Quality in Market Research

From Theory to Practice
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Contents

Foreword vii

1 Introduction 1
Market research today 2
The quality movement 4
Standards 5
Delivering quality 8
Improving quality 10

2 Market research as an industry 11
What is market research? 11
The demand for market research services 13
Research suppliers 16
Market researchers 19
Trends in the market research industry 23

3 Quality and truth 27
Truth, science and research 28
Truth in social sciences 31
Qualitative research and understanding 34
Validity and reliability in market research 35
Science, truth, and managing quality 41

4 Quality and the profession 43
Professions and members 43
Knowledge and professions 49
Professional organizations 51
Codes and standards 52
Key principles 54
Professions and standards 57
Professionals and their clients 58
Is professionalism enough? 60

5 Quality and business process 63
Satisfying clients 63
Conformity to specification 66
Quality and money 67
Delivering market research quality through the business process 71
6 Quality and legislation
- Legislation and research 81
- Data protection and privacy 82
- Freedom of information 93
- Other communications 94
- Types of research and research environment 95
- Is legislation good for research? 96

7 Quality management and ISO 9001
- What is ISO 9001? 99
- What ISO 9001 requires 100
- Assessment and certification 112
- ISO 9001: In summary 113

8 Process standards for interviewers
- Interviewing problems 115
- The role of IQCS 115
- IQCS minimum standards 123
- Assessment and inspection 124
- Is it all enough? 128
- Standards for the whole research process 129

9 International quality standards for research
- The ISO 20252 standard 131
- The ISO 26362 standard 144
- Are two ISO standards needed? 147

10 People quality – Investors in People
- What is required? 149
- National occupational standards 154
- Investors in People 159
- Assessment to IiP 162
- IiP: In summary 163

11 Quality system development, implementation and assessment
- Commitment and resources 165
- What changes are needed: the initial audit 168
- Management system documentation 170
- Implementation: getting it all working 177
- Assessment and certification 182
- Assessment to other standards 185

Specimen procedures 187

Bibliography and sources 205
Foreword

Exactly when the first sample survey occurred is a matter on which opinion is divided. However, it was at least some 250 years ago, and more large scale census taking can be dated and located much earlier. From those historic roots market and social research have grown to be the considerable activity they form today whose results are used by businesses, governments, pressure groups and citizens around the world.

Whilst quantitative survey research has its theoretical basis in statistics and related disciplines, the validity of the results – their validity and reliability – is equally reliant on the rigour and consistency with which the processes around survey research – the sample selection, the questionnaire printing/scripting, the interviewer training and respondent interface, the data preparation and the data analysis – are undertaken.

The importance of the process quality around these components has been recognized since the earliest surveys. However, the rapid growth, increased use of technology and international spread of research have resulted in greater interest in, and need for, more formal approaches to quality control. ISO 20252:2012 is the industry’s response to this need and is now spreading rapidly around the world, as both providers and suppliers of market research become aware of the benefits formal quality standards provide to all stakeholders.

This book draws on the experience and professional expertise that has grown up around this subject in the UK over the last 35 years. The authors have been closely involved over many years in the drafting and implementation of research quality standards and their expertise and understanding is displayed throughout this book.

It is a timely addition to the professional survey researchers tool box and I welcome it and recommend it to all those with an interest in survey and research quality.

Bill Blyth, Global Methods Director, TNS, Chair ISO TC225
1 Introduction

In this introduction we discuss the continuing importance of quality issues to market and social research in the context of ongoing changes in research methods and the globalization of research services and business generally. The different senses of the quality concept are also introduced. Quality standards are well established in market research and they are put into the wider context of different types of standards including; ethical, product, service and those of capability or process. How quality can be achieved, maintained and improved is also introduced, as is assessment and certification to standards.

Quality has always been a concern of market research,¹ although its nature continues to change. In the 70s and 80s the focus was upon addressing concerns about the data collection process, particularly the need for validation of interviewers’ activities. In the 90s quality issues widened to include the whole research process, driven partly through the impact of general standards for managing quality. With the emergence and rapid increase of new methods of data collection, particularly digital research, in the early years of the new century, quality concerns have shifted again towards issues such as the reliability of respondent access panels, the quality of data collected online, the reliability of online samples, and broader methodological issues such as the diminishing need for representative research towards ‘good enough research’. Another trend has been the increasingly international scope and structure of research with corresponding international quality initiatives. The first edition of this book² was published in 1997, soon after a period of debate about quality in market research and how to achieve it, and the purpose of the book was to consider the issues then current. In the 15 years since then there have been many changes relevant to the subject including those mentioned above. An update of the book is, therefore, timely and to give adequate justice to the changes some of the contents are new and much of it has been re-written, this time through the work of two authors.

