
A new research medium, new research populations and seven deadly sins for Internet researchers

*Clive Nancarrow
John Pallister and
Ian Brace*

The authors

Clive Nancarrow is a Professor in Marketing at Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, UK.
John Pallister is a Lecturer in Marketing at Cardiff Business School, University of Wales, UK.
Ian Brace is a Director of NFO BJM, London, UK.

Keywords

Internet, Ethics, Quality, Codes of practice

Abstract

The increasing use of Internet-based qualitative and quantitative research is based on both "pull" and "push" factors. "Pull" factors include research clients' demand for faster turnaround and low cost, while marketing research agencies' naturally competitive endeavours represent the "push". Attempts "to clear the e-mist" regarding research on the Internet and examines the main types of Internet based research (qualitative and quantitative) as well as seven "sins" for Internet researchers – based on interviews with leading providers of Internet market research and IT specialists. Concludes that there is a need for both practitioners and academics to ensure their houses are kept in order and to respect the rights of respondents and clients and, just as importantly, be seen to be doing this and so keep possible interference by governments at bay.

Electronic access

The research register for this journal is available at http://www.mcbsp.com/research_registers

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at <http://www.emerald-library.com/ft>

Introduction

Our focus on research on the Internet stems from the speed of this research revolution, the magnitude of its impact and concerns over what might happen if we are not proactive in taking a strong ethical stance both in industry and academia.

Methodology

This paper follows on from our previous work on ethical issues in marketing research and deontological influences, in particular, codes of conduct (Pallister *et al.*, 1999; and in particular Brace *et al.*, 2000). This paper is about the future and so we have tried to anticipate issues and problems and take soundings on our thinking and speculation by means of a series of depth interviews:

- three depth interviews with senior Internet-based researchers from leading US Internet research agencies;
- one depth interview with a senior Internet-based researcher from a leading UK Internet research agency; and
- four depth interviews with Internet IT specialists.

Feedback on a paper given at ESOMAR (Brace *et al.*, 2000) was also used. The suggestions of two reviewers of this paper have also been incorporated.

Because of the iterative research process and bearing in mind the academic and practitioner readership of the *Qualitative Market Research Journal*, we present the paper in what we hope readers will find is a stimulating, reader friendly narrative that attempts to combine speculation largely based on our own brainstorming with research findings as well as relevant literature.

We examine a number of new issues that we believe have not been covered in the literature before. Most notably these include the likely impact of new populations of researchers outside of the marketing research industry and new research applications within the industry. Given the growth of new populations of researchers most likely working without a code of research conduct, we identify temptations or research sins that, coupled with increased activity by marketing research, could lead to respondent burn out and withdrawal of co-operation.

The narrative

We first of all examine why Internet based research is increasing, the types of Internet based research and then describe the new and growing populations of researchers enabled by this medium. We will argue the importance of ethical research behaviour as a platform for maintaining quality and, of course, respecting respondents and clients. Given the deontological leanings of market researchers (Pallister *et al.*, 1999), we examine the issues an Internet code of research practice needs to address (“seven deadly Internet research sins”). Finally we will recommend possible steps marketing research professional bodies should take to protect the industry and respondents, and suggest future avenues for research.

The push and pull factors

The speed, ease, cost and, perhaps, novelty of research using the Internet explain its appeal to clients for both quantitative and qualitative research (the “pull” factor). Research suppliers also want to be among the first to adopt the research medium and innovate to ensure they remain competitive (the “push” factor).

We should not forget that respondents, too, seem to enjoy what is currently on offer and sometimes respond to Web survey opportunities in “hundreds of thousands” within a few days (claim from US research agency). The appeal of the Internet as a research medium is not confined to members of marketing research professional bodies such as ESOMAR, CASRO, MRS, AQR etc. We should note that its appeal goes across disciplines and functions and is not even the exclusive province of the working population.

Given the activities of these other “research” and data collection populations, it will be essential to demonstrate that both the professional marketing research industry and marketing academia keep their houses in order. They will need to respect clients’ and respondents’ rights and so, importantly, maintain potential respondent goodwill, thereby keeping at bay excessive government regulation. Because the Internet is relatively new and its use growing at a pace, it is a favourite source of horror “stories” for the media, which means that any forms of

perceived abuse by our industry are likely to be reported and possibly be blown out of proportion. Of course, we are aware of the criticism by a few researchers that any further tightening up of codes and guidelines may seem to border on the excesses of a professional “nanny state”. It may also seem insulting to the great majority of researchers who behave impeccably. However, we believe we should at least consider the potential problems and solutions and this is the purpose of this paper. Its aim is to act as a stimulus for discussion on ethics and Internet research.

Types of Internet research

Secondary research

The Internet can be a rich source of secondary or desk data. Some of the Internet trend data for this paper comes from the www.nua.com site and we were able to obtain the latest codes of conduct and research guidelines from ESOMAR, CASRO and CMOR in the same way. The main issues with secondary research revolve around copyright, plagiarism and correct sourcing.

However, the main focus of this paper is on primary data collection on the Internet. There have been a variety of ways in which the Internet has been used for carrying out such research, with mixed degrees of success, and with a variety of different ethical issues involved.

Qualitative marketing research

The Internet has particular relevance to qualitative recruitment and fieldwork. A number of marketing research agencies are building up “panels”, or more correctly databases, of potential respondents with e-mail addresses. These are used for both qualitative and quantitative recruitment. Many qualitative research agencies will testify to the problem of clients specifying excessively demanding recruitment criteria leaving recruiters looking for a “needle in a haystack”. The pressures on recruiters to meet such demanding quotas is thought to lead to some recruiters “bending the rules”. The building up of a pool of contacts that can be easily accessed by e-mail means thousands can be screened quickly and accurately for qualitative projects. However, some members of the panel can be “over-used” and

respondents can potentially become too marketing literate.

