

Top 10 Fieldwork Scams

By Richard Bohrman

Where most of us try to make an honest living by toiling for years during much of our adult life, there are some who have a different viewpoint and consider that such drudgery interferes too much with holidays and other forms of enjoyment.

If not born with a silver spoon in the mouth and with shyness for a responsible means of earning a living, there is another way to indulge in the toys and pastimes of the bon vivant. Lost souls who walk this path of thin ice chase the fast buck. The more unscrupulous players of the game have given rise to an abundance of scams. Some are ingenious, others just banal, but all have in common the aim to get rich quickly through trickery. Here are a couple of famous examples.

The Nigerian Scam

Unless you live in a cave or on the moon, you have probably heard about this one. Here is how it works: the scammer emails you claiming to be a Nigerian official, businessperson or the surviving spouse of a former government official. He or she offers to transfer millions of dollars into your bank account in exchange for a fee; in this case, not a small fee, either. If you respond to the initial offer, you might even receive "Official looking" documents. Then the scammer asks you to provide a blank bank letterhead, your bank account numbers, and some money to cover transaction and transfer costs as well as attorney's fees.



Of course, you will lose your money and you will never see a cent of those promised millions.

The Ponzi Scheme

One of the biggest swindlers in U.S. history, Charles Ponzi's name is associated with the Ponzi "Pyramid" scheme; you know, the one allegedly used by Wall Street's Bernard Madoff to defraud unsuspecting investors out of \$65 billion.



In the 1920s, Charles Ponzi tricked thousands of New England residents into investing in a postage stamp speculation scheme. At that time, the annual interest rate for bank accounts was just 5 percent, but Ponzi promised investors that he could provide a 50 percent return in 45 days and a 100 percent profit in 90 days.

Initially, Ponzi bought a small number of international mail coupons to support his scheme, but then he used money from later investors to pay off his earlier ones. In his heyday, Ponzi made millions of dollars but in the end justice prevailed and he ended up broke and in prison.

Top 10 Fieldwork Scams

The market research industry has more than its fair share of fiddles, though blissfully not as audacious as the Nigerian and Ponzi scams. Research agencies and their customers trust interviewers and field supervisors - who are more often than not freelancers - to carry out their work with integrity and probably most of the time they do.

But there are occasions when such data collectors only pay lip service to whatever Code of Ethics they are supposed to abide by. And with varying degrees of cunning, they get to "Work" with their fabrications.

No matter how sophisticated reporting and analysis standards are, when the quality of raw data from quantitative fieldwork has gone astray, so do the conclusions and recommendations in the report. Any research practitioner with some years of experience will have come across dodgy data that carry all the dreaded hallmarks of fudging or "Massaging". Needless to say that major decisions influenced by such misleading information could lead to catastrophic results. As the saying goes: "Rubbish in - rubbish out".

Below the top 10 fieldwork scams that project managers may have come across. And if not, perhaps they serve as a reminder that due diligence measures to ensure quality fieldwork is fundamental.

1. Phantom Respondents

This respondent only exists in the imagination of the interviewer, who fills out a blank questionnaire at his or her own leisure. The more adventurous culprits may not even bother to copy responses from genuinely completed questionnaires.



2. Professional Respondents

Professional respondents could be friends or family members of the interviewer who oblige by giving an interview or participating in a focus group on whatever topic may come along regardless of whether they meet the screening criteria or not. With a reasonable robust pool of such respondents, the interviewer earns the spurs for being productive.

3. The Screening Dodgers

Interviewers continue an interview with a respondent when answers to screening questions are such that the interview should have been terminated. In some bizarre cases, interviewers have changed the gender of the respondent even when her name clearly belongs to a male.

4. Doppelgangers

Interviewers copy every other genuine questionnaire with some changes to avoid complete replication that a validation program could identify.

5. Incentive Poachers

Interviewers pocket the incentives meant for respondents. This affects the quality of data collection because an incentive instills the motive for (responsible) respondents to complete an interview as honestly as they can and may prolong his or her attention span for interviews longer than 25 minutes.

Another variety of this poaching is when supervisors claim funds for the purchase of incentives, but respondents never receive them.

6. Cluster Busters

This aggressive ploy involves visiting a single place with high footfall to attempt to complete as many questionnaires as possible in one single visit. Respondents' selection is indiscriminate and disregards screening questions and quotas completely. Any living soul will do.

7. Survey Trespassers

Briefed interviewers ask other (usually less experienced) interviewers who are not part of the originally assembled team to complete questionnaires without much explanation and at a lower fee. The culprit submits the questionnaires as his or her own and pockets the profit.

8. Questionnaire Shufflers

These are supervisors who re-assemble a questionnaire, keeping the section with screening questions in all forms, but dividing the main body of the questionnaire into two or more batches.

