

THE NEED FOR AND STRUCTURE OF STANDARDS OF CONDUCT FOR SURVEY RESEARCH PRACTITIONERS

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In the preface to its Code of Standards, the Council of American Survey Research Organizations - the national trade association of the commercial survey research industry - states as follows:

...Our purpose is to communicate, to educate, to protect, and to represent. We communicate to ourselves, to the industry, and to the public about the changing world of research, keeping pace with the world around us.

We educate ourselves, the industry, and the public because the changing world around us requires our attention and commitment to understanding it and working within it.

We protect the public's rights and privacy by requiring a commitment to high standards from every firm that joins our association. CASRO's Code of Standards for Survey Research must be followed by all CASRO members. And we represent what is best about the research industry: an uncompromising commitment to ethics and professionalism, combined with the desire to know what opinions and beliefs about products, services, and people will shape and color our world.

One of the primary reasons for the founding of the Council of American Survey Research Organizations was to develop a set of ethical standards by which commercial research firms could conduct their businesses.

In 1975 about 25 research company presidents got together because they were concerned about the federal government's expressed interest in setting limits on the amount of survey research for government agencies that could be contracted for with outside independent research firms. The government's motivation for this idea ostensibly was related to the control and regulation of research studies. However, these research company presidents were concerned not only that their businesses were threatened, but also that the control over the research study design, implementation, and analysis would be more and more removed from the arena of independent professional researchers and become more and more enmeshed in the arena of professional bureaucrats. It was obvious to these founders of CASRO that they needed a set of standards that would help to better establish the professionalism of the industry. Subsequently, CASRO's by-laws were written specifically requiring the development of this Code of Standards. The By-laws now state:

As a condition of membership each organization agrees in writing to abide

by the Code of Standards for Survey Research, which, as revised from time to time and approved by a majority of members, is automatically incorporated into these By-laws.

CASRO's Code of Standards came about after much work and deliberation, drafts and revisions, and lengthy discussions, because the companies that founded CASRO represented not only a variety of research specializations, sizes, and personalities, but also variations in basic philosophy about how one does research and what constitutes professionally conducted survey research. The Code had to pass muster with legal counsel, be approved by the Board of Directors, and, finally, be approved by a majority of members. Then every member had to agree to abide by the Code or resign. The Code was completed and approved in mid-1979; no one resigned; and the Code, I believe, has been instrumental in the growth of CASRO and in rather quickly establishing its credibility within the survey research community.

While carrying out our responsibilities in accordance with sound professional standards always has been critical to the conduct of survey research, the articulation of these standards by our industry and our adherence to them are more important today than ever before because of the growing usage of survey research, the increased reliance placed on it, the widespread public visibility of our efforts, and the heightened possibility of malpractice suits.

Now for a look at the specifics of the CASRO Code of Standards. It should be understood at the outset that these standards do not deal with the merits of any particular research methodology or how to design a questionnaire or with any other technical aspect of survey research. Rather, these standards express rules of ethical conduct for survey research organizations and practitioners.

The CASRO Code is organized into four sections describing responsibilities to respondents, responsibilities to clients, responsibilities in reporting to clients and the public, responsibilities to outside contractors and interviewers.

While all sections of the Code are important, it is particularly significant and appropriate that the section on responsibilities to respondents is the first and the most detailed. It expresses two essential principles: (1) the principle of confidentiality, which states that "survey research organizations have the responsibility to protect the identities of respondents and to insure that individuals and their responses cannot be rela-

ted," and (2) the principle of privacy, which states that "survey research organizations have a responsibility to strike a proper balance between the needs for research in contemporary American life and the privacy of individuals who become the respondents in the research. To achieve this balance: respondents will be protected from unnecessary and unwarranted intrusions and/or any form of personal harrassment, and the voluntary character of the interviewer-respondent contact should be stated explicitly where the respondent might have reason to believe that cooperation is not voluntary."

The principle of confidentiality includes such specific applications as:

- (1) restricting the research company's personnel from the use of respondent-identifiable data beyond legitimate internal research purposes,
- (2) making the research company responsible for seeing that subcontractors and contractually-hired consultants are aware of and agree to adhere to the principle of respondent confidentiality,
- (3) denying clients access to respondent-identifiable data except for validation or other legitimate research purposes and then only with written assurance that respondent confidentiality will be maintained.
- (4) rejecting the use of invisible identifiers on mail questionnaires,
- (5) making it clear that the use of survey results in a legal proceeding does not relieve the research company of its ethical obligation to maintain respondent confidentiality and anonymity.