Qualitative fieldwork over the Internet includes real-time interactions as well as notice-board and e-mail interactions. The medium for real time can be text, audio or video-audio (given broadband infrastructure). The advantages of the more anonymous variants of Internet qualitative research are similar to those for group support system driven qualitative research. Deal and Hodson argue (1997) that allowing participants in focus groups to privately key in answers to some questions may:

- encourage “hesitant” participants to speak more freely;
- “moderate” the more dominant respondents;
- reduce the problem of participants speaking at once; and
- encourage frank responses to sensitive issues.

Cohen (1985) also argues that a similar approach can reduce moderator bias.

However, the absence of visual data or both audio and visual data of respondents needs to be carefully considered. Both can provide important clues as to the true meaning of a respondent communication (see Pike and Thompson, 1995). On the positive side, using the Internet allows geographically dispersed respondents to form some sort of group for exchange of views and comparisons of reactions and, of course, it can be fast and cheap! In addition the availability of software for qualitative analysis may make large scale qualitative research on the Internet more attractive in certain situations. Inevitably the decision whether or not to use Internet based research will depend on careful consideration of:

- intended use (idea generation on a subject ; diagnosis; evaluation etc.) (see Barker and Nancarrow, 1999; Sweeney *et al.*, 1997);
- the topic (sensitivity);
- characteristics of the population (e-literacy; geography; reticence etc.)
- use of stimuli;
- special research techniques that might be needed;
- importance of reading body language and tone of voice;
- the skills of the moderator (see Sweeney *et al.*, 1997); and
- budget and timing.

Quantitative marketing research

Possibly the most straightforward technique is the e-mail survey. This is where an e-mail is sent to a potential respondent posing questions embedded within the e-mail itself or has a questionnaire attached. The embedded approach has the advantage that it is simple for the respondent to complete and return. Using an attached questionnaire is more complex for the respondent, and may raise issues of compatible software, but allows for a questionnaire of better appearance and more complicated routing. The evidence suggests that e-mail questionnaires give better response rates because of their simplicity from the respondent’s point of view, but at some cost to the researcher to make it simple (Dommeyer and Moriarty, 2000). An e-mail survey requires a database of e-mail addresses to which the questionnaires can be sent. These people may or may not have previously agreed to participate. If they have not, then there are possible issues of “spamming”, or sending of unsolicited e-mails, to which we will return later in this paper. Respondents are invited to log on to Web sites where quite sophisticated questionnaires have been set up for them to complete. These can incorporate complex routing, hidden from the respondent, as well as graphics, etc. The difficulty here is getting people to go to the Web site. This can be achieved by banner ads on other Web sites that direct potential respondents to the questionnaire site (possibly with the encouragement of a prize draw or similar incentive), or the respondent can be alerted to the Web site by e-mail or by telephone or through the post – in which case, the respondent is likely to be a member of a panel recruited for this type of survey or might be on a database.

Specially recruited panels have been in existence for some years. This is particularly the case in the USA, where respondent panels for postal and telephone surveys have been common for decades. Respondents have been recruited to be on the panel, some basic demographic and other data is known about them, and they know that they are likely to be asked to take part in a survey. The extension of these panels to Web sites has been a natural development of a well-tried technique. More recent, though, has been the development of large databases (sometimes erroneously referred to as panels) where there is no prior consent from the respondent and all that is

known about them is their name and address (e-mail or otherwise). A more recent, largely quantitative development has been the do-it-yourself survey. Clients rent space on a market research Web site, write their own questionnaires that appear on the Web site, and await the contracted number of responses, at which point the questionnaire is removed. As this process could be carried out, at least in theory, without clients having any interaction with a research professional at all, issues of professionalism and respondent abuse may arise. Most reputable research agencies do claim that they maintain “strong editorial controls in this area” to avoid dubious questions or even offensive material as the survey would go out under their banner. However, the problem is that it is not just reputable marketing research agencies and academics using the Internet.

The adoption of the Internet as a research medium for enthusiastic well meaning DIY types also applies to qualitative marketing research. One can only wonder at the possible damage such ventures might lead to in the hands of the unskilled.

Who is using the Internet for research and why?

Professional marketing researchers may think they are the principal users of the Internet for primary research. However, the low cost of both quantitative and, increasingly, group support software has opened up the possibility of conducting “serious” qualitative and quantitative research to many new types of users (Shalofsky, 1999). New sectors attracted or likely to be attracted by the low cost include:

- universities (not just researchers but also countless students in higher education in Europe studying people oriented subjects – psychology, sociology, health, cultural studies etc.) – carrying out assignments, projects and dissertations;
- other public sector departments; and
- small- and medium-sized businesses (SMEs).

To appreciate the potential magnitude of the activity in SMEs you just have to note that research was once the privilege of larger organisations. Nowadays, small organisations can contemplate research on the Internet and

the number of SMEs dwarfs that of larger ones.

One of the outcomes of the Internet is that it has made both qualitative and survey research more accessible to more people who have not previously used research. It has also made research possible for projects which were once regarded as prohibitively expensive to research in larger organisations. As an industry we must welcome and support this increased access to research, though we have concerns over its application by relatively research naïve users, particularly in the case of qualitative research.

