

## Promoting Research Results A Guide to Good Practice

MILLENIUM EDITION

Text in blue denotes changes from the last version of the Guide to Good Practice.

### Section 1: Overview

In order to improve the quality of the promotion of research results and to attempt to prevent disputes between newspapers, the Regional Newspaper Research Forum, in conjunction with the Newspaper Society, has produced this Guide to Good Practice.

When using research results editorially, in an in-house ad, in a media pack, in a single sheet flyer or verbally, the following should be borne in mind:

- Quote the source - where do the figures come from.
- Give the month and year the research was carried out.
- Describe the area accurately and use a map where possible.
- Give the total sample size of the survey.
- Use the "average issue readership" figure whenever referring to readership. If any other figure is used, it should be defined.
- Make comparisons with competitors on a like for like basis.
- Ensure that percentages always refer to the correct base. Is it x% of everyone, of readers or simply people who use media to make buying decisions?

### Section 2: Raison d'Etre

This initiative has arisen because some newspapers have made claims which are untrue, ambiguous or misleading. It is believed that in many cases the misrepresentations are honest mistakes, but once in print, offenders find it difficult to withdraw and tend to defend their position. This has the effect of escalating the dispute. In the long term, this can be to no-one's benefit. One or more titles can unfairly lose advertising revenue. Both the newspaper making a dubious claim and the challenging title can incur legal costs. Much time is lost by both newspaper managements as they make claim and counter claim. Advertisers can lose confidence not only in research, but in other claims by newspapers. Market research agencies can lose business as newspapers fail to commission new research.

This initiative aims to make those who promote research data more aware of the potential pitfalls and provide a guide to good practice which will help to prevent disputes occurring.

The regional press commission a large number of research projects most of which are aimed at increasing advertising volumes, although many cover other areas of a newspaper's operation. Where data are used internally, they cause no problem for competitors, but when put into the public domain by way of the newspaper itself, or by way of media packs and the like, it is usually done with the expressed purpose of increasing that title's advertising revenue, often at the expense of another local newspaper.

This Guide to Good Practice does not seek to inhibit creativity in copywriting, layout, design or graphics, but merely to draw attention to some fundamental disciplines concerning the incorporation of research data. Observing these suggestions will be of benefit because it will ensure that competitive newspapers will not pick up on any failings and attempt to discredit the literature or other supporting material.

The parts of any survey which are the most flattering are normally extracted from the results and published. If claims can be substantiated, no difficulty arises, but where competitors are unable to check the veracity of claims, disagreements have occurred. As can be seen from the Market Research Society's Code of Conduct (see Appendix B), the information required to check the veracity of claims must be made available to all who request it, but this Guide is attempting to prevent the need for action of this nature rather than provide a remedy after a dispute.

### **Section 3: The Validity of the Research**

#### **Data Collection**

This Guide to Good Practice presumes that unbiased data have been collected from a sufficiently large representative sample of the population in a newspaper's area. Surveys carried out to the JICREG specification, for example, would be of this type. Research conducted by a market research agency which is a member of the Market Research Society and subscribes to its Code of Conduct, will normally meet this criterion.

#### **Contractor**

It has been found that research conducted by a newspaper's own staff for the purpose of selling advertising does not carry the same credibility as that conducted independently. Research which covers a neutral area such as opinion polling, where it can be seen clearly that the newspaper does not have a vested interest, is unlikely to be challenged. Other non-contentious areas could include how far people travel to work or how often they go to the theatre. Research conducted by educational establishments such as universities, polytechnics, business schools, colleges and schools lacks credibility in varying degrees partly because of the limited experience of the teaching staff in the specialised area of readership research, partly because of the dubious quality, experience and dedication of the unpaid interviewers and partly because of the multitude of other small but important factors which go to make up a valid survey (e.g. weighting). Educational establishments are not to be recommended when data are to be put into the public domain to sell advertising.

### **Section 4: Good Practice**

Good practice would suggest that the following points are implemented:

#### **Source**

The source should appear in close proximity to the data. In an editorial piece this could be somewhere in the copy; in a "house ad", it could be at the bottom of a chart; in a media pack it could be in the introduction. If more than one source is used, it must be made clear which data are taken from each source. The source makes a statement about the quality and credibility of the research. [Note that JICREG can be quoted as a source only when the survey has passed its appraisal.](#)

## Date

The date of the research should appear in a similar fashion to the source. It is important because markets change and a readership claim made last year may no longer be as valid if a new newspaper has recently been launched. Providing the date, gives advertisers and competitors an opportunity to make this judgement for themselves. The date to be used should be the month and year of the fieldwork. [Note that if JICREG is quoted as the source, the date should be the month and year that the data appear on the JICREG Database, not the date of the research.](#)

## Area

The researched area should appear and be described in such a way that it can be identified on a map. For example:

- a list of postcode sectors
- a list of local authority areas
- a radius

Most research (including that for JICREG) will have the area defined by postcodes.