The research sector has a long history of supporting and devising standards to improve quality and these have manifested in a number of ways including codes of conduct, data collection standards (e.g. the

¹ Throughout the text we will refer to ‘market research’ as shorthand for market, social and opinion research unless explicitly stated.
1 Introduction

Interviewer Quality Control Scheme in the UK), national and now international process standards such as ISO (International Organization for Standardization) 20252:2012 Market, opinion and social research – Vocabulary and service requirements and professional development programmes. Among other subjects, the role, impact and merits of these initiatives are discussed in later chapters of this book, together with some practical guidance and advice on implementing formal quality schemes. However, the earlier chapters consider rather more general issues such as the structure of the market research industry and some of the theoretical underpinnings of quality in market research.

We hope the book will assist those involved in research to understand the factors which impact on research quality, the schemes which are there to assist this, the parameters of the schemes and the holistic approach that is required to address quality and research excellence. As such this book is aimed at all those with an interest in or responsibility for research and research quality: compliance and quality professionals, research providers, associated suppliers of relevant technology, research buyers and users and those involved in research assessment and certification.

Market research today

Research today is a mass of contradictions with a number of push and pull factors which are stretching research and could irrevocably change its nature:

• Research is in demand. Since the turn of the 21st century research has experienced a period of strong global growth and industry consolidation, only recently stemmed by the global recession of 2008/9. But for some, research has become a commodity and there are an increasing number of clients buying purely on price or doing it for themselves. DIY digital research tools have made conducting research easier and some clients no longer need or want a researcher as the intermediary.
• The emergence and growth of social media has radically opened up new avenues of opportunity for accessing and learning more about the populations’ opinions and attitudes. To give some context, the social media site Facebook had 845 million monthly users at the end of December 2011 (based on Facebook’s December 2011 Fact Sheet figures); if it were a country it would be the world’s third largest (smaller only than China and India). There are over 181 million blogs.

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3 Research clients, buyers and users of research are all terms for an individual, organization, department or division, internal or external, which requests or commissions research projects.
of which 34 per cent post opinions about products and brands. Research has never before had such a seemingly readily available and easily accessible resource. But how best to engage via social media? How reliable are such sources? What about the established research models and how do they apply in this environment?

- Social media has led a re-emergence of mass observation on a scale not seen since the 30s and 40s. Researchers have to listen and observe more and ask less. But how to do this ethically and legally when so much information can be so easily accessed with something as simple as a smart mobile phone?

- Research is widely recognized as an essential business tool, used to support business decisions. But buyers want these insights quickly and they want actionable research insight that makes a measurable difference to their business. Some are of the opinion that there is no longer always a need for representative results; instead some buyers are happy with ‘good enough research’, which is timely and based on what the ‘right’ group of customers are thinking and wanting.

- Response rates are decreasing. Finding respondents agreeing to participate in research is increasingly difficult, resulting in the need for different ways to engage respondents, from the growth of incentivized respondent panels to the favouring of more passive research techniques (such as online data scraping). What does this mean for quality? Is the research sector creating enormous groups of professional respondents through the development of panels? Will respondents only participate if incentivized? How reliable are scraping approaches, particularly those trawling online sources?

- Anonymity is no longer an essential requirement, with the focus being on transparency and confidentiality. Research boundaries are expanding. More and more non-research exercises are being undertaken by researchers, for example co-creation exercises where researcher, respondent and client jointly design and develop products and services. With the gap narrowing between market research and other forms of marketing and customer relationship management what does that mean for research as a profession? If researchers become the innovators, the creators, how do they maintain their objectivity to predict, rationalize, persuade and dissuade?

These developments are innovative and exciting, but they can strain the formal disciplines and in the forthcoming chapters we will consider the impact of these trends on research standards and the various quality schemes.

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The quality movement

All sorts of reasons can be suggested for why quality has become such a central concern throughout the economically developed world. One impetus has been the stimulus of a global economy, the potential to purchase anything from anywhere via the development of online markets. These and other aspects of economic growth and expansion have all stimulated suppliers’ preoccupation with quality issues. However, downturns have been a factor as well; when demand levels contract the first need is to hang on to the customers you have and not allow competitors to acquire the business. Customer satisfaction in a tight business climate has been very much part of the quality ‘movement’. However, these concerns are also part of broader issues such as marketing return on investment.

