Questions to Ask Your Survey Vendor

Experience

Do they have experience conducting demographic and health policy research?

Your survey vendor should be able to give you descriptions of past health policy surveys they have completed. These descriptions should include the goals of the research, the scope of the project (e.g., number of interviews, budget), the methodology used, the success of the project (e.g., response rates $\leq$ 70%, completed on schedule) and deliverables they produced (e.g., ASCII data file, survey methodology report, etc.). Some vendors specialize in market research. We recommend that you avoid using these vendors. Typically, market research does not require the same level of quality standards that policy research does.

What are the qualifications of their research staff?

The education and training of the research staff is an indicator of the vendor's capabilities. Good survey vendors have statisticians and survey researchers with graduate-level degrees (in statistics, economics, sociology, public policy, etc.) who appreciate the intricacies of collecting data that is valid and reliable.

Does the survey vendor have any examples of publications that have been produced from their research projects?

Your survey vendor should be able to provide you with examples of publications that have been produced using data they have collected. These publications could be papers on survey methods, policy papers in academic journals, formal reports to government agencies, or newspaper articles.

Is the survey vendor a member of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)?

We encourage you to choose a vendor that is a member of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). These vendors abide by a common code of ethics and have information on best practice guidelines that promote the collection of high quality data. The AAPOR web site is www.aapor.org.

Interviewing Capabilities

Do they use CATI?

CATI stands for Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing. Nearly all survey vendors use some form of CATI. CATI has a number of features that facilitate telephone data collection. Your vendor should be able to explain what these features are and how they use them. For example, if an interviewer reaches a respondent at an inconvenient time, they can schedule a callback in the CATI system. When the scheduled time arrives, a notification appears on an interviewer's screen and prompts them to make the call. This callback feature enhances response rates. CATI can produce sample dispositions at any time during the fielding of your study. This allows you to track the progress of your project. CATI reduces interviewer error because it has all the skip

patterns programmed. Surveys done on paper require that the answers later be keypunched into a data set. CATI is more efficient. It does not require this step because it produces a computerized data set.

Do they have enough interviewers to conduct your project in a timely manner?

Your survey vendor should give you a description of their telephone survey operations. They should be able to tell you how many interviewers they can devote to your project and whether they can meet your time line requirements.

Do they have experienced interviewing staff?

Your survey vendor should tell you about the experience of their interviewers. It is not uncommon for there to be a high turnover rate for interviewing staff. Ask your vendor how many experienced interviewers they can commit to your project. A typical and very acceptable scenario is to have a combination of experienced interviewers (e.g., more than 2 years) and less experienced interviewers (e.g., less than 2 months) assigned to your project. An unacceptable scenario is to have the majority of interviewers assigned to your project be inexperienced interviewers.

How do they train their interviewers?

Your survey vendor should tell you their interviewer training procedures. What do they typically do to train their interviewers before putting a study on-line? Good survey vendors will use training manuals for each project that include a "Q-by-Q" (question-by-question) description of each item on the survey. They may also have help sheets for interviewers to use when they are on the phone that provide answers to frequently asked questions or probes for difficult questions. You should request to see an example of training materials they have used in the past.

Do they monitor interviews? If so, how much will they do for your project?

Monitoring interviews literally means "listening in" while an interviewer conducts a survey. Monitoring is particularly useful at the beginning of a survey. It allows you to check that interviewers are administering the survey correctly and it also allows you to identify items that are difficult for respondents. Your survey vendor should monitor at least 10% of your surveys.

How many times will they call a respondent for a first contact?

Your survey vendor should tell you how many times they will call a respondent to establish a first contact before they consider the sample "dead" or a "non-contact" case (meaning they will no longer attempt to call that respondent). This is something you can specify in your contract with the vendor. We recommend a minimum of 10 calls before considering a piece of sample dead or a non-contact case.

What is their sample-to-completes ratio?

The ratio of the number of respondents in the sample to the number of completes desired is an indicator of how much effort the survey vendor puts into working your sample. The less your sample is worked, the less representative your data will be. We recommend that your sample-to-completes ratio be five or less.

Data Cleaning

Do they have a coding staff?

Survey vendors often have coding departments who will code open-ended and "other (specify:)" questions. Your vendor should be able to tell you about their coding staff and the procedures they use. For example, the coding staff may read through the first one hundred actual responses to the open-end and develop a list of codes. You may ask your vendor if they will share the list of codes with you before using it to code the surveys.

What data cleaning do they typically do?

Your survey vendor should have computer programmers on staff who will check the data after it is collected to identify and correct errors. For instance, they should check that all of the responses are in the appropriate range, that there is consistency between responses (e.g., if a respondent indicated they had a child, there should be information in the child section of the survey) and that all of the skip patterns in the questionnaire were followed correctly.

What data management software do they use?

The computer software programs that a survey vendor's data cleaning department uses is an indicator of their level of expertise. A good vendor will use more sophisticated programs such as SAS, SPSS, Access, Paradox, Oracle, etc. A less experienced vendor may use some type of spreadsheet software such as Excel.

How do they handle data privacy?

Your survey vendor should be able to tell you their policy on data privacy. A good survey vendor will abide by a data privacy policy such as the one used by the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO) (web-site address: www.casro.org). Your survey vendor should be able to tell you what they require of their staff and how they store the data at the completion of the study. Some vendors will remove all identifying information from the data set and will store it in a locked storage space for a specified number of years.

Deliverables

Will they provide you sample disposition information while the study is in the field and at the end of the study?

Your survey vendor should be able and willing to provide you with sample dispositions during the course of your survey and at the end of the study. The sample disposition reveals how many calls have been placed and the outcome of these calls (e.g., number of completed interviews, number of refusals, number of cases ineligible for interview because the number has been disconnected or the number is for a business, etc.). If a vendor is working your study's sample appropriately, they should be willing to share sample disposition information with you. If your vendor is not willing to provide sample dispositions, you should ask for an explanation. It may mean that they are not devoting enough interviewing time to your project.

How will they give you the data at the end of the study?

You should ask your survey vendor what format they will give you the data in at the end of the study. A good survey vendor should be able to provide a copy of the data on disk or via e-mail to you in a number of formats (e.g., ASCII, SAS, SPSS, etc.). Again, this is an indicator of their level of sophistication and expertise.

Will they provide you a survey methodology report?

Your survey vendor should be able to provide you with a survey methodology report at the end of the survey. A good vendor will be conscientious in tracking the procedure used and outcome of each phase of the data collection process. The report should include a description of the sampling frame, the survey instrument, interviewer training, coding procedures, cleaning procedures, response rates, and a sample disposition.