



HEALTH CARE/MEDICAL RESEARCH



Quality as a differentiating factor

As the margins of speed and cost narrow, research quality will set providers apart

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Over the past five to 10 years, the number of research firms that include the ability to conduct primary research in the pharmaceutical or health care market in their list of client offerings has steadily increased. Primary reasons for the increase of health care marketing research providers include the proliferation of health care respondent panels, resulting in an apparent ease of access to targeted respondents; the leveling of the playing field that advances in technology provide; and the decreasing cost of this technology, mainly in the form of panel management and data collection platforms.

As a result of these developments, providers have been in a race to be the fastest or the cheapest provider of health care research. From a client perspective, the argument can be made that the increased competition has been a net positive for their research function, as healthy competition among providers in any industry spurs decreases in both cost and delivery times.

However, being the fastest and the cheapest is only a preferable scenario if you are running a factory. When your product is a commodity, the faster you can produce a widget at a lower cost will allow you to increase



market share and rise above your competition. But health care research – or any other type of research – is not widget-making. In the race to be the fastest and the cheapest, the focus on research quality has been overlooked.

As margins of speed and cost grow razor thin, resulting in near parity among providers, the differentiating characteristic among health care marketing research firms will increasingly default to the level of quality.

Quality encompasses more than simply the end product, for final data and the conclusions drawn from it are only sound if the means and methods of collection are also sound. Health care marketing research, like all specialized disciplines, requires experience, diligence and subject-matter expertise in order to be successfully executed. There are particular and vital nuances in recruitment, fieldwork

and validation evident in health care research that are not present in other types of research.

Thus it is the quality of the entire research engagement that matters, and in three distinct areas:

- Project initialization: accurate market feasibility, verified respondents.
- Fielding: health care expertise in the presentation of topics and survey design, anticipation of potential fielding challenges and proactive solutions to overcome.
- Results: 100% clean, verifiable data, validation of results and recommendations and insights in context.

In initializing a project, accurate feasibility sets the research up for success and this is where a quality, experienced health care marketing research partner can offer an advantage over other research firms. Feasibility within health care segments is unique and challenging. Whether targeting rare disease sufferers, specialist physicians prescribing particular treatment regimens or payers working with specific health care organizations, a reputable firm working in the health care space can draw on years of past experience to gauge specific feasibility with reliability and confidence. Moving beyond assessing feasibility, access to the appropriate research respondents is vital. The existence of a standing panel of respondents will not

guarantee quality respondents. Reputable health care research firms should have an understanding of each health care demographic and a relationship with respondents that extends beyond the digital world. Verification of credentials and identity are essential, as is a personal touchpoint at the conclusion of the research engagement. While online recruitment and digital fulfillment of research incentives such as gift cards or pre-paid credit cards may promise efficiency, these practices also increase fraud risk. Given that incentives for physician research in particular can be steep, having confidence in the relationship between your health care research provider and their respondents is important and protects your research investment.

In quantitative engagements, the way questions are presented to respondents is important, and in health care surveys, often the complexity or specific nature of topics requires a keen eye toward presentation of information. In addition, exactly how topics are introduced and explained necessitates a fielding partner who understands the therapeutic environment and can make suggestions for best practices. Experienced health care agencies anticipate potential fielding challenges and suggest adjustments to variables that can overcome any challenges. From past experience in particular health care demographics, workarounds or new paths can be suggested as ways to keep momentum. Providing interim data for clients to check ensures the final deliverable is presented in the most usable format.

Clean, validated data is the product of the foundational principles of quality built into the initialization and fielding of the project. Quality data is the most visible result of a well-executed research endeavor and allows for the development of accurate recommendations and next steps. Working with the client team, the research agency can produce insights that are not only actionable but draw from previous or established learnings and can be integrated with institutional knowledge.



While cost and speed are factors controlled solely by the fieldwork provider, quality is a more elusive target and will require clients and fieldwork agencies to work in partnership. Here are a few suggestions on how clients can help ensure there is a focus on the quality of the research engagement:

- Provide finalized specifications and project parameters so that feasibility and project timelines can be set. The more information that the client team can impart to the research agency at project initialization, the more the team will be set up for success.
- Communicate clear research objectives and disclose specifically how the findings will be utilized for decision-making. This provides necessary research context and can also spur suggested best practices for ensuring objectives are met.
- To place value on quality, purchasers of health care research should understand the relationship between provider and respondent, how compensation is handled and how fraud is prevented.
- Be available to make quick decisions based on fielding actualities. Be open to changes in project scope that may be necessary to achieve the project objectives.
- Review interim data and reporting and confirm any necessary manipulation or adjustments.

Of course, time and money will continue to be driving factors in the

execution of research. Budgets are a reality of any business and health care research providers will need to continue to work with clients in this area. Similarly, we know that market events and occurrences drive our clients' challenging timeframes and we need to be diligent about delivering on time. In addition, clients are in an unenviable position as insights functions are continually being tasked with doing more with less money. Instead of seeking out the cheapest option, the focus should be on the smartest option and this can be achieved by being open to a partnering relationship with a research provider, where one successful project builds upon the next.

As health care research marches forward into 2020 and beyond, there will be new techniques and technologies to uncover customer sentiment, perceptions and decision-making available in the researcher's toolbox, replacing older methods. What will remain constant are the three inevitable parameters of cost, time and quality. Research providers have greatly diminished any distinction in the case of both cost and time. Thus, the race to be the fastest or the cheapest research option will end as the commoditization of health care data collection reaches a tipping point. Going forward there will be a resurgence of the primary importance of data quality and both health care research providers and their clients will be better for it.

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