



“Aspirin,” “Kerosene,” “Data Quality”: Are These All Generics?

There are certain brand names that over time have been used so prolifically that they have lost their individuality and become generic words. Aspirin and kerosene are two examples. Xerox and Kleenex are two others that have fought long and hard to remain brands. I fear that for marketing research professionals, we may be approaching a similar fate for “data quality.” The term has become so debated and ubiquitous that it may be losing its meaning.

Back in the day, some of my business school friends used to joke about playing a game called Buzzword Bingo: Every time a professor used a term that had become so hackneyed as to lose its meaning, like “shareholder value” or “core competencies,” they marked a card until someone got “Bingo.” Is the term “data quality” becoming just another blank on your “Buzzword Bingo” card?

Look at the agenda of any recent MR conference, or the pages of our trade publications, and data quality is clearly getting a lot of attention and conversation. Unfortunately, it seems there isn't a lot of consensus on what data quality means or what it stands for. Some in our profession have questioned the magnitude of the issue. Most, I would venture, have divergent opinions on its true definition. Others debate which elements of the marketing research value chain (another buzzword) should harness the responsibility to maintain data quality.

Your association and allied organizations are all working both collectively and independently to frame the issue and to search for solutions. It's a necessary battle, and MRA will continue to take a lead role in waging it. I can, however, wonder aloud, whether this battle is ultimately winnable.

Like everyone, I have opinions, and fortunately I have a venue in which to express them publicly. I firmly believe that data quality in marketing research has become a concern. No, I don't believe that the world is crashing down, nor would I maintain that the majority of research being performed has major data quality problems. But I do see some serious scuffs in the armor.

At the risk of rehashing some of the most prevalent accusations of data quality breaches, my staff and I are constantly on the look-out for straight-lining in online surveys, satisficing, professional respondents, lack of survey validation, leading and poor survey design and poor sampling practices. I recognize that many less-than-qualified entrants have emerged on the landscape and that they're creating pseudo research


that clients accept – often because it is cheap or because they don't know better and/or because it conveniently creates that proverbial lamp post upon which a drunk can lean upon for support rather than illumination.


To that end, I take serious issue with some of the newer attempts to measure advertising effectiveness. These often begin by asking highly compensated online panelists to claim that they saw a specific ad in a specific issue of a magazine, and then suggest that these same respondents can rationally discern that the same single ad in a single issue of a magazine actually compelled them to take a specific action on a product. Much as we wish they could, consumers simply can't directly link behavior to stimuli in that way.

But let's return to my earlier point that there is little consensus on what actually constitutes data quality. You might suggest that my biggest pet peeve, above, isn't really a data quality issue, but rather an issue with overall project design or inappropriate use of research methodology. And therein lies the real challenge with which we must be aware when addressing such a large and difficult to grasp issue as data quality.

It is absolutely incumbent on each of us – whether we are a data collection firm, full service researcher or End User – to maintain an ethical and sound methodological approach behind every component of the research and insight derivation process.

But at the end of the day what we really need to be mindful of is not the process as much as its outcomes. To paraphrase an old favorite quote, the best marketing researchers understand that what matters most is taking the time to provide actionable insight and strategic direction framed by both the empirical and the intuitive and spending less time dwelling on the unachievable goal of creating a bullet proof process.

Obsess too much on the latter and we either lose the attention of those we need to guide, or worse, accomplish nothing. At the risk of filling in a blank on your Buzzword Bingo sheet, what's most important is that our work “adds value.” 

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