If an area is described in such terms as:

- circulation area
- distribution area
- core area
- prime area
- catchment area
- marketing area

these areas should be defined (e.g. those postcode districts where the newspaper has 10% or more household cover) and more detailed information (e.g. the relevant list of postcodes) should be made available upon request. Ultimately, enquirers should be able to mark the area on a map.

The term "the newspaper's area" is too vague and potentially misleading and should not be used.

The area description is particularly important when quoting penetration figures. There is obviously a great deal of difference between 61% of a core area consisting of a few postcode sectors and 61% of a county.

Maps of the research area should be published in media packs or other promotional material which make extensive use of the research. Maps should be used if possible in editorial or "house ads", but if this is not possible, a description of the area should be used. Maps with the research area marked, should be available upon request.

If area figures in a promotional piece are taken from an extract of the research (e.g. a core area), this should be made clear.

If maps are shown with a line describing the outer boundaries of the research area, and the research has not covered the entire area enclosed by the line, this must be made clear. For example, if a free newspaper has conducted research in its distribution area which does not cover the entire area described on the map (there

are holes), this should be stated next to the map and it should be made clear that any figures relate to the distribution area and not to the area shown on the map. Showing the percentage of households covered by the research within the area on the map would be very helpful. An alternative may be to show the map with holes.

Maps should show sufficient detail to enable the borders to be identified with reasonable accuracy.

### **Sample Size**

The total sample of the survey should be shown. If subsets of the data are used (e.g. 15-34 year olds) care should be taken to ensure that the interpretations are statistically valid. If there is any doubt, the research agency can test it. Where statistics are used which are based on sample sizes lower than those normally acceptable, but which still have some validity (though with a larger margin of error) the fact that a small sample size has been used should be indicated. For example, valid sample sizes may have been achieved in social groups C1, C2, D and E but not in groups A and B (even when A and B have been combined). It would not be sensible to provide readership for, say, C1, C2, D and E and not A and B, especially where overall readership has been provided. In a case like this, it would be better to provide figures for all groups but indicate that the AB readership is based on a small sample size. The actual sample size for the data subset need not be shown. That is, in the case above, it would not be necessary to state how many respondents were in social group A, how many in B, how many in C1 etc., but if a table was based on, say, C2's and the views of this group given, the sample size (the number of C2's) should be stated.

It is often a better strategy to combine groups to ensure a sufficient sample than to present data based on small sample sizes. Remember that when combining groups, you should not add the penetrations and then divide by the number of groups to get the average penetration because there will almost always be a different number of respondents in each group. Special care needs to be taken where the newspaper has obtained respondent level data for use on an in-house computer.

Where a number of subsets of the survey data are used, the bases should be made clear. For example, if readerships of competitive titles among men are compared, the base should be listed as "men" so that it is not confused with a later table which may be based on households.

### **Readership**

The industry standard measure of readership is "average issue readership"(AIR) which can be defined as those respondents in a survey who read a daily paper the day before being interviewed (or read it on Saturday if the interview took place on a Monday) or who read a weekly newspaper in the seven days before the interview; a monthly in the month before interview. Reading is for two minutes or more and by those aged 15 years or over. This is a practical definition; there are other factors to be taken into consideration if research is being conducted, but these do not concern the promotion of research results. The percentages, or the number of readers in thousands, can refer to AIR as "readers" or "readership". In most cases this is the definition which should be used.

If any other definition of readership is used such as cumulative readership, that is, readership over a specific number of issues such as a week for a daily newspaper, the definition should be clearly stated.

There are no industry agreed definitions for such terms as regular or occasional readership. If used, these should be clearly defined. Note that regular readership is not the same as average issue readership.

## Methodology

Most readership surveys adhere to the JICREG Guidelines. If this is the case, a statement to this effect will suffice to describe the methodology. If not, the following should be mentioned:

- type of sample - random or quota (and if the latter, what quota was used).
- place of interview - in home, on street etc.
- the sample frame used (the universe) - all adults, businessmen, lapsed readers etc.
- the design of the sample frame (round lists, postcodes etc.)

## Numerical Conventions

Percentages should be rounded to the nearest whole number (up and down); 0.5% being rounded up. Readership is normally rounded to the nearest thousand. Readers-per-copy figures are usually rounded to one place of decimals. For example, 1.64 would become 1.6; 1.66 would become 1.7. 0.5 is usually rounded up (1.55 would become 1.6). Rounding to the nearest whole number would not be acceptable. Rounding to two places of decimals would be acceptable.

