation purposes, are expressly prohibited."

What do you do when a "research company" calls you on the telephone and tries to sell you something?

Such companies are not survey research companies. While selling by telephone is not against the law, pretending to be "conducting" a survey, when it is not true, is certainly unethical. Survey research companies don't do this.

Companies that use the cover of a survey for another purpose, like sales pitches or soliciting contributions, often will not say who they are until the respondent has agreed to buy something. If you think a "phony" survey is taking place, ask for the name of the research company. If the company refuses to give it, do not continue the interview. All research companies state their names at the beginning of the interview. If the company gives you a name, (1) ask if it's a research company, (2) ask if it abides by CASRO research standards, and (3) ask what is the purpose of the survey. If these questions are answered adequately in your mind, then you should proceed with the interview. If the answers are not satisfactory, please contact CASRO, your Better Business Bureau, and/or the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

Your cooperation is a way of helping improve society, since it will mean better products and services for you and your neighbors, and because companies, agencies, and government bodies will know what you want. Your opinion counts.

- From the Council of American Survey Research Organizations