ESOMAR

8 tips to quality check commissioned research
It is not easy to judge the quality of a market research study. Whether the figures in a report are the result of a carefully executed process or – to the extreme – of outright fraud may not be clear immediately. Sometimes, the offer received might be a first indication. If the price is too good to be true (too low to cover the costs of thorough work) this may be a sign of poor quality. To find out if a price is realistic for a certain market, it is possible to look it up in the Global Prices Study 2018. However, a realistic fee is not a guarantee for high quality work. The quality of the fieldwork may still be poor, with most of the money going to the profit rate of the agency.

The problem of entire studies being outright fabricated came up several times in the last months. In Germany, a series of articles was published by Spiegel-magazine called “The Market Research Files” (“Akte Marktforschung”) indicating that cheating was common in some market research agencies. Furthermore, several cases of fraud were tabled with ESOMAR’s Professional Standards Committee, and some cases of entire studies being fabricated were maintained.

While it is hard to detect only a few fake interviews, it is less difficult to detect if an entire study is fabricated. There are ways to ensure it will be impossible to get away with faking an entire study. Below are some tips for those who commission research. Taking these tips could help to avoid and detect outright cheating.

Tip 1
Agree with the agency that raw data are delivered

Raw data are a lot harder to fake than just tables, and only raw data can be thoroughly checked for cheating (see paragraph 7). Sometimes agencies maintain that they are not allowed, by the Code or by professional standards, to give raw data to market research clients, especially if respondents have not agreed to their personal data being delivered to clients. This is not true. If there is no return path to the respondent, raw data can be given to the client. And, if the answers to some of the questions could result in the identification of respondents, it is always possible to remove those variables before delivering the raw data or to classify them in such a way that identification of the respondent is no longer possible.

Tip 2
Agree with the agency that supplementary information is to be delivered

Very often supplementary information is collected along with the study data, depending on the type of the interview. CAPI, CATI and online interviews should be delivered with the time stamps. Interview sheets should be delivered for paper & pencil or mail interviews, noting that only those that do not contain identifying information may be checked by the market research client. If interviewers are involved, agree with the agency that they supply the interviewer reference numbers.

Researchers are required by the ICC/ESOMAR Code to supply sufficient technical information to enable the client to assess the validity of the results.

Providing the additional information will not make cheating impossible, but it will make it much more difficult and less rewarding. Inventing not just the interview data, but the time stamps per question as well, is a lot of work. Checking handwriting and the writing tools used can show similarities. And, if an interviewer delivers very similar interviews from different respondents, this can be an indication of fraud. In addition, asking for supplementary information is a signal to the agency that the interviews will be checked thoroughly.
Tip 3
Integrate questions with known results in questionnaire

This is an easy to implement way of making cheating more difficult, if not impossible. Integrate 2 or 3 questions in the interview that you already know the answer to from other studies. Certainly, the agency might still have the possibility to execute only a part of the interviews and fake the rest accordingly. If it’s not just single answers that are looked at, but also how the answers relate to each other (e.g. by correlations or cross tabulations), cheating will become much harder, especially if the agency does not know which questions are most relevant.

Tip 4
Commission more than one field agency with a study

This is a realistic option for clients commissioning big studies. By splitting up the interviews to more than one field institute, results can be compared, and in doing so inconsistencies could be detected. In order to make this work it is important to ensure that the different field institutes are not connected to each other.

Tip 5
Agree on field controls and undertake them

As for CATI and CLT interviews it should be agreed that checks by clients are possible. Following the ICC/ESOMAR Code, researchers must on request allow clients to arrange for independent checks on the quality of data collection and data preparation.

Of course, you can never be sure that the agency only does proper work on the days the checks are in place. But if time between the announcement of the audit and the actual audit is short, it is not easy for a fraudulent agency to set up the scene. Moreover, it is possible to repeat the checks if there is a real suspicion of fraud.

Finally, a contractual clause on audits is a strong signal to the agency that the quality will be checked thoroughly.

Tip 6
Agree on the possibility to check on payment of incentives

 Especially for interviews with physicians, lengthy online, or qualitative interviews, incentives are paid to the respondents. These payments should be on the balance or in the books for agencies doing proper work. It should be agreed that an auditor may check whether the payments of the incentives were done or are in the books.

Such an audit is not a violation of data protection laws or of professional rules, because the bookkeeping will be checked by an auditor who will not report on any of the respondents to the market research client.

Because of the costs involved this kind of check would normally only be done if there are already other indicators for fraud.

Tip 7
In-depth check of raw data with statistical methods

This tool is not very easy to apply but very powerful in detecting fraudulent interviews. The statistical in-depth check method is based on how cheaters come up with data.

One possibility to fabricate data is to do only a few interviews and then generate comparable interviews, or to imagine how persons well known by the cheater would likely answer the questions and make up additional interviews according to these patterns. As a result, there will be groups consisting of very similar interviews which can be detected, e.g. by Cluster Analysis.

Another way to generate interview data is to fill out interviews more or less at random. In this case you will get data without an inner structure. This can be detected e.g. by applying a Principal Component Analysis or a Factor Analysis to a list of statements.

In any case it is very difficult, if not impossible, to generate consistent data with a proper variation through cheating. This check could also be used to identify single interviewers who cheat.

Tip 8
Commission an ESOMAR member to conduct the research

ESOMAR recommends to always carry out due diligence when commissioning projects with any agency. In addition, any claim to be an ESOMAR member should always be verified by using our free-to-use member search in www.esomar.org/community/our-people. To ensure getting good quality research, use professionals and organisations who have adopted the ICC/ESOMAR Code, either by being members of ESOMAR and/or members of a national association who has adopted or endorsed the ICC/ESOMAR Code. The ICC/ESOMAR Code requires agencies to design research to the specification and quality agreed with the client, to ensure findings and interpretations are clearly and adequately supported by data, and ensure that the research is carried out in accordance with appropriate scientific research principles, methods and techniques.

Summarizing, market research clients are not helpless against cheating agencies. Therefore, if market research agencies subcontract fieldwork to other agencies or panel providers, they are obliged to check the fieldwork at least randomly. And in case an agency or client detects cheating, it is important that such a case is brought to the national market research organization or to ESOMAR so that such agencies can be stopped from damaging the whole industry.
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2. Agree with the agency that supplementary information is to be delivered
3. Integrate questions with known results in questionnaire
4. Commission more than one field agency with a study
5. Agree on field controls and undertake them
6. Agree on the possibility to check on payment of incentives
7. In-depth check of raw data with statistical methods
8. Commission an ESOMAR member to conduct the research

8 tips to avoid and detect outright cheating in market research

Raw data, supplementary information, and payments of incentives are to be delivered to the client.

Researchers must on request allow clients to arrange for independent checks on the quality of data collection and data preparation.

Integrate 2 or 3 questions in the interview that you already know the answer to from other studies.

The statistical in-depth check method is based on how cheaters come up with data.