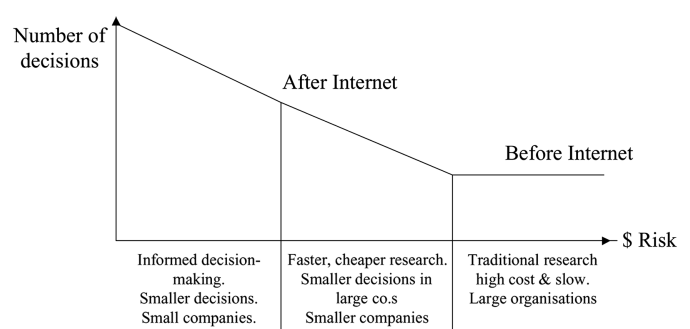
As part of the background for this paper, one of our co-authors interviewed a number of leading Internet research supply companies. One of the people he interviewed was Charlie Hamlin of Insight Express, to whom we are indebted for Figure 1, which is based on one that Charlie drew in the course of the interview.

The research decision model

The horizontal axis in Figure 1 represents the importance of the decision to be made. This can be a combination of factors such as investment involved, perceived risk, and so on. The vertical axis represents the number of such decisions that are made in business each year.

Traditional market research is used principally at the right hand end of the horizontal axis; time and money involved in research mean that it is used mostly where there is a relatively high importance attached to making the correct decision. And it is generally carried out by larger organisations. Decisions within smaller organisations, of which there are many times more, and smaller decisions within larger organisations, are

Figure 1 Hamlin model: the research decision model after the Internet



made largely without the help of original market research. They use secondary data, market knowledge and judgement.

The arrival of the faster, cheaper Internet surveys has opened a new category on this chart.

Now it is possible to carry out research quickly and relatively cheaply. For larger organisations they can now use research to help with smaller decisions. For smaller organisations, Internet research gives the opportunity to collect original data for the first time, with questions tailored to their specific needs.

So, within organisations that are already users of market research there is the potential for more research to be carried out. As an industry we should be very happy with this. Even if the data collection is all handled by the user company internally, so not putting any money into the pocket of a research agency, such activity puts research increasingly in the centre of decision making.

But if the data collection is organised within the user company, is there anybody involved in the process who is aware of the ethical issues, never mind the research issues? We know of at least one client organisation that uses Web-based surveys regularly to collect information from its customers. The organisation of these surveys is entrusted to a junior marketing person together with someone from the IT department. No researcher is involved at all.

The Market Research Society has a code of conduct and a separate set of guidelines just on qualitative market research. ESOMAR has a set of guidelines for different types of research including the interviewing of children. One can imagine the potential for bad publicity in the case of inappropriate “marketing research” exercises on children by non-members of professional bodies.

There is clear potential here for ethical mistakes to be made simply because the people running the survey are not aware of the ethical issues.

Amongst smaller and medium sized companies there are often the technical IT skills to set up Web site surveys or qualitative panels but no-one in the organisation who is familiar with the ethical issues of research. Again there is potential for such surveys to cause damage to the image of market research. As an industry we should be trying

to give assistance and guidance to these people, both for their sakes and for ours.

In the business world, the interest in collecting quantitative and qualitative data from individuals and organisations is also spreading across disciplines. Database marketers regularly “market research” customers as do sales managers, service managers and other types of marketing managers. HRM departments, in particular, but most departments in an organisation may also wish to collect data regularly from their employees and client departments (internal customer satisfaction) and the Internet provides an excellent opportunity to do this when respondents are geographically dispersed.

The outcome of new sectors carrying out research is that members of the public are likely to be confronted with numerous research projects. These might include Web site pop-up evaluation surveys, customer satisfaction questionnaires whenever there is a significant contact with an organisation, quasi-medical and sociological surveys, media sponsored opinion polls and surveys by students and academics from a wide variety of disciplines (geography, history, bio-sciences, psychology, sociology, business related etc.). Inevitably, some of the research instruments will be badly designed and promises made to respondents may sometimes be unfulfilled (incentives such as findings of a survey). Student e-mail addresses for the most part do not make it clear the sender is a student rather than an academic.

Respondent disillusionment may spread and grow in intensity at an alarming rate. Pressure from the community could lead to governments’ believing that they have to introduce legislation to allay public concern. Once again the professional and academic market research industry may have to expend a great deal of effort and funds to distinguish themselves from database marketers and researchers who are not governed by the same codes of practice. What can marketing researchers belonging to professional bodies do about this? Apart from keeping their own house in order, they must also consider educating outside parties. At Bristol Business School in the UK, the Market Research Society’s code of conduct has been adapted to students’ and staff’s research activities. This should mean that while these researchers are connected with the school, ethical Internet

behaviour will prevail. Equally importantly, it means thousands of students will be going out into the business world aware of the existence of professional codes, their importance and specific guidelines. However, are all academic institutions as well prepared?

Tackling the SME sector and internal client “researchers” will also need some careful thought. The appeal of the Internet as a fast and relatively simple data gathering tool may lead many such people to set up their own qualitative research or quantitative surveys without any regard for the normal principles of research, neither in the design of what they do and ask, nor in their regard for the respondents. This may well be more out of ignorance than deliberate malpractice, and a challenge for any designer of a code of practice is to bring that code to the attention of such people. Once again, this is not a new problem, but one that is heightened by the easy accessibility of the Internet to both questioners and respondents.

Technological trends and implications

The number of people (in March, 2000) who are online is estimated to be just over 300 million with North America (134 million), Asia/Pacific (69 million) and Europe (83 million) in the lead. These three regions account for 95 percent of those online. It is also estimated by “Nua” Internet Surveys that by the year 2005 the number online will have increased to 350 million. What will be significant to researchers is how people access the Internet:

- conventional PCs and laptops;
- palm-tops;
- WAP telephones (plus automatic spoken interviewing with spoken responses at a time of your choice with speech recognition);
- interactive television; and
- computer body wraps (items of clothing or ornamental accessories).

