

7.5: Ethical Issues in Marketing Research

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to

- Describe ethical issues relating to marketing research.
- Discuss ways to avoid unethical research practices.

The Use of Deceptive Practices

In marketing research, there are many potential areas of ethical concern. Each day, people share personal information on social media, through company databases, and on mobile devices. So, how do companies make sure to remain ethical in decisions regarding this vast amount of research data? Marketers must balance the benefits of having access to this data with the privacy of and concern for all people they can impact.

Too many times, we have heard about the lack of ethical decision-making when it comes to marketing research or personal data. Companies are hacked, share or sell personal information, or use promotion disguised as research. Each of these can be considered unethical.

Link to Learning: The Insights Association

There is an organization devoted to the support and integrity of quality marketing research. This organization, called The Insights Association (IA), “protects and creates demand for the evolving insights and analytics industry by promoting the indisputable role of insights in driving business impact” (Insights Association, 2021). Having a solid understanding of ethical practices is critical for any marketing professional. Become familiar with terminology, responsibilities, enforcements, and sanctions of the [IA's code of standards and ethics](#).

First, let's look at some deceptive practices that might be conducted through research. The first represents something as research when it is really an attempt to sell a product. This is called *sugging*. *Sugging* happens when an individual identifies themselves as a researcher, collects some data, and then uses the data to suggest specific purchases (Masters, 2019). According to the Insights Association Code of Marketing Research Standards, researchers should always separate the selling of products from the research process (Insights Association, 2021).

Other deceptive research practices include using persuasive language to encourage a participant to select a particular answer, misrepresenting research data subjectively rather than objectively while presenting the results, and padding research data with fabricated answers to increase response rate or create a specific outcome.

Invasion of Privacy

Privacy is another concern when it comes to marketing research data. For researchers, privacy is maintaining the data of research participants discretely and holding confidentiality. Many participants are hesitant to give out identifying information for fear that the information will leak, be tied back to them personally, or be used to steal their identity. To help respondents overcome these concerns, researchers can identify the research as being either confidential or anonymous.

Confidential data is when respondents share their identifying information with the researcher, but the researcher does not share it beyond that point. In this situation, the research may need some identifier to match up previous information with the new content—for instance, a customer or membership number. Anonymous data is when a respondent does not provide identifying information at all, so there is no chance of being identified. Researchers should always be careful with personal information, keeping it behind a firewall, behind a password-protected screen, or physically locked away.

Breaches of Confidentiality

One of the most important ethical considerations for marketing researchers is the concept of confidentiality of respondents' information. To obtain a rich data set, very personal information may be gathered. When a researcher uses that information in an unethical manner, it is a breach of confidentiality. Many research studies start with a statement of how the respondent's information will be used and how the researcher will maintain confidentiality. Companies may sell personal information, share the respondents'

contact information, or tie specific answers to a respondent. These are all breaches of confidentiality for which researchers are held accountable (Insights Association, 2021).

Although we hear about how companies utilize customers' data unethically, many operate ethically. One example is the search engine DuckDuckGo. The search industry generates millions of user data daily; most search providers capitalize on this data by tracking and selling this information. Alternatively, DuckDuckGo has decided NOT to track its users. Instead, it has built its business model on the fact that no user information is stored—ever. Ethically, DuckDuckGo offers users private searches, tracker blocking, and site encryption. In an industry that is continuously collecting and selling personal search information, DuckDuckGo is the exception. There is no concern about being hacked because no data is collected (DuckDuckGo, 2021).

Companies with a Conscience: Gallup



Figure 7.11 Due to ethical concerns around market research, companies like Gallup that specialize in market research must perform with high ethical standards to collect credible data so that their customers will value their work. (credit: "Survey" by EpicTop10.com/flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The [Gallup Organization](#) is a market research firm that specializes in understanding market sentiment (see Figure 7.11). Every year, Gallup completes an assessment of the honesty and ethical approach of different professions in its numerous polls. In the 2021 survey, nursing was the top profession in terms of these two measures (Saad, 2022).

Gallup's research led to additional findings about the state of ethics for businesses. "Ethical standards need to be at the core of an organization's purpose, brand and culture" (Khouri & Semykoz, 2019). But what about Gallup's own ethical standards? Gallup is "a global analytics and advice firm that helps leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems" (Gallup, 2021). To be proficient and well-informed on the variety of topics Gallup investigates, the firm must hold itself and its employees to a high ethical standard.

Gallup completes multiple polls and research continuously. To meet the high standards of its public, Gallup must perform these practices ethically. Each step of the research process is completed with diligence and intention. For those reasons, Gallup is recognized for its ethically backed data. Gallup is a global leader in market insights and has locations in seven cities within the United States and an additional 27 locations internationally. According to Chuck Hagel, former Secretary of Defense of the United States, "Gallup is truly an island of independence—it possesses a credibility and trust that hardly any institution has. A reputation for impartial, fair, honest and superb work" (Gallup, 2021).

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