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Control is elusive in research design

by Margaret R. Roller

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Back in college, there was a lot of talk about controlled environments. Indeed, a primary lesson in the lab was that only by integrating controls into research design could you be assured of the reliability, interpretative value, and projectability of the research results.

But in the real world of marketing research, control is elusive. It is difficult, if not impossible, to build in the kinds of controls we want. That's why even the most traditional research designs continue to be debated and refined.

In qualitative research, there are probably as many opinions about optimizing group interaction and output as there are moderators. And in quantitative research, techniques to control for nonresponse bias in mail surveys and refusal rates in telephone studies have been hotly discussed.

Researchers, especially academics, continue to conduct experiments regarding the most basic design topics. Scholarly journals such as *Public Opinion Quarterly* would have little to publish if researchers discovered design solutions to these problems.

Proper controls take human psychology into account and are an important facet of both qualitative and quantitative research designs. Controls are equally important to new research techniques and technologies. Real-life issues such as cost, speed, and client needs should be weighed carefully in research design. However, design parameters are only as strong as the overall integrity of the research design, which is based on control features.

The use of projective techniques in qualitative research is an example. Wanting to provide clients with a "creative" focus-group session, moderators may resort to innovative projective exercises; however, moderators design these techniques carefully and with the understanding that two hours with a group of strangers is an unlikely environment for delving knowledgeably into individual personalities. The parameters inherent in focus group research leave the moderator powerless to interpret picture sorts, collages, or personalization exercises.

The moderator who controls the process by designing topic-specific group exercises can gain more meaningful interpretations. A perceptual map exercise can provide a useful picture of where a product category fits in a consumer's everyday life. But asking a consumer, "If this product was a car (a Hollywood star, etc.), which would it be?" is meaningless given the unknown variables affecting the consumer's response. The most a moderator can hope to control in a traditional focus group is product-specific attitudes and behaviors.

In quantitative research, the effectiveness of on-line versus traditional surveys is being debated. Proponents of on-line research generally focus on its efficiencies, while skeptics look at the limited population base from which the surveys draw.

There are, again, control issues to consider. Two that directly impact on-line research are computer mediated communication (CMC) and Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD).

CMC is the study of human-computer interaction, the collection and analysis of digital data, and the effectiveness of tools such as Web links. Accounts of fabricated personalities and gender-switching on the Web are enough to make researchers reconsider their design parameters. *The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* is an excellent CMC resource and can help identify variables marketing researchers may want to integrate in their designs as controls.

Though some dispute the reality of IAD—last December, the *New York Times* asked, "Net Addiction: True Disorder or Just a Cyber-Psycho Fad?"—the fact is, psychiatrists and support groups currently exist for the sole purpose of treating IAD-inflicted individuals. McLean Hospital, a Harvard Medical School psychiatric facility, established the Computer Addiction Services department to provide cognitive behavior therapy and other treatments for IAD patients. The potential impact of IAD in terms of understanding on-line respondents has direct research design implications.

The degree to which researchers can or cannot control our interactions with research subjects has everything to do with how we think about research design and the specific parameters we build. Control is fundamental to our work, and as we grapple with new designs, we can look forward to more discussion. ■