The mode of access may have implications for speed of interactions as well as display capability, which, in the short term, may limit the length and the complexity of questionnaires or qualitative input as well as the ability to show stimuli. With technically limited hardware, respondents may become irritated with unsolicited e-mail

questionnaires in particular and resort to blanket deletion.

The ethics-quality relationship

Shalofsky (1999) demonstrates the problem of defining quality in marketing research and examines the ethics-quality relationship. We have argued that the way in which respondents are treated will ultimately affect the quality of professional marketing research and cost-effectiveness (Pallister *et al.*, 1999). Disillusioned and abused respondents will no longer be willing to co-operate in research projects, jeopardising both the representativeness of samples (and hence quality of a project) and the cost of reaching respondents through conventional interview media. If more resource goes to respondent recruitment then other aspects of the research design may suffer through lack of funds. In addition, research carried out by Brace *et al.* (1999) suggests that if respondents believe confidentiality and anonymity are not assured a significant number will withhold certain types of crucial personal information. The significance of this is that if the industry gets tarnished by the activities of “researchers” who do not honour confidentiality and anonymity, respondents may generally be less forthcoming and so increase non-response to questions in “legitimate” marketing research surveys.

At this point we should also consider the rights of respondents. Codes of market research recognise the right of respondents to anonymity and reasonable treatment such as honest indications of questionnaire length amongst other things. Murphy (2000) examines online privacy from the respondent’s perspective and notes a useful distinction between informational privacy (control of the access to information about oneself) and interactional privacy / “not being bothered” (see also O’Malley *et al.* (1999)). Murphy notes cultural, social and individual differences in the concern about privacy. From our point of view, the two concepts of informational privacy and interactional privacy help focus our thinking on potential abuses (“sins”) by researchers on the Internet to which we will return later.

The concern about why some marketers behave unethically has led to the development of a number of models. The Hunt-Vitell

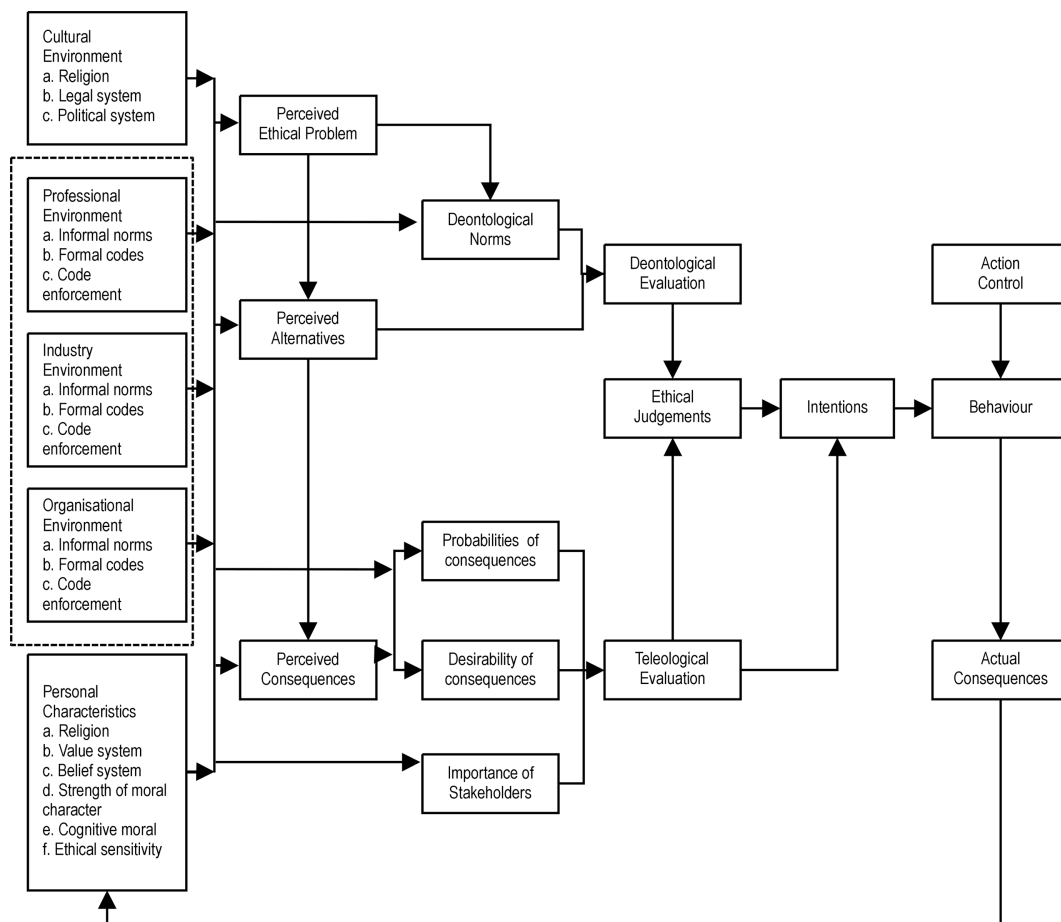
model (Hunt and Vitell, 1986) is particularly useful as it shows how ethical judgement for an individual is a mix of deontological evaluation (rules/codes driven) and teleological evaluation (perceived consequences driven; the end may justify the means). The model also shows the various influences on each type of evaluation (see Figure 2).

In Figure 2, one major deontological influence for a marketing researcher should be the code of conduct of the professional body to which the researcher belongs (Pallister *et al.*, 1999). Presumably, deontological prescriptions were once the product, in part, of teleological debate. Teleological debate and deontological prescriptions are influenced by a wide variety of cultural, industrial, organisational and individual factors that influence whether a “problem” is recognised in the first place and the consequent decision making process (as shown in Figure 2). Once a decision is made and acted on, the actual consequences may

reshape personal, organisational and industrial norms (codes) and ethical stances.