## Penetration/Cover

Both penetration and cover are two terms which are effectively the same. Convention has it that cover is used to describe the relationship between circulation and households, and penetration the relationship between readership and population. Both are expressed as percentages. It should be made clear to which subset of data a penetration figure refers (all adults, housewives, those who expressed an opinion etc.) and to which geographic area (the full survey area or only a selected part of it).

## Copy

Any copy which accompanies data should accurately describe the figures. For example, it would be incorrect to say that 62% of adults in an area always read the Mercury if that figure represents the average issue readership. Similarly, it would not be right to claim that 77% of people look at the Mercury if they want to buy a car if the figures state that:

- a. it is 77% of adults, not people **OR**
- b. it is 77% of adults *who use media* to find a car (excluding those who find a car from other sources) **OR**
- c. it is 77% of readers, not 77% of all adults in the area

Competitive comparisons should be on a like for like basis. For example, average issue readership of one title should be compared with average issue readership of a competitor, not average issue readership compared with cumulative readership. Similarly, it would not be right to compare people in one area with readers in another. It should not be implied that the results apply to a broader or different area than that surveyed (e.g. More readers than any other paper in the North West unless the whole of the North West was actually surveyed or there are reliable data taken from a

credible source). If newspaper A is promoted as having more readers than newspaper B, when newspaper B only circulates in part of newspaper A's area and has many readers outside that area, a highly misleading impression is given. It is important to state that this situation is true only in newspaper A's area.

Wherever possible, state the question adjacent to the figures.

## **Section 5: Conclusion**

The objective of this Guide is to help newspapers to promote their research findings honestly and fairly thus avoiding acrimony between titles. It is believed that many disputes between newspapers are caused by the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of research data rather than a deliberate desire to mislead.

Newspapers will naturally, and quite rightly, promote only the most favourable results from their studies, but should not attempt to deceive. Sins of omission are just as invidious as sins of commission.

Market research agencies and media consultancies are available for further guidance on the promotion of results.

This Guide to Good Practice will no doubt be referred to by those using research to buy advertising (advertisers and agencies) and by those attempting to mediate in or settle disputes.

This Guide is not intended to be definitive and may be amended from time to time in the light of experience.

## **Appendix A**

### **The Regional Newspaper Research Forum**

The Regional Newspaper Research Forum (RNRF) is primarily a forum for the regional press. Its aim is to foster and encourage free discussion and exchange of information amongst research practitioners within the regional press. The Forum has a role as an impartial body able to provide comment and criticism, when necessary, of the quality and promotion of research, and to promote good practice in the future.

At meetings of this Committee during 1991, it was agreed that there is a need to provide guidance to users of research data in the regional press to help them to promote research results in an honest and truthful manner.

## **Appendix B**

It should be noted that most market research agency contracts include a clause which states that all promotional use of research should be approved by them. The market research agencies usually have members of the Market Research Society who subscribe to its Code of Conduct. This states amongst other provisions:

B14. Researchers must not knowingly allow the dissemination of conclusions from a marketing research project which are not adequately supported by the data. They must always be prepared to make available the technical information necessary to assess the validity of any published findings.

B27. Where any of the findings of a research project are published by the Client, the latter has a responsibility to ensure that these are not misleading. The Researcher must be consulted and agree in advance the form and content of publication, and must take action to correct any misleading statements about the research and its findings. If the Client does not consult and agree in advance the form of publication with the researcher, the latter is entitled to:

- a) refuse permission for his name to be used in connection with the published findings and
- b) publish the appropriate technical details of the project.

These technical details would normally include the sample size and definition, the basic method used and the dates and locations of fieldwork. In addition, details of the questions used to produce the published results must also be made available.

- a. *its objectives*
- b. *its universe*
- c. *size and nature of sample*
- d. *any weighting methods used*
- e. *where relevant, weighted and unweighted bases (clearly distinguishable) for all major conventional tables*
- f. *where relevant, statement of response rates and discussion of any possible bias*
- g. *method (s) by which information was collected*
- h. *general nature of any informant incentives offered*
- i. *the dates when, and geographical coverage of, fieldwork and, on prior request from the client, a detailed list of sampling points used and the times of day and/or days of the week when fieldwork was carried out*
- j. *fieldforce(s) involved at any stage*
- k. *subcontractors used for major parts of the research*
- l. *in qualitative work - method of recruitment*
- m. *in desk research - sources used*

B26. *When reporting on the results of a research project, the Researcher must make a clear distinction between the findings as such, the Researcher's interpretation of these and any recommendation based on them.*

It is recommended that newspapers use a market research agency with a member of the Market Research Society as that member, if involved in the study, would be required to comply with the Society's Code of Conduct.

Having promotional copy checked by the market research agency can often prevent a client from understating his case. Approval to publish is only refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misrepresentation.

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