Quality has two broad and different senses. First there is quality as excellence; the best; the superb. This usage is probably more common in normal language, but as a working concept it has been either ignored or rejected by management thinkers and the quality movement. Quality as excellence, it is said, is just not a practical business concept. The second, and the more applied, interpretation is relative quality; relative, that is, to what is required. In other words good enough for the purpose in mind: ‘fit for purpose’ and better rather than the best.

Relative quality, then, is a matter of meeting requirements with an emphasis on customer requirements; providing what is wanted or (and this may be different) what is needed. A commercial qualification is made by adding the rider ‘at least cost’ or providing the best value for money. Practical quality is, therefore, not just a matter of giving the customer what he or she wants but doing so at least cost, with a measurable return on investment and most profit to the provider; a focus on customer wants and needs has a very strong commercial aspect. In a competitive market this is absolutely necessary; if the customer is not satisfied they can always go elsewhere. Wants and needs are, however, themselves problematical in any application of quality and this will be explored shortly. For the moment though it is worth noting that if customer requirements are to be met they must be identified and understood. This is very much part of the subject matter of market research and therefore relative quality, whatever else, is good business for market research.

In the literature of quality and in all manner of quality programmes, it is relative quality which has made the running. But quality as excellence cannot be dismissed quite so lightly and especially in relation to quality in market research. In opposition to relative quality, quality as excellence has the implication of a goal irrespective or even despite what the customer wants. Also, in an age of greater consumer control, with respondents actively participating in ‘their brands’ via social networks and media, customers’ demands may exceed even the expectations,
aspirations and supply ability of brand owners. Quality as excellence resonates with concepts such as the Platonic ‘Good’ and ‘Truth’ and the latter link is of particular interest when exploring quality in market research. Whatever else, and however it is defined, the output of market research services is expected to be ‘true’ against some sort of yardstick. In the end, few market research suppliers can be satisfied merely because the client likes the results; there is an imperative to provide ‘true’ findings and insight. The practical limitations of timing and budget constraints are seen as concerning accuracy levels rather than any fundamental compromise with the concept of delivering the truth. This subject is explored further in Chapter 3.

Quality as excellence also has a dynamic dimension. Relative quality is all very well but merely meeting current wants or needs is no stimulus to improvement. Pursuit of excellence is one way in which businesses anticipate rather than merely meet consumer demand. Innovation may also be built into quality programmes based on relative quality along with the distant drum of excellence acting as a spur.

Professionalism is also built around notions of quality as excellence. The professional-client relationship assumes less than perfect knowledge by the latter of his or her needs or wants and it is the job of the professional to deliver quality based on high standards generated from within the profession. The issue of quality and professionalism is the subject of Chapter 4.

**Standards**

There are different types of standards: product or service standards, quality process standards, professional ethical standards, business ethical standards, etc. Whereas a product or service standard establishes the criteria against which things can be measured in a verifiable and consistent manner and process standards involve how they are produced, others such as professional ethical standards are a form of applied ethics, which concerns the moral issues that arise in a profession. Ethical standards tend to be assessed by others within the profession (i.e. self-regulation) as it requires the specialist knowledge of the profession to effectively judge others’ professional moral conduct and behaviour.

Standards are a well established means of ensuring that relevant needs are met. Sometimes organizations and practitioners will refer to their own bespoke internal ‘standards’ but proprietary standards of this type are, by definition an oxymoron. Standards imply some universality applied by a range of organizations, not just one, and are defined and interpreted by some recognized external body such as the British Standards Institution (for quality standards) or a well regarded trade or professional association (usually for Codes of Practice or Conduct).
1 Introduction

The point of product standards for technical and manufacturing processes are relatively easy to understand. If you want to be sure a fire extinguisher will work if ever you need it you assume or hope that it is produced to a standard which ensures this is the case. How the appliance works – the underlying physics – need not concern you if you have faith in the standard and the supplier’s conformity to that standard. By far the most common quality standards are the thousands of technical product specifications issued by the national standards bodies such as the British Standards Institution (BSI) in the UK, Asociación Española de Normalización y Certificación (AENOR) in Spain, Deutsches Institut für Normung (DIN) in Germany, etc. There is a national standard, or British Standard (BS) as is the case in the UK, for virtually every significant product with a technical dimension. In business, buyers require their suppliers to meet relevant product standards as a minimum condition for being considered at all, although additional and more unique requirements may of course be specified as well. In applications which have a critical safety dimension the need for conformity to established technical standards may also be a legal or quasi-legal requirement. Two important features of technical product standards is (1) that they concern the key parameters which determine whether or not the product works (rather than how it looks) i.e. whether it is ‘fit for purpose’ – and (2) that conformity to the standard can be determined by objective measures and tests. If, for example, dimensional tolerance is part of the specification, whether this is met can be established by appropriate measurements.

