



Market research mistakes you're probably making & how to avoid them



By Rainer Kocsis

rkocsis@pivotalresearch.ca

Introduction

If you're curious about what people think and feel about your organization, market research is the perfect way to gauge these important insights. The ability to remove guesswork from decision-making and make data-driven choices is a crucial starting point on the road to success, and that depends on getting as much reliable information about the market as you can.

When done correctly, market research is the golden key that helps you uncover the attitudes and behaviours of a target population. Understanding your customers, your competitors, and industry trends is essential to providing the goods and services that people want, boosting your profitability and competitiveness in the marketplace, and propelling your organization forward.

Market Research Done Incorrectly

But market research also has the potential to become surprisingly destructive if it's done incorrectly or inaccurately. As with all research, market research is susceptible to errors—sneaky, subtle, and seemingly minor missteps can creep into your data collection and potentially undermine the quality of the data you're collecting. Any mistake spells trouble and can degrade the accuracy of your data, generate meaningless and random data instead of helpful insights, and skew the subsequent extrapolations that will be made using that information.

Since the goal of market research is to make inferences about a population of interest, errors that throw the entire dataset into question therefore compromise that dataset's predictive power. Any error takes the research one step farther from giving accurate results and feasible predictions.

Bad market research can also be a liability, and the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' research isn't always obvious to the untrained eye. Even the most well-intentioned researchers must be careful of the danger lurking in common errors. Falling victim to these errors may cause large discrepancies in your data; however, these errors are so common, they are often difficult to spot!

Positioning Your Organization for Market Research Success

Before you position your organization for success and take the path to greater customer understanding by market research, it's important to know the common pitfalls you might encounter and how to avoid wasting your resources on a research program that produces untrustworthy data.

In this article, we go over some common mistakes that are most likely to find their way into your outreach and tamper with your data, as well as offer several remedies, best practices, tips, and steps you can take to prevent each of those errors from occurring in the first place.

With this in mind, here's a quick look at 3 common missteps that you should familiarize yourself with. Even if some of the common mistakes listed here seem familiar or obvious to you, it is always good practice to continuously review these crimes of research design and keep them in mind before you embark upon a new research campaign. Keeping these mistakes on your radar and off your rap sheet will prevent lost time and money, yield reliable and top-quality data, and empower you to deliver thoughtful insights that you need to make informed decisions.





#1: Ambiguous or Unclear Questions

One of the most common mistakes seen in market research is being unclear about what exactly it is you are trying to ask. If your question isn't precise or has vague meaning, the analysis will be open to interpretation and your findings may be incorrect.

The reason ambiguous questions are so common is because it's very easy to write questions from your own perspective rather than from the perspective of someone else. For instance, while the question **'How concerned with each of the following are you?'** might seem reasonable at first glance, the word 'concern' is a broad term with a wide range of implications. **'I'm concerned about traffic'** could mean **'traffic makes my journey longer'** to one person but to another person could mean **'traffic makes me feel unsafe and increases the likelihood of accidents.'**

The Fix

Be clear about what specific information you want. Take the time to carefully proofread and ensure your question doesn't confuse respondents or create overlap between two concepts that aren't associated with each other.

For the above example, consider asking about traffic safety and traffic congestion in two separate questions. When it comes to analysis, there will be less debate about what your respondents are actually referring to.

Clarity is important in market research. If respondents aren't able to easily understand your questions and answer choices, you will end up with bad responses that don't make sense.



#2: Leading and Loaded Questions

In the same way unclear questions can contribute to poor market research, so too can leading or loaded questions. The difference, in this case, is that the questions themselves sway or prejudice the responses you receive by increasing the likelihood of respondents picking a particular answer choice.

More specifically, a leading question uses context-heavy wording that essentially elicits a positive or negative perception in the respondent's mind. This "leads" or forces them to answer a question in a certain way, which may not accurately reflect their actual opinion or situation.

By contrast, a loaded question is one that contains an unverified assumption. In environments where answering a question is mandatory to move forward, loaded questions yield disingenuous and often non-replicable data.

Implying there is a right and wrong answer will populate your responses with bias which, in turn, will throw off your data gathering and make the information you need less reliable. These common traps are often unintentional—it's possible to write a leading or loaded question that unknowingly encourages bias even if you aren't trying to fish for a certain answer.

Examples of leading questions:

1. *'Do you agree with the Prime Minister's harsh stance on immigration?'*

This question could lead some respondents to have a negative perception of the Prime Minister's position on immigration simply because the word 'harsh' is used. The question is biased because respondents might be subconsciously compelled to answer based on the leading nature of the wording.

2. *'Our restaurant was recently recognized for its excellence in customer service. How satisfied are you with the service you received from our dedicated, top-rated staff?'*

This is a leading question because the preamble as well as the actual question signals to the respondent that the wait staff are highly rated, which may lead a respondent to discount a less than satisfactory experience.

3. *'Are you excited to try our amazing state-of-the-art product?'*

This question uses leading language when describing and highlighting information about the product—particularly the two subjective adjectives 'amazing' and 'state-of-the-art'—which may lead the respondent to a positive answer. The question also assumes that the respondent is in an 'excited' emotional state, which is likely inaccurate.

As a worst case, a respondent who does not share this judgment may feel uncomfortable, irritated, or confused about how to answer accurately which will cause them to stop answering questions. This question may even lead the respondent to believe the company is trying to manipulate them into providing a positive answer.