The principle of privacy includes such specific applications as:

- (1) making every reasonable effort to ensure that the respondent understands the purpose of the interviewer-respondent contact, including having the interviewer promptly identify his or her research firm affiliation and answering all respondent questions forthrightly and honestly;
- (2) prohibiting deceptive practices and misrepresentation, such as using research as a guise for sales or solicitation purposes;
- (3) respecting the right of individuals to refuse to be interviewed or to terminate an interview in progress;
- (4) arranging interviewing times that are convenient for respondents;
- (5) weighing the research need against the length of the interview so as to minimize the time burden, and never enticing respondents into an interview situation by a misrepresentation of the length of interview;
- (6) minimizing the discomfort or apprehension of respondents and interviewers when dealing with sensitive subject matter;
- (7) using any kind of recording equip-

ment and one-way viewing rooms only with the full knowledge of respondents.

The second section of the Code addresses the research company's responsibilities to clients. It states that the researcher-client relationship should be characterized by honesty and confidentiality, so as to foster confidence and mutual respect.

A survey research organization must assist its clients in the design of effective and efficient studies that are to be carried out by the research company. If the research company, either at the planning stage or after a study is underway, has any questions about the efficacy of a study design, it must make its reservations known to the client promptly.

A research company has the obligation to allow its clients to verify that work performed meets all contracted specifications and to examine all operations of the company that are relevant to the proper execution of projects in the manner set forth.

Research firms will hold confidential all information supplied to them by a client that is necessary for the conduct of a project and all information related to client projects themselves. And, of course, a research company may not make any public release of client-owned research findings without client approval.

Digressing for a moment from the CASRO Code as it currently stands, I believe now that the reality of market research malpractice has been thrust upon us, our industry could strengthen its codified statements about responsibilities to clients. We should state, for instance, in no uncertain terms, that it is our responsibility to develop a research design specifically for a client problem and avoid any tendency to force the problem into a pet technique or into a technique that is currently in vogue and to state even more forcefully our responsibility to be sure a client understands the limitations of whatever is proposed.

Back to the CASRO code, the third section deals with the research company's responsibilities in reporting to clients and the public. It states that the research company must ensure that all findings reported to a client or released for public consumption are an accurate portrayal of the survey data. The Code enumerates 13 items of information that a client report or public release either should contain or that should be available on short notice if requested. However, the Code specifies six items that represent the minimum information that should be included in any public release of survey findings. These are: (1) the sponsorship of the study, (2) a description of its purpose, (3) a description of the sample and its size, (4) the dates of the fieldwork, (5) the name of the research company that conducted the survey, and (6) the exact wording of the questions.

Further, the Code directs research companies to advise their clients that if they publicly disclose survey results that are incorrect, distorted, or incomplete, the research company reserves the right to make its own release of any or all survey findings necessary for correction or clarification.

This section of the CASRO Code of Standards is very similar to the Principles of Disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls, which were set forth - and which member organizations must subscribe to - in order to provide consumers of survey results that enter the public domain an adequate basis for assessing studies for themselves. Again, as with the CASRO Code, the Principles of Disclosure of NCPP are not meant to pass judgment on the merits of the methods employed in any specific survey.

The fourth section of the CASRO Code on the responsibility to outside contractors and interviewers simply states that a research company will not ask an outside contractor or interviewer to engage in any activity that is not acceptable as defined in the other sections of the Code.

The CASRO Code is not intended to be, nor should it be, an immutable document. Circumstances may necessitate additions to or modifications of the Code. Over the years several changes have been made. The most recent addresses the issue of gifts to clients and states: "Bribery in any form and in any amount is unacceptable and is a violation of a research organization's fundamental ethical obligations. A research organization should never give gifts in the form of cash. To the extent permitted by law,

the research organization may provide nominal gifts to clients and may entertain clients as long as the cost of such entertainment is modest in amount and incidental in nature."

No code of standards can ensure that no abuses will occur. Abuses by member companies may go unnoticed or unreported; standards cannot be forced on non-member companies. And there are, of course, legal restraints that automatically convey to an association when it writes standards. Nonetheless, the CASRO Code of Standards was written by professional survey researchers and is subscribed to by about 130 U.S. research firms that represent about 85% of the total annual volume of commercial research. This carries a lot of weight with those companies that want to behave responsibly.

The Code is enforceable when an abuse is committed by a CASRO member. There is a carefully written set of enforcement procedures. If a member is found to have breached the Code of Standards, that company may be censured, suspended, or expelled from CASRO. And, if appropriate, a public announcement of the action taken may be made as well.

The CASRO Code has united the membership, not only because it states in plain language the professionalism of our industry, but also because it relates this professionalism to our clients and to others outside of the industry. The Code has supported the industry, particularly in that all important area of respondent confidentiality. Finally, the Code has improved the image of our industry because it is a symbol of our professionalism and integrity and puts everyone - clients, the courts, even the government on notice that we are willing and able to regulate ourselves and, therefore, no one else needs to provide that regulation.