For example, if N=500 and the Lol is 20 minutes, the supervisor divides the questionnaire into two, whereby 250 interviews will be with the screening section and the first half of the main body

of the questionnaire – version A – and the other 250 also with the screening section and the second half of the questionnaire: version B. This effectively reduces the Lol to around 10 minutes and the interviewers will then accept a lower fee. After receiving all the questionnaires, the supervisor diligently completes the missing sections in version A, "Inspired" by responses in version B and vice versa.

9. Extortion Magicians

These are sly supervisors who lull a project or field manager into believing that fieldwork will be smooth, but purposely procrastinate progress in submitting completes. With a looming deadline for concluding fieldwork at a point of no return, pressure starts to mount and the project/field manager will by then more easily cave in when the supervisor "Suggests" a higher interviewer fee or incentive of greater value because "This is such a difficult survey". Miraculously, completed questionnaires then start pouring in, many of which interviewers had already finished during the initial stages of fieldwork but were not handed in. The supervisor slips the incremental payment into his pocket and more likely than not receives compliments from the project/field manager for "Rescuing" the survey.

10. Staged Back-Checking

When asked to record callbacks as part of a back-checking exercise, supervisors arrange the calls with their friends and family members who have been briefed in advance as to what to say.



Quality Control

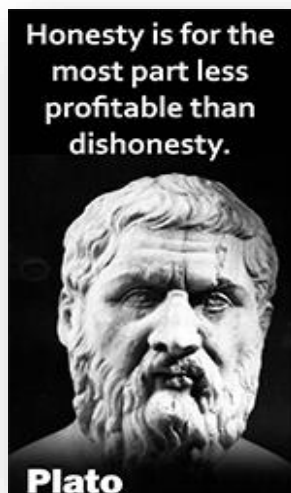
Fortunately, most interviewers do the best they can and rogues are an exception rather than the rule. But it is still worth the effort to keep rotten apples from spoiling the barrel.

Researchers use various tools for quality control with a validation program probably being the more popular one. It verifies the consistency of entered answers more systematically than manual scrutiny can. With online self-completion questionnaires, such logic rules are in real time preventing the respondent from continuing. This logic checking also occurs when supervisors inspect completed paper questionnaires before data entry, but this is more prone to human error.

Back-checking – usually through callbacks to respondents, but occasionally also by revisits - is the more rigorous of methods to weed out dodgy completes. Only, however, when quality controllers completely independent from the field team arrange it. Supervisors do have the responsibility to inspect the work of their interviewers, but this is like checking your own work, as the interviewers belong to his or her team.

The recording of interviews – audio or sometimes video – is theoretically the ultimate tool, but not always possible due to laws or respondents' refusal to be taped.

Quality control is an uphill struggle that is time consuming and requires investment, but definitely worth the fight.



Incite Quality Control Measures

F2F Interviews with Respondent Contact Details

- Field management fully logic-check completed paper questionnaires before data entry.
- Field management back-check at least 30% of interviews through recorded (with the permission of the respondents) call-backs. Quality Controllers, independent from the field team, listen to all the recordings in full or in part, depending on the evident quality. Furthermore, they back-check another 10% over and above the quality control measures taken by field staff and 10% of interviews that were already checked by the supervisor.

F2F Interviews without Respondent Contact Details (e.g. Intercept Interviews)

- On site continuous supervision by field management.
- Monitoring by independent Quality Controllers with or without the knowledge of the field team.
- Field management fully logic-check completed paper questionnaires before data entry.

Telephone Interviews

- Depending on government regulations in a country, all telephone interviews are recorded and independent Quality Controllers listen to at least 30% of the recordings per interviewer.
- If government regulations prohibit the recording of telephone interviews, field management back-check at least 30% of interviews per interviewer through recorded (with the permission of the respondents) call-backs. Independent Quality Controllers listen to all the recordings in full or in part, depending on the evident quality. Furthermore, they back-check another 10% over and above the quality measures taken by field staff and 10% of interviews that were already checked by the supervisor.

Self-Completed Online Questionnaires

- In case contact details are not available - e.g. completes from a panel - the data analyst assigned to the survey verifies that the IP addresses correspond with the areas of residence the respondents claim to live. Furthermore, the analyst checks the completion time (starting and duration) to help validate data integrity.
- With contact details, field management back-check at least 30% of interviews through recorded (with the permission of the respondents) call-backs. WRA Quality Controllers listen to all the recordings in full or in part, depending on the apparent quality. Furthermore, they back-check another 10% over and above the quality control measures taken by field staff and 10% of interviews that were already checked by the supervisor.

Data Validation

- The data analyst assigned to the survey, checks the entered raw data both manually and through a validation program.
- Thorough validation only leaves genuine fully completed questionnaires with consistent answers.