Of course, those who are not professional marketing researchers may be more consequences driven by necessity (ignorance) and so break the rules of professional bodies. However, it is possible that even professional body members may be tempted to break what they regard as “minor” rules. Why should this be? In the first place, the researcher may not be sufficiently familiar with his/her respective code. Alternatively, the researcher in rare instances may waive a known rule. For instance, the quality of a specific survey might be enhanced by contravening professional codes of conduct (say, by exaggerating incentives or misleading respondents as to what will be involved in terms of time or complexity). However, the long-term outcome could be one of quality deterioration as respondent co-operation evaporates. In many organisational markets there are only a few key buyers who are regularly approached for interviews. In such cases, any goodwill to

Figure 2 The Hunt-Vitell model



Source: Hunt and Vitell (1986)

the marketing research profession needs to be nurtured, not just protected.

Pallister *et al.* (1999) examined the role of the UK Market Research Society (MRS) code of conduct in maintaining ethical standards. They carried out a survey on a UK sample of MRS members and established the following:

- (1) Many UK organisations need to review how they implement the MRS code of conduct given not all market researchers are members of the professional body. It would seem that less than half of organisations (43 percent) have anyone with responsibility for enforcing the MRS code or handling queries (43 percent) and even fewer have anyone responsible for disseminating codes (30 percent). So not only do many organisations have nobody taking responsibility but there is also evidence that, where some one is appointed, the stance tends to be reactive (handle queries or enforce) rather than proactive (disseminate). The MRS code reads:

A6 Members shall endeavour to ensure the people with whom they work are sufficiently familiar with this code of conduct and that working arrangements are such that the code is unlikely to be breached through ignorance of its provisions.

Clearly this does not seem to be happening. One might expect the need to appoint someone is greater in larger research organisations. However, there appeared to be no relationship between, say, size of marketing research agency and presence of someone responsible for the above duties. We should note again that not every member of a research agency or client research department belongs to a professional body, which underlines the importance of dissemination.

Interestingly the MRS and ESOMAR codes differ slightly in terms of for whom a member should take responsibility, ensuring who is aware of each respective code. The MRS code states “with whom they work” which could cover everyone in the organisation as well everyone in other organisations with which they work (whether on a shared project or not). For a research supplier, this could include sales and database personnel in client organisations. The ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and

Social Research Practice on the other hand is more specific:

Individuals are always responsible for ensuring that the other people in their organisation who to their knowledge are concerned in any way with marketing research activities are aware of, and understand, the principles laid down in this code. They must use their best endeavours to ensure that the organisation as a whole conforms to the code.

Researchers must ensure that clients are aware of the existence of this code and of the need to comply with its requirements. So the ESOMAR code seems to restrict itself to a member’s organisation and the marketing research activities of clients.

However, it is not clear whether a supplier’s educational role extends to a client’s activities with which the supplier is not involved. Nor is it clear if the responsibility extends to the whole of the client organisation. One might argue these are implicit in the code. However, if the MRS survey findings mentioned above are also true for ESOMAR members internationally, then there is a need for organisations to think through how dissemination, enforcement and handling of queries are operationalised.

- (2) The second finding from the survey of MRS members revealed that many respondents are ruled by other conventions and codes (industry ethical codes, for instance, in pharmaceutical marketing research; corporate and “informal codes”). We assume these would either be more demanding than the MRS code or cover specific types of activities in more detail. However, once different codes are set up the potential for inconsistency and conflict may arise. We should also not discount the possibility that the other influences are less stringent. Views of colleagues were also sought by a few (14 percent).
- (3) The other key finding was that most respondents appeared to be rules rather than consequences driven when moral dilemmas in marketing occurred (deontological rather than teleological) and so professional codes of conduct are crucial.

Given the latter finding, we now turn our attention to the ESOMAR Guidelines on Internet Research.

ESOMAR Guidelines on Internet research

Given the deontological orientation of professional marketing researchers it makes sense to examine the ESOMAR “guidelines” on Internet research in more detail (copy in the Appendix). ESOMAR note the very real problem of developing an up-to-date and comprehensive set of guidelines at the beginning of their Internet guide:

Because information technology and the Internet are evolving and changing so rapidly it is not practicable to discuss in detail all the technical features of Internet research in such a guideline. This therefore concentrates on the main principles which must be followed in carrying out research on (or about) the Internet and in reporting the findings of such research.

Many of the points made are straightforward re-expressions of the main code. However, we would like to examine some of the more specific issues that the guidelines cover as well as many that are not covered.

Issues specific to research on the Internet

Whilst considering Internet research practice, we very much need to keep the other research populations in mind and the possible impact their activities may have on public perceptions of market research. What impact will these new populations of Internet researchers have on perceptions of research? Are small and medium enterprises, the proliferation of marketing companies with Web site customer surveys, academics and students the innocents who may succumb to sinful practices? And what impact will database marketers have on the Internet, in particular “suggers”, who sell under the guise of market research? Do we need to draw a much bolder line between what we permit and the potential practices of these other populations to distance ourselves very publicly?

We will now examine some of the potentially poor research practices and the seven research sins that might emerge as well as note the problems of malicious hackers, more correctly known as “crackers” (McClure *et al.*, 1999).

The seven deadly Internet research sins (excess, omission, exposure, intrusion of privacy, negligence, off-loading, complacency) are discussed in detail below.

The sin of excess (and consequent respondent burn out)

It is possible for Web site and e-mail surveys to achieve sample sizes of tens or even hundreds of thousands of respondents because of the relatively low cost involved in certain cases. Even for qualitative projects one can imagine the temptation to go quasi-quantitative. The achieved degree of sampling accuracy cannot always be justified in either instance. Of course, some Web site researchers do set sample size limits with the survey programmed to go off-line once achieved. However, this practice may not be universal.