While nearly all published technical standards relate to physical products, there is no reason in principle why the concept cannot be extended to various services. Again key parameters which determine whether or not the service meets basic needs can be defined and conformity objectively measured. At least this is so in principle.

In the UK, market research was one of the first service standards to be introduced (as BS 7911:1998, Specification for Organizations Conducting Market Research) and codified the standards that the research sector had already developed under its own steam, firstly via the introduction of the Interviewer Quality Control Scheme (IQCS) and later by the activities of the Market Research Quality Standards Association (MRQSA). Similar initiatives were undertaken elsewhere e.g. Australia, Germany, France and Spain. Chapter 8 will look at some of these early schemes, particularly those standards for interviewers.

The increasing globalization of research, and the need for consistent quality standards across markets, prompted the research sector to unify the various standards, culminating in the introduction of an international standard for market research, ISO 20252, Market, opinion and social research – Vocabulary and service requirements, in 2006. In 2009 this was supplemented by the introduction of a separate standard for access panels, ISO 26362:2009, Access panels in market, opinion and social
research – vocabulary and service requirements. Chapter 9 will look at the implementation, application and assessment of the international standards for research in more detail.

There are also process or capability standards, developed to improve management and especially in relation to ensuring adherence to the delivery of product or service standards. First within the defence industry and later more generally it was recognized that delivering quality, whether this is defined in terms of meeting wants and needs or just conforming to defined product standards, requires a formal methodology; quality management systems or quality assurance models. Appropriate standards were, therefore, developed and published such as, in the UK, BS 5750 which was later superseded by the ISO 9000 series. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, ISO 9001:2008, Quality management systems – Requirements has had some impact within market research; standards such as ISO 20252 in addition to being research service standards also incorporate the quality management or assurance models of ISO 9001:2008.

Once standards are established within a field of activity the question of assessment arises. Buyers of products or services covered by standards want assurance that what is delivered is actually in conformity to the parameters set in the standard. Similarly suppliers wish to be able to demonstrate that this is the case and thus differentiate themselves from ‘substandard’ competitors. Such assessment can be carried out by a first, second or third party. First party is simply a matter of the supplier asserting that the service meets the standard. Obviously there is no harm in doing this but it may be less than convincing to the buyer (although it may be possible to seek recompense if non-conformities are subsequently found). Second-party assessment involves the buyer establishing conformity through tests in cooperation with the supplier. This may give the buyer comfort but involves much effort, not to mention inconvenience to the supplier (each major customer may wish to send in a team of quality inspectors).

A solution potentially attractive to both sides is, therefore, third-party or independent assessment. The supplier pays a recognized organization to carry out the necessary work to determine conformity to the standard and the resulting certification can then be presented to any potential buyer requiring conformity to the standard to be demonstrated. Such third party assessment is quite well established in relation to product assessment (e.g. the BSI Kite mark scheme) but is even better known for the quality management standard ISO 9001. Increasingly buyers have sought assurance that their suppliers have methodologies in place to meet requirements and thus (by tautology) deliver quality. Assessment against ISO 9001 has come to be regarded as a strong indicator of this capability. There has, therefore, been some switch from a focus at the product level (with inspection of incoming material, exhaustive testing
1 Introduction

etc) to what lies behind the attainment of consistent quality levels. Some disciplines closely associated with research are essential parts of these management standards, e.g. customer satisfaction monitoring and measurement can be found in ISO 9001 and in ISO/TS 10004:2010, Quality management – Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for monitoring and measuring.

Market research ethical standards are detailed within the various Codes of Conduct, which set out the principles, rules and practices for individual research practitioners. All the notable research Codes are based on comparable ethical principles. The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) Code on Market & Social Research is the most widely used, although most developed markets have their own Codes to reflect the specific needs of their domestic market. The Code requirements are discussed in Chapter 4.

With an increasing amount of legislation impacting on the practice of research, Codes need to reflect the interpretation of such legislation in addition to the overarching ethical principles governing the profession. Although the sector remains primarily self-regulatory in most markets (with some exceptions), the practice of research is increasingly being governed by legal requirements determined in privacy legislation such as the Data Protection Directive in Europe. In Chapter 6 we will explore in greater detail the legal issues impacting on research.

