

Market Research Overview

Why You Should Understand Market Research

Even if you never plan to commission original market research, it's still useful to have a baseline idea of what's involved. Market research surrounds us. News stories feature the latest public opinion figures. Advocates and political operatives perform polls and focus groups and use them to inform their strategy.

Market researchers and political pollsters generally present their information as fact, but beware: "Facts" can range in credibility. You may hear that four out of five dentists recommend Chewaliscious Bubblegum to help fight cavities. However, if only five dentists were surveyed, and four of them own shares in Chewaliscious, the findings hardly represent the truth—even if the data itself is accurate. If 80% of respondents give high approval ratings to the president, it makes a difference if we understand who was polled. Were they drawn from a major Republican donor list or taken randomly from the general population?

If you're paying for research, it's even more important to understand what you're getting. There are a lot of market research and political polling firms, but that doesn't mean all of them are good. If research is performed poorly, it can be worse than not doing it at all. Now, not only do you have bad data, but you may go off in the wrong direction believing you've done the work to ensure the facts are on your side.

Hiring a Good Market Research or Political Polling Firm

If you're launching a general communications campaign, a good market research firm should be able to help you. However, if you're fighting a specific political battle or ballot initiative, an experienced political pollster will likely be a better fit. In either case, finding a good research firm can be a challenge. Start by contacting organizations you feel have launched impressive campaigns in the past and finding out who they used. Note that research firms work across many issues, so feel free to call organizations in other advocacy areas such as the environmental or women's movement, or even your state political party. Ask for the organization's communications director who can likely put you in touch with the person in charge of their research.

If you want to conduct local or state-based research, contact local or state groups for a recommendation. If you want to do national research, contact national groups. You can also find reputable market research firms through sources such as the American Association of Political Consultants or the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center. You might also consider hiring an independent research consultant. This person wouldn't perform the actual research, but would be in charge of hiring and managing the process.



Get proposals from at least three firms. A firm's response to the proposal process will give you an idea of how easy the firm is to work with, its people, its recommended research approaches, and price ranges. When choosing a firm, base your decision on the following:

- **Experience.** Corporate work and even general non-profit work differs from political or social advocacy work. Does the firm have experience in advocacy or political research? Do you like the work they've done for past clients? If it's a political polling firm, how successful is it? Can the firm competently execute large public opinion polls—or does it rely on do-it-yourself software like Zoomerang or Survey Monkey?
- **Reputation and credibility in the field.** This is especially important if you want your research to influence journalists and/or politicians. If this is the case, use a polling firm that politicians and journalists know and respect (though note that some firms like Gallup will charge more if you use their name when publicizing results).

- **People.** Get a sense of the qualifications, experience, consulting skills, natural curiosity, and creativity of the individuals assigned to your project. Find out who will be working on your project and what their roles and responsibilities will be. Know your main point of contact. Make sure the A-team on the proposal isn't replaced by a less experienced team to do the actual work.
- **Client relationships.** Request a client reference list and call a couple of clients. Ask them questions such as how long they've worked with the research firm, how satisfied they are with the firm, the firm's strengths and weaknesses, and whether they have any reservations in recommending the firm.
- **Proposal.** Review the firm's proposal. Does it understand the goals of the project? What is the firm's plan for gathering information and communicating results? How qualified is its staff? What's the proposed timing and cost?

Market Research Basics

There are two basic ways to do market research: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research helps you understand the attitudes and behaviors of your target audience, while quantitative research measures these attitudes in a statistically reliable way. If you're a people person, you'll probably prefer qualitative research, but if your best friend is your computer, you'll likely favor quantitative research. Good market research generally relies on both. Quantitative research might show you that there's a 50% increase in the number of drivers who speed on Thursdays. However, unless you pull someone over and talk to them (qualitative research), you won't know that on Thursdays, it's free-chicken-wings-while-they-last at the local pub.

The chart on the following page describes the differences between qualitative and quantitative research.



Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research Overview		
	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
When to use it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To understand <i>how</i> people think (e.g., patterns of reasoning, connections to other issues, private or unconscious feelings and emotions, core values) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop statistical information on <i>what</i> people think Typically used to answer “how much” in absolute or relative terms (e.g., how much support do we have for this ballot initiative?; how much does this message affect people’s opinions?)
Most common uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To understand the target audience mindset for development of messages To test reactions to messaging and creative Used before quantitative research to help fine-tune the survey questions Used after a survey to dig deeper into the results (e.g., why people have answered in certain ways) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To understand the level of support for a key issue To test messages at a statistically valid level (helps understand <i>if</i> the message is effective without insight as to <i>why</i>) To track trends over time (i.e., longitudinal studies) To influence politicians (by showing levels of support) To track campaign effectiveness (e.g., tracking attitudes pre, during, and after a campaign)
How it works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research participants are deliberately selected based on certain desired characteristics Methods use direct interaction and conversation, usually in the form of open-ended questions designed to help researchers understand how people think and reason about a topic Because the format is often very conversational, analysis is subjective, and the results may vary greatly depending upon who conducts the research Methodology can include techniques like word association, sentence completion, role playing, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research participants are selected randomly and asked to answer questions that have discrete answers or fall on a numerical scale (e.g., “How would you rate President Bush’s performance on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “very good” and 5 being “very poor?”) Usually done by telephone, though may also be done through paper surveys or the Internet Any researcher should be able to duplicate the survey with similar results (that is, results within the margin of error)
Main types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-on-one interviews Focus groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey/questionnaire administered via telephone, online, in person, or via mail How a survey is administered depends on the survey goals and objectives (e.g. mail surveys have much more limited use than phone surveys)
Drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because of the low number of respondents involved, it cannot be used to generalize to the larger target population Subjective and unstructured; also subject to “group think” and unintentional influence by the moderator or interviewer Data collection and analysis may be labor intensive and time-consuming May not be effective for certain types of research (e.g., hostile political ads can have a “sleeper effect” where ads test poorly immediately after being shown, but are effective in changing public opinion over time) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It takes human behavior out of context and ignores the effects of variables that haven’t been included in the research questions—it tells you “how much” but not “why” Results are limited by the questionnaire design (e.g., respondents answer the questions they’re asked, but aren’t able to expand on their answers or provide additional insight/rationale) Polling and other large surveys can be costly

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