The temptation of an easily acquired large sample may prove too much for some innocents and, perhaps, even some market researchers belonging to professional bodies.

The relatively low cost and speed of transmitting e-mails may also encourage the despatch of numerous waves of e-mail reminders to encourage respondents to participate in a project, particularly business respondents!

More researchers, larger samples and more frequent reminders add up to more demands on respondents. Indulgent researchers clearly waste the time of many respondents and may reduce some respondents’ willingness to co-operate in another project in the near future. The sin of excess is about “bothering” respondents and so is a breach of interactional privacy.

The sin of exposure (and client and research agency embarrassment)

Researchers will need to think carefully what they expose on a Web site. While there is a small security risk with face-to-face interviews or telephone interviews, the Web certainly does seem potentially to increase the risk of useful brand and market insights falling into the hands of competitors and their agents. The same risk of course also applies to innovative commercial research tools used on the Web. Academics too may not wish to reveal the line of research being pursued or innovations in methodology.

While some research agencies try to ensure sensitive material cannot be downloaded from a Web site, the enterprising Web thief can download or simply video or photograph the screen. It is fairly easy to find some market research Web sites and join Internet panels. We know of several researchers who have

done this. Should the practice be prohibited by ESOMAR and other codes and if it is, how could it be enforced?

The sin of omission (and misleading the client)

Not to advise a client that there may, in some instances, be shortcomings in using the Internet for research, particularly qualitative research recruitment fieldwork and research on non-e-literate populations, is clearly the sin of omission. To not advise of the security issue we have just described or the problems of achieving good sample design for some populations are just two examples.

Of course, the sin of omission can apply to any research medium. However, omission may be greatest where the experience of a medium is relatively limited and this lack of familiarity may partly be the cause.

The sin of privacy invasion (and respondent irritation, anxiety or embarrassment)

Peterson and Wang (1995) noted different attitudes in the USA to the UK on the general issue of privacy. Americans were more relaxed about the idea of people or organisations collecting information about them for non-threatening purposes, while the British were more of the view that the practice was inherently undesirable and should really only be carried out when absolutely necessary. Murphy (2000) makes the point that there are seven theoretical stances when considering ethical responsibility and these will govern the way in which privacy issues are seen and acted on. Within the industry ESOMAR has developed a set of Internet guidelines to try to ensure respondents understand how the industry and the research organisation with which a respondent comes into contact view privacy amongst other things:

Researchers are encouraged to post their privacy policy statement on their online site. When such privacy policy statements exist, they should be easy to find, easy to use and comprehensible.

As regards e-mail contact, it is arguably in moderation no more intrusive than other research media. The issue of explicit and implicit agreement to be contacted (for instance e-mail addresses in a society's directory) in some situations may need to be clarified.

With Web site research there is of course the controversial issue of the use of "cookies". If a respondent visits a research Web site, how entitled is a researcher to plant a cookie (a violation?) and later examine the respondent's

browser on their PC to see if the site has been visited before? Clearly, cookies are potentially useful to screen out "professional respondents" or monitor research topics covered before on a research panel and to avoid duplication or multiple entries to win respondent sweepstake prizes (see Moskovitz *et al.*, 2000; Murphy, 2000). Of course, inspecting a respondent's cookie folder in theory may also reveal certain other sites the respondent has visited. The collection of a respondent's Net "surfing" habits could be a big turn off if respondents thought such practices occurred. On the other hand cookies can work in the respondent's favour, making interactive panel operations less tedious by cutting out the need to ask for background information each time. Transparency is essential, with research agency privacy statements needing to be both clear and not low profile.

Should we also have a clear statement from marketing research professional bodies on the use of cookies, given the media hype and the fact that media trackers are using them already? The Web site PRIVACY.NET is eye-opening in terms of what can be extracted from a PC on line to a Web site. There seems to be a good case for clarification on both the technical possibilities for data extraction and the associated privacy issues. What counts as observation in a public place when the Internet is classed as public?

Finally, on the topic of privacy, an interesting study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (www.Nua.com 18 May 2000) showed children were often easily swayed by gifts into revealing information not just about themselves but also their parents! This would also suggest researchers need to distance themselves publicly from this backdoor type of data gathering and breach of privacy.

The sin of off-loading costs (respondent abuse?)

ESOMAR guidelines state respondents need to be reminded of the cost of participating in Web site surveys in terms of telephone charges. This seems fair given that some Internet access in Europe still involves a significant charge per minute – something respondents might resent when giving their time for the commercial benefit of others and sometimes without any cash incentive. The problem will be exacerbated as respondents increasingly appreciate the value of the

information they provide and possibly expect compensation for this.

Interestingly, a recent Web site survey by the UK Market Research Society on its own members indicated the interview length but not the cost involved.

Should the maximum interview length also be clearly flagged as well as average length? And will we need to re-think incentives?

The sin of negligence (failing the client)

In terms of negligence there are three possible issues. The first is how to deal with “professional” respondents. The offer of incentives to respondents to participate in research projects on Web sites may very well start to attract professional respondents. At the moment the problem may be negligible, but in the future this may not be the case. For researchers not to address the issue may seem negligent. But how can researchers address the problem? Cookies are one option but are not the complete answer to the prevention of repeat visits to a site as there are ways round them (the use of cookie editors for instance). We also have the privacy issue to address to which we have already referred.

The second issue concerns researcher carelessness and inexpertise which seem likely to occur amongst the expanding population of research innocents using the Internet. Errors of course can sadly occur in all interview media. The difference is that on Web sites the mistakes (and potential nuisance) can affect more (possibly thousands) of Web site visitors before it is noted. Even research angels make mistakes. Should additional checking protocols be demanded of large-scale Web research and more educational projects be aimed at the new populations of researchers?