Delivering quality

Given that quality has become a central concern to businesses and other organizations, how is it to be achieved and delivered to the customer? Three key elements are widely recognized although the emphasis varies according to the writer, viewpoint and, arguably most important of all, the nature of the organization seeking to deliver quality. These elements are purpose, process and people.

Purpose is about commitment to quality within the organization and this may be expressed in written mission statements, through meetings, exhortation or other ways, but, however it is done, it must reflect real belief and commitment and not just pay lip-service. Commitment must also be achieved throughout the organization starting at the top but going all the way down. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes tend to be the way in which organizations bring these issues together and ensure senior corporate buy-in. However, these are generally top-line policies which match overarching corporate objectives and goals; Total Quality Management (TQM) programmes place strong
emphasis on commitment and how to truly achieve it. It is the process management systems that underpin CSR policies which deliver quality in practice.

Process concerns systems and methodologies to deliver quality consistently and constantly and those stressing its importance argue that commitment, while essential, cannot deliver without the discipline and rationality of effective systems. Those with a strong emphasis on process generally favour the adoption of formal systems and see considerable benefits in underpinning commitment with assessment to ISO 9001. Developing formal systems (often seen as largely a matter of writing procedure manuals) is, however, only one, and the less radical, strand in the process approach. Another is to fundamentally reappraise all the processes which deliver products and services; to re-engineer the organization. Another is to place heavy reliance on automated processes, removing any human interaction, as human interaction introduces subjectivity into process. As such, technology plays a vital role in the way in which processes are organized, and this applies increasingly to modern market research. At each stage, technology drives the way in which research processes are structured and carried out.

However, even the strongest advocates of a process approach recognize that irrespective of the technology, systems either work or fail through people and quality ultimately depends on the understanding, skills and motivation of an organization’s staff. There is, therefore, a loop back to commitment. Functional, management and customer service skill levels may vary among staff members. Many and various approaches are offered to develop this human aspect of delivering quality. Changes to processes themselves of course require changes in how people work and the skills they need to employ. Similarly radical changes to processes – re-engineering – call for the same level of rethinking on the human side. However, re-engineering is linked to de-layering, downsizing and taking out costs, which often involves shrinking the workforce and this is particularly the case in hitherto people-intensive businesses such as market research. Where the immediate impact of re-engineering seems to be fewer colleagues and less job security, developing any real staff commitment to quality can be an uphill task.

A human resource focus is always a strong element in TQM programmes and the training and skills development aspect is covered by schemes such as Investors in People schemes and occupational standards initiatives, explored in more detail in Chapter 10.

A final aspect of the people side of quality to mention at this point is professionalism (the subject of Chapter 4). Professionalism in market research, as well as in other knowledge businesses, is often seen as a more appropriate route to quality than an emphasis on process and systems.
Improving quality

The quality concept up to this point has been presented as static; organizations seek it but then just need to keep it to a sufficient degree. Clearly, however, this is not enough. Organizations need to seek quality improvement on a continuous basis with the goal of ever moving forward. The need for improvement is also, arguably, built into both concepts of quality. Quality as excellence is always unattainable and the best we can do is move a bit nearer the impossible. Relative quality is also always dynamic since the requirements to be fulfilled are themselves fluid and changing; in fact quality improvement is itself part of the dynamic. Improvements raise expectations.

TQM programmes take improvement as central to the whole quality issue and generally put emphasis on both the goals sought and people as the key means to make advances. The goal is often expressed as going beyond meeting customer requirements to delighting them; finding something – which may be trivial in itself – to give satisfaction over and above that which was expected and anticipated. In market research terms this may include how clients are handled, how information is communicated but perhaps above all the intangible creative element which lifts a routine project to something offering the client real added value, the actionable ‘insight’ so sought and valued by clients.

System approaches such as those based around ISO 9001 and service standards such as ISO 20252 tend to be seen by TQM proponents as at best safety checks to quality improvements; the system stops other aspects deteriorating while specific improvements are made. At the worst, systems are said to fossilize quality and in fact inhibit innovation in customer delivery or shift the focus from substance to form. Criticisms of this sort have been quite commonly expressed in the market research sector as part of the debate about the worth of ISO 9001 and indeed the research standards ISO 20252 and ISO 26362. However, this is to ignore the dynamic elements which a good quality system should include and especially the need to seek improvement through systematic and deep analysis of identified problems. ISO 9001 and ISO 20252 require this approach. Moreover such criticisms fail to understand the broader dynamic of quality schemes. No one quality process standard, ethical Code of Conduct, or professional development approach by itself produces quality market research. It is a combination of all these standards, and only when these standards are in alignment in a dynamic, fluid, holistic way, will quality in research be produced.