Examples of loaded questions:

4. *'Do you enjoy drinking wine?'*

This is a loaded question because it assumes the respondent drinks wine at all. People who do not drink wine or alcohol of any kind will not be able to answer the question truthfully. Forcing respondents to answer questions which don't apply to them often results in random selection of answers, which will hardly help your organization make evidence-informed decisions.

5. *'How frustrated are you with the school's response to your child's special needs?'*

This is a loaded question because it assumes the respondent is frustrated in the first place. A better way to phrase the question would be 'Are you satisfied with the school's response to your child's special needs?'

The Fix

To avoid leading questions, stay away from non-neutral wording—unnecessary and highly subjective adjectives that are either positive or negative. Adjectives such as 'great' or 'hard-working' can alter a respondent's answer by directly or indirectly leading them to believe a certain answer or argument is more correct than another. Questions should be clear, simple, and innocuous and should not skew or guide respondents.

Loaded questions are best avoided by ensuring every respondent has adequate response options so they can share their true thoughts, opinions, and values in an honest fashion. In the case of example #4 above you may choose to ask a preliminary question on whether the respondent drinks wine at all and use flow conditions to let people who don't drink wine pass or "leap-frog" over the question. Only respondents who answered that they do drink wine will have an opportunity to answer the follow-up question. This strategy ensures that respondents aren't answering questions that don't apply to them or that they're unqualified to answer.

If you're ever unsure if a question may be boxing in respondents with limited choices, including an "other" option is another good backup plan.



#3: Double-barreled or Compound Questions

Another top market research mistake is when two or more questions are combined, which can lead to responses that do not represent the intent of the respondent. Known as the double-barreled question, it is one of the most common oversights.

To understand the double-barreled question, just think about a double-barreled shotgun. It shoots from two barrels in one go. In the realm of research, the double-barreled question asks two questions at once and makes it difficult for respondents to answer either one honestly.

Forcing respondents to answer two questions at once is a great way to ruin your results. If a single question has two subjects, it's impossible to tell how the respondent is weighing and prioritizing the different elements involved in their response choice. Questions should always be written such that only one thing is being measured.

Examples of double-barreled questions:

1. *'Which restaurant has the best price and quality?'*

Some respondents may answer with a restaurant that they feel has the best price, while others will respond with a restaurant that they feel has the best quality. It is possible – even likely – that the restaurant with the best price isn't the highest quality.

2. *'How satisfied are you with the pay and benefits of your current job?'*

This is double-barreled because some respondents will give more weight to pay and others will answer while giving more weight to benefits. Crucially, you would have no way of knowing the difference.

3. *'Is your company's workplace culture fun and productive?'*

This example asks two questions but only allows for one answer. While having fun and being productive aren't necessarily mutually exclusive, this two-pronged question is unclear as to which part respondents should focus on. It will fail to capture respondents who think the workplace culture is fun but not productive and vice versa, so respondents will either misrepresent their true feelings or fail to answer at all.

The Fix

As you can probably already see, the fix for a double-barreled question is a matter of simply splitting it up into separate questions. Dividing double-barreled questions into multiple distinct pieces—each centered on a specific idea, objective, opinion, variable, or piece of feedback—will ensure respondents know clearly what you're actually asking and what exactly they're agreeing or disagreeing with.

In the above examples, it makes sense to break the questions into two. For instance, *'Please rate the cleanliness of the hotel room and lobby'* should be *'Please rate the cleanliness of the hotel room'* and *'Please rate the cleanliness of the hotel lobby.'* As another example, *'Was the training comprehensive and easy to understand?'* should be *'Was the training comprehensive?'* and *'Was the training easy to understand?'*

The telltale signs of double-barreled questions or answers are the conjunctions "and" and "or." If you need a conjunction, it's likely you're jamming questions together and asking about multiple things. When you give your questions a proofreading scan, check specifically for conjunctions. If you see a double-barreled question, fix it by asking one question at a time.



Wrap-Up

Market research may seem like a walk in the park until you realize how many ways there are to do it poorly. Conducting market research is both an art and a science—a question that makes perfect sense to you might be utterly confusing to someone else.

These are a few of the most common gaffes that amateur market researchers tend to commit; however, this is not an exhaustive list. Looking out for these red flags is only the beginning of becoming a proficient market researcher—there are many more you'll need to be conscious of.

Now that you have a better idea of how to recognize the most common mistakes and errors to watch, it will become easier to gather reliable intel with confidence, improve the resulting data quality, and draw accurate conclusions. If you focus on avoiding these pitfalls, you'll be well on your way to ensuring robust market research success.

Go through these guidelines whenever you're planning on starting a new research project to avoid these common mistake types. Integrating the strategies in this guide will ensure that your research is accurate and helps your organization reach its future goals with confidence.



Interested in unlocking the full potential of market research?

There's no way around it—you need to do market research. Conducting high-quality market research on a consistent basis is one of the most important things a business can do to set a path forward and succeed in today's quickly changing economy.

All too often, businesses downplay the importance of engaging the experts when embarking on market research. Companies that treat market research as inessential will invariably find themselves playing catch-up to their competitors. Those that make the effort to incorporate consistent research will have a big payoff down the line.

When thoughtfully and correctly executed, market research can be an effective means of collecting data and unlocking powerful, critical, and actionable insights that grow and improve your business.

Looking for a partner to conduct high-quality market research and analyze the results with accuracy? [Contact us](#) to learn more!



10339 124 St #700, Edmonton, AB T5N 3W1
Telephone: 780-421-1199
Toll Free: 1-877-421-1199
Email: info@pivotalresearch.ca