For the third area of negligence, we turn away from those carrying out legitimate research to crackers who could potentially jeopardise your projects. A recent book by Internet security experts describes how easy it is to breach computer systems, networks and Web servers (McClure *et al.*, 1999). A well-built “firewall” around the system or Web server is a crucial defence. The ESOMAR guidelines also note the importance of a firewall to protect a client’s intellectual property.

Systems with weak defences are described as “low-hanging fruits” – easy targets, ripe for hacking. It is likely that some innocents as well as some marketing research agencies may

not be as security conscious as others in the electronic medium.

A successful Web site cracking exercise might result in:

- Web site demolition;
- changes to the Web site;
- interception of data (though this is difficult); and
- unwelcome e-mails to respondents.

Why should anybody want to “crack”? There are of course those that just like flexing their hacking muscle in a mischievous way. There are also dissatisfied employees and ex-employees and, of course, anti-capitalist groups looking for easy targets. The result could be an embarrassing loss of data and/or time and client disappointment.

The sin of complacency

This list of cyber temptations and crimes are all thought to be possibilities. Possible yes, but how probable is it that they will occur? Perhaps what counts are public and industry perceptions that such practices are possible. This may be sufficient reason to address the issues in our codes and guidelines and so safeguard our reputation. The sin of complacency is not one we should tolerate, given the rights of respondents and the possibility of a spiralling decrease in respondent goodwill and in government intervention. Interestingly, some researchers in the US we contacted think government intervention might be the only way of forcing an agreed code, given the number of professional bodies, including the newly launched Interactive Market Research Organisation, with its own Internet etiquette code.

Conclusions

The quality of marketing research will increasingly depend on how well both industry and academia are seen to treat their major resource, the respondent. We need to consider carefully the rights of respondents and the growing media focus on rights when it comes to the Internet. The use of the Internet for research will grow both within the traditional marketing research industry and outside of this in SMEs and higher education. Professional bodies such as ESOMAR will need to consider ensuring their codes of conduct and guidelines are adhered to within

the industry if the survey findings of MRS members in the UK can be generalised to other countries. Perhaps many organisations need to appoint a code of conduct guardian to ensure it is disseminated and that there is someone to handle queries (for suggestions, see Murphy, 2000) and enforce the code(s). In addition ESOMAR might consider more proactively addressing neighbouring research populations, in particular SMEs and higher education with appropriate educational programmes. Certainly, such moves would only help the industry be seen to be taking a more serious stance on ethical issues and stave off government interference or government over-reaction to the survey explosion across disciplines.

In terms of the ESOMAR guidelines on research on the Internet, consideration should be given to being more specific in relation to the seven deadly sins. As regards hackers and crackers, it might be useful for the professional bodies to provide technical tips on checking the level of security on Web sites in particular.

Finally, in order to distinguish professional marketing research from other types of research, is there merit in providing a joint ESOMAR/CASRO etc. Web stamp (on every page of a Web questionnaire)? The same principle may also be appropriate for a consortium of marketing research academics.

In terms of academic research, it would be interesting to monitor the growth, mindsets and practices of the new populations of researchers. It would also be helpful to research how the general public feels about many of the issues raised in this and other papers on respondent rights and examine cultural differences.

References

- Barker, A. and Nancarrow, C. (1999), "Plug and play: stemming the qualitative brain drain: safeguarding the future", *AQRP Trends Day*, London.
- Brace, I., Nancarrow, C. and McCloskey, J. (1999), "MR confidential: a help or hindrance in the new marketing era", *Journal of Database Marketing*, Vol. 7 No. 2, November, pp.173-85
- Brace, I., Nancarrow, C. and Pallister, J. (2000), *The Impact of Networking: Marketing Relationships in the New Economy*, ESOMAR Congress, Vienna, pp. 429-50.
- Cohen, R.J. (1985), "Computer-enhanced qualitative research", *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 48-52.

- Deal, K. and Hodson, T. (1997), "Electronic and conventional focus groups: comparisons and relative merits", *Canadian Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 16, pp. 61-71.
- Dommeyer and Moriarty (2000), "Comparing two forms of an e-mail survey: embedded versus attached", *International Journal of Market Research*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 39-50.
- Hunt, S.D. and Vitell, S. (1986), "A general theory of marketing ethics", *Journal of Macromarketing*, Spring, pp. 5-16.
- McClure, S., Scambray, J. and Kurtz (1999), *Hacking Exposed: Network Security Secrets & Solutions*, Osborne/McGraw-Hill, Berkeley, CA.
- Moskowitz, H., Gofman, A., Tungaturthy, P., Manchaiah, M. and Cohen, D. (2000), "Research politics and the Web can mix: considerations, experiences, trials, tribulations in adapting conjoint measurement to optimising a political platform as if a consumer product", *NET3 ESOMAR Conference*, pp. 109-30.
- Murphy, D. (2000), "Privacy in market research: rights, responsibilities and remedies", *Net 3 ESOMAR Conference*, pp. 279-98.
- O'Malley, L., Patterson, M. and Evans, M. (1999), "Data fusion and data control: privacy problems – and solutions", *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 288-302.
- Pallister, J.G., Nancarrow, C. and Brace, I. (1999), "Navigating the righteous course: a quality issue", *Journal of the Market Research Society*, Vol. 41 No. 3, pp. 327-43.
- Pike, R. and Thompson, L. (1995), "The technological fix in qualitative research – let's be honest in what we are trying to achieve", *Proceedings of ESOMAR Seminar: Looking through the Kaleidoscope: That Is the Qualitative Mission?*, Paris, December.
- Shalofsky, I. (1999), "Quality and ethics in market and social research", in McDonald, C. and Vangelder, P., *ESOMAR Handbook of Market and Opinion Research*, ESOMAR.
- Sweeney, J.C., Soutar, J.N., Hausknecht, D.R., Dallin, R.F. and Johnson, L.W. (1997), "Collecting information from groups: a comparison of two methods", *Journal of the Market Research Society*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 397-411.

