



Reporting Survey Data in Public Media & Public Forums (08/09/10)

Researchers report details of their methods in order to give their audience a sense of the validity and limitations of their research. The idea of transparency applies to whether reporting to a private client or in a public forum. However, a couple of characteristics make reporting methodology in news formats unique and it is helpful to understand why methods are reported as well as the unique nature of public reports in deciding what to include in a press release.

Newspaper and magazine articles, television and radio segments, blog postings and other public reporting media vehicles often do not provide a sufficient amount of space or time to sufficiently cover all of the important aspects of a methodology. Further, the audiences for these public media most often have less technical expertise than those whom survey and opinion researchers are typically in the position of informing. For these two reasons, the minimum standards for reporting of methodological information in public forums have evolved to accommodate brevity as well as “big picture” concepts.

Minimum Reporting Standards

The MRA professional code of standards requires mandatory minimum reporting standards for “public release research.” Section A, item 3 notes the following:

All marketing and opinion research released for public consumption (e.g. p-r release research) will comply with prevailing research standards specified in this Code and include statements disclosing (1) the method of data collection, (2) the date(s) of data collection, (3) the sampling frame, (4) the sampling method, (5) the sample size, and (6) the calculated margin of error for quantitative studies.

These basic elements are commonly seen in published media. They describe the largest, most important design choices common to survey and opinion projects (i.e., how was the survey conducted, is it designed to be projectable and, if so, what is the sampling margin of error). However, they are not sufficient alone to give an individual a complete sense of the limitations of a project. For this reason, a reasonable supplement to these basic reporting requirements is to include a link or reference to a fuller report and/or make additional details available upon request to any who may inquire for them.

Supplemental information that may be included in a linked technical appendix may include a variety of information depending on the nature of the research. For example, for surveys, the researcher may consider reporting an annotated questionnaire (questionnaire plus aggregated statistics), details of survey weights, survey response rate, method of respondent selection, the sponsor and data collector of research, known limitations and biases and any other pertinent information of which the researcher may be aware. Since each research project is unique, it is incumbent upon the researcher to maintain a high level of honesty and integrity in reporting methodological details.