

## FIELD PROBLEMS IN CONSUMER RESEARCH <sup>1</sup>

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I am glad to be with you here today and even more glad to be given the opportunity to talk about a subject that is generally taken for granted—the field work; and when you have been dabbling in research for 25 years like I have, then you know fully well that field work cannot be taken slightly, that it is a very serious part of the research.

The field work or the data gathering is one of the most, if not the most, important aspects of a research project. It is not only important but it is also the most expensive and the most critical. It is important because it is the source of data and the usefulness of the report is largely dependent on the quality of the data obtained. It is expensive and it accounts for about 80% of the direct costs of a project; sometimes the ratio may even be greater. It is the most critical because many field errors are irrevocable—they can no longer be corrected because one cannot go back and re-interview the respondent. She may have been conditioned or because of the time that has elapsed, re-interviewing her may no longer provide the needed information.

While there are numberless problems in the field, I will concentrate on a few major ones. I will also concentrate on household surveys since this is the most common type of survey that we do. Let me start with application of sampling techniques.

### A. *Application of Sampling Techniques*

Random sampling is the general method used in survey research. The meaning of randomness is, as you know, due to chance. In short, it should not be judgmental or subjective. While the theory is sound and easy to set up on paper, the actual implementation is not simple. Usually, the primary sampling unit that is being used is the electoral precinct, since it is assumed that electoral precincts have equal numbers of

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households. This, however, we have discovered, is not true and the assumption of equal density blocks is no longer applicable. What does one do in a case like this? Then one has to prelist all the households in the sample precincts and redistribute quota accordingly. Very often, especially in barrios, it is not easy to define the boundaries of a precinct. Moreover, this, as you know, is an expensive undertaking and expectedly increases the cost of research.

Another serious problem in sampling is the unavailability of the sampled respondent for interview in spite of repeated call backs. There are two alternative solutions to this. In some studies, the respondent is simply dropped. However, this is somewhat risky in consumer studies because the most difficult respondents to interview are generally the upper class homes, the males, and the working housewives. If we simply drop them, they will be under-represented in the total sample and they might constitute the important market for the product studied. The other solution is to substitute the inaccessible respondent with another possessing the same socio-economic and demographic characteristics and while this may be a more practical solution, we must still be aware of the fact that no two households or two individuals are identical especially when it comes to attitudinal information.

Sampling in remote barrios poses another serious problem in commercial research where we are faced with time and budget constraints. What are the criteria for including a barrio? And by using these criteria, what percent of the barrios should be included? There are no immediate answers to these.

### B. *Interviewing*

Let us now move on to the other difficult problems in the field. These are the interviewing problems. In fact, they are more difficult because there is no way of measuring the magnitude of error that each oversight causes.

#### *Preparation of the Questionnaire*

While the preparation of the questionnaire is strictly the responsibility of the project director, I would like to include it as part of the field problems because it has an important place in the gathering of data. When a questionnaire is prepared, three criteria must be borne in mind:

1. It must elicit the information needed by the Client.
2. It must be easy to follow in the field.
3. It must be adaptable to processing which is either manual or computerized.

In many instances, it is not always easy to meet the three conditions. The first criterion must be strictly complied with in the preparation of a questionnaire. However, between the second and the third criteria, more emphasis should be placed on the second; that is, the questionnaire must be easy to follow in field. I think the reason for this is obvious. While the tabulation people are under constant supervision, field interviewers are not; while errors in tabulation are easy to detect, errors in the field are not easy to pin-point. Also, errors in field are more costly, even "deadly," than errors in tabulation.

How does one come up with a good questionnaire? Pretest, pretest, and pretest! A minimum of 10 interviews is essential. Then tabulate your results to see whether you are getting the desired information.

Another important aspect in questionnaire preparation that is pertinent only to the Philippines is the translation of the questions to the various dialects. Invariably, questionnaires are always thought out and prepared in English and then they are translated into the various dialects as required. As you know, most dialects are thin in English equivalents. So what do you do? Here again, you have to look for at least two translators per dialect and have each one translate the English questionnaire. Then get a third one to translate the dialect questionnaire back into English to check its accuracy. In addition, you will again have to pretest the dialect questionnaire, tabulate the results of the pretest to ensure that there are no variations in questions asked by dialect.

Another problem in interviewing is the manner of the interviewing itself. A face-to-face interview is a dialogue between interviewer and respondent, and the kind and quality of response obtained is very dependent on the rapport established between the interviewer and the respondent. Because of this, even the interviewer's appearance, i.e., personality, is of utmost importance. How she dresses, how she greets the respondent, her tone and manner of speaking—all of these contribute to the success of an interview.

As they say, the kind of answers you get, depends on the

kind of questions you ask. For instance, if you are fielding 60 interviewers all over the country, what is your assurance that they are asking questions the correct way and the same way? Again, there are no foolproof measures to guard against this, but a good method of control is to train each interviewer thoroughly and to maintain adequate supervision. How thorough is thorough training and how adequate is adequate supervision is relative and depends on the complexity of the questionnaire and the level of intelligence and experience of the interviewer. For example, we know for a fact that an interviewer's interview on the first day will vary significantly from her interviews at the latter part of the duty, after she has gained some experience. This in itself constitutes an important variable.

Recording of responses is also another problem in the field. While a supervisor can satisfy herself that an interviewer is asking the questions correctly, how sure is she that an interviewer is recording the answers accurately, word for word? Again, one needs certain controls to ensure accuracy of recording. It is good in the training to have the interviewers record the respondent's answers while one of them is interviewing and then to compare all the answers. It is also advisable to tabulate the early results to detect early enough any interviewer bias in the recording. It is important that interviewers record the answers verbatim. If the interview was conducted in the dialect, the answers in the dialect should be jotted down exactly the way it was said.

How can one be assured that interviewers are honest in their work and that they did interview all the respondents assigned to them, and that they did ask all the questions? While post-checking a percent of the interviews is a sure way of discovering this, at that stage it is probably too late for the study; and while some of the interviews can be replaced or salvaged, much damage in cost, time, loss of personnel and even the representativeness of the interviews will already have been caused. Averting this can only be effected by very close field supervision. We are assuming, of course, that our field supervisors are honest themselves.

Other considerations to avoid these things from happening are proper selection of interviewers, satisfactory salary and benefits, and proper motivation. In short, interviewers must be thoroughly screened; they must be right for the job; they must be paid satisfactory salaries and adequate living allowances commensurate to the work demands; they must be made

to realize the importance of honesty in their work and loyalty to the research agency they work for.

To summarize, the problems of field work are numerous. Many of them are serious and cannot be underestimated; and field controls are not 100% foolproof. The best solutions lie in preventive measures such as proper selection of interviewers, a properly constructed questionnaire, very thorough training, and very tight supervision. While it is standard procedure to check back a percent of the completed interviews, if discrepancies are discovered, it is probably too late to do anything about it, and even if this were possible, so much money and time will already have been wasted. It is, therefore, more effective to institute preventive measures than curative ones because in field work there are usually no remedies once the damage has been done.