Appendix. ESOMAR – conducting marketing and opinion research using the Internet (endorsed by ICC and WFA)

Basic principles

Marketing and opinion research is the professional activity of collecting and interpreting consumer, business, and social data so that decision makers can make better and more efficient marketing and social decisions.

All research carried out on the Internet must conform to the rules and spirit of the main ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice and also to data protection and other relevant

legislation (both international and national (ICC/ESOMAR codes and guidelines are always subordinate to existing national law. There is currently no international unanimity as to whether country of origin or country of destination applies to research on the Internet.).

Such marketing and opinion research must always respect the rights of respondents and other Internet users. It must be carried out in ways which are acceptable to them, to the general public and in accordance with national and international self regulation. Researchers must avoid any actions which might bring Internet research into disrepute or reduce confidence in its findings.

Introduction

The rapid growth of the Internet has opened dramatic new opportunities for collecting and disseminating research information worldwide. At the same time it raises a number of ethical and technical issues which must be addressed if the medium is to be used effectively and responsibly for marketing and opinion research purposes.

The fact that the Internet is inexpensive to use and difficult to regulate means that it can be open to misuse by less experienced or less scrupulous organisations, often based outside the research industry. Any Internet surveys which fall seriously below the high standards promoted by ESOMAR and other leading professional bodies will make it more difficult to use the medium for research and could seriously damage the credibility of such research, as well as being an abuse of the goodwill of Internet users generally.

ESOMAR has issued this guideline to protect the interests both of Internet respondents and of the users of Internet research findings. Because information technology and the Internet are evolving and changing so rapidly it is not practicable to discuss in detail all the technical features of Internet research in such a guideline. This therefore concentrates on the main principles which must be followed in carrying out research on (or about) the Internet and in reporting the findings of such research.

Requirements

Co-operation is voluntary

- Researchers must avoid intruding unnecessarily on the privacy of Internet respondents. Survey respondents' co-

operation must at all times be voluntary. No personal information which is additional to that already available from other sources should be sought from, or about, respondents without their prior knowledge and agreement.

- In obtaining the necessary agreement from respondents the researcher must not mislead them about the nature of the research or the uses which will be made of the findings. It is however recognised that there are occasions on which, in order to prevent biased responses, the purpose of the research cannot be fully disclosed to respondents at the beginning of the interview. In particular, the researcher should avoid deceptive statements that would be harmful or create a nuisance to the respondent – for example, about the likely length of the interview or about the possibilities of being re-interviewed on a later occasion. Respondents should also be alerted when appropriate to any costs that they may incur (e.g. of online time) if they co-operate in the survey. They are entitled at any stage of the interview, or subsequently, to ask that part or all of the record of their interview be destroyed or deleted and the researcher must conform to any such request where reasonable.

The researcher's identity must be disclosed

Respondents must be told the identity of the researcher carrying out the project and the address at which they can without difficulty re-contact the latter should they wish to do so.

Respondents' rights to anonymity must be safeguarded

The anonymity of respondents must always be preserved unless they have given their informed consent to the contrary. If respondents have given permission for data to be passed on in a form which allows them to be personally identified, the researcher must ensure that the information will be used for research purposes only. No such personally identified information may be used for subsequent non-research purposes such as direct marketing, list-building, credit rating, fund-raising or other marketing activities relating to those individual respondents.

Privacy policy statements

Researchers are encouraged to post their privacy policy statement on their online site. When such privacy policy statements exist,

they should be easy to find, easy to use and comprehensible.

Data security

Researchers should take adequate precautions to protect the security of sensitive data.

Researchers must also reasonably ensure that any confidential information provided to them by clients or others is protected (e.g. by firewall) against unauthorised access.

Reliability and validity

Users of research and the general public must not be in any way misled about the reliability and validity of Internet research findings. It is therefore essential that the researcher:

- follows scientifically sound sampling methods consistent with the purpose of the research;
- publishes a clear statement of the sample universe definition used in a given survey, the research approach adopted, the response rate achieved and the method of calculating this where possible;
- publishes any appropriate reservations about the possible lack of projectability or other limitations of the research findings, for instance resulting from non-response and other factors. It is equally important that any research about the Internet (e.g. to measure penetration, usership etc.) which employs other data collection methods, such as telephone or mail, also clearly refers to any sampling, or other, limitations on the data collected.

Interviewing children and young people

It is incumbent on the researcher to observe all relevant laws specifically relating to

children and young people although it is recognised that the identification of children and young people is not possible with certainty on the Internet at this time.

ESOMAR requirements about the precautions to be taken are set out in the ESOMAR Guideline on Interviewing Children and Young People. According to the ESOMAR guideline, permission of a responsible adult must be obtained before interviewing children aged under 14 and asking questions on topics generally regarded as sensitive should be avoided wherever possible and in any case handled with extreme care. Researchers must use their best endeavours to ensure that they conform to the requirements of the guideline referred to, for example by introducing special contacting procedures to secure the permission of a parent before carrying out an interview with children under 14. Where necessary researchers should consult ESOMAR or their national society for advice.

Unsolicited e-mail

Researchers should not send unsolicited messages online to respondents who have indicated that they do not wish to receive such messages relating to a research project or to any follow-up research resulting directly from it. Researchers will reduce any inconvenience or irritation such e-mail might cause to the recipient by clearly stating its purpose in the subject heading and keeping the total message as brief as possible.