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Making Research Decisions: Informal Research Methods

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In a sense, research simply is listening and fact finding, and practitioners most commonly rely on informal methods when engaged in simple fact finding (Cutlip et al., 2006). Such research often is critical to organizations as they monitor their internal and external environments, track public opinion concerning emerging issues, and address potential areas of conflict with target audience members before they become problems. Informal research methods often provide organizations with quick and

inexpensive ways to listen to critical publics such as employees, community members, consumer groups, and government regulators. Despite these potential benefits, practitioners take a sizable risk when they use informal research methods as the sole basis for communication campaign planning and problem solving. Because these methods lack the rigors of scientific research, they have a much greater likelihood of producing inaccurate results.

What makes a research method casual or informal? As noted in chapter 5, one of the reasons researchers consider a method informal is that it lacks a systematic process. When researchers use a casual process to collect information, the results lack objectivity. The second characteristic of informal research has to do with the samples practitioners use. In informal research, the sample may be too small or the responses of sample members may be too narrow to adequately reflect the views of everyone in a population, known as *generalizability*. This does not mean that informal research methods do not produce useful information. It is important, however, to understand the limitations of the information collected. Informal research methods generally are useful for exploring problems and for pretesting ideas and strategies. It is not advisable, however, for campaign managers to use them as the sole basis for program planning and evaluation. With this in mind, in this chapter we briefly present some of the casual methods most commonly used by communication campaign practitioners as they engage in the research and planning process.

PERSONAL CONTACTS

The most obvious and common form of informal research involves talking to people. Practitioners can learn a surprising amount simply by asking people—ideally those who are members of a target audience or other relevant group—for their opinions and ideas. When political candidates or elected officials want to know what voters care about, for example, they may simply get out of their offices and ask people. Personal contact also might include personal experience in some cases. When practitioners experience the problems and benefits associated with a situation on a first-hand basis, it gives them valuable insights that they cannot gain by sitting in an office reading a report. Practitioners may find personal contacts especially useful when combined with scientific research methods. Contacts may help practitioners gain insight before they conduct a formal survey, for example, or help them understand survey findings that are surprising or counterintuitive. Although talking with people has serious limitations—a few people cannot possibly represent the range of opinions and behaviors that exist among all members of large publics—practitioners often gain valuable insights and ideas from their personal contacts.

PROFESSIONAL CONTACTS, EXPERTS, AND OPINION LEADERS

Practitioners keep in regular contact with their peers, friends in related fields, and others who typically possess a wealth of useful experience and knowledge. These contacts may be especially valuable for practitioners, for example, when they are planning or implementing a new program for an organization. If an organization interested in holding a special event never has conducted one, it makes sense for managers to talk to contacts who specialize in event planning and promotion to take advantage of their knowledge and experience. Veteran practitioners are likely to have a wealth of practical advice and their own set of contacts that can benefit someone new to the field. In some cases, managers may want to hire consultants or firms who specialize in certain areas of public relations, either for a single project or on a continuing basis.

Managers also may benefit by talking to recognized opinion leaders or those who are experts in a relevant field. This group may include, for example, members of state or local government, editors and reporters, leaders of special-interest groups, teachers and educational leaders, leaders of community groups, union leaders, or trade association managers. Normally, the procedures used to collect information take the form of an informal, open-ended interview. Practitioners use the discussion to glean information and insights from a select group that is uniquely informed about a topic. The fact that these leaders are experts and opinion leaders, however, raises an important point to consider when using this type of research. These people, because of their position, affiliations, and knowledge, do not necessarily reflect the knowledge or opinions of the majority of citizens likely to make up a targeted public. In this case, experts' opinions and insights are potentially useful and even important, but are not generalizable to a more broad audience.

In addition, their opinions will be shaped by the organizations for which they work. In fact, some organizations such as unions, trade associations, and activist groups typically conduct research that they make available for little or no cost. In many instances, such research provides valuable information and insights to practitioners and their organizations. In other cases, however, organizations may conduct research, not to impartially learn the attitudes and opinions of the public but instead to gather support for existing organizational positions and official viewpoints. It is easy to create a research project that looks formal and scientific but contains untrustworthy results because project managers used leading questions or a purposefully selected sample. When you use research that a different organization has collected, it is important to learn as much as possible about the research method, including sample-selection procedures and the actual questionnaires or other instruments researchers used to collect data. This will ensure

that you are aware of the potential limitations of the information you are using. Even with potential limitations, such information may provide unique insights only possible through meeting with experts or opinion leaders or by examining the information they have at their disposal.

ADVISORY COMMITTEES OR BOARDS

Advisory boards, standing committees, specially appointed panels, and similar bodies provide organizations with specific direction, help them plan and evaluate their programs and events, and help them identify and respond to feedback from the publics they serve. The nature and qualities of such groups differ widely according to their purposes. Public relations professionals often serve on the advisory board of local nonprofit organizations, for example, to help plan and direct their media relations and special events projects. Many local governmental bodies are advised by citizens committees as they address community issues such as urban planning, public transportation, or local safety issues. Other advisory groups may consist of employees, consumers, or students. In fact, any group an organization is serving or anyone who may benefit an organization through expertise or ability generally is qualified to serve in an advisory capacity.

Through their knowledge, experience, and insight, those who serve in an advisory capacity provide organizations with information critical for their successful operation. It is important for organizations to listen to advisory panel members and, when appropriate, work to incorporate their advice into their plans and actions. Members of advisory groups are quick to recognize when they are being used for appearances and when their advice has no effect on organizational behavior. In these cases, group members are likely to become a source of derision and potential conflict rather than a useful source of information and advice.

When organizational managers blindly follow the advice and information provided by advisory groups, however, they also may experience problems. The accuracy and validity of the advice provided by such groups provides a limited point of reference for understanding public opinion; it cannot possibly represent the range of attitudes and opinions held by all members of a target audience. With this in mind, managers must use information gathered from such groups as counsel only. Gathering information from advisory boards does not serve as a substitute for the scientific approaches organizations use to determine the attitudes and behaviors of target audience members.

FIELD REPORTS

Many organizations have field representatives who might include, for example, district agents, regional directors, or sales and service people. Often, these people have more direct contact with important target audience

members than anyone else in an organization as they work their way through a district. The activity reports routinely filed by some types of field representatives may be a useful source of information for an organization, especially if agents make note of customers' questions. It is important that supervisors encourage their field agents to follow up on complaints and undertake related activities that help them to monitor and evaluate an organization and its standing among target audience members.

A manager's desire to learn the truth is critical to the successful use of field reports as a beneficial source of information. Field reports—in fact, any formal or informal research method—will not be useful to an organization seeking to justify its actions. The information provided by those in the field only is useful when supervisors are willing to hear the truth from their representatives. Having said this, it is important to recognize that the information provided by field representatives has limitations. These people do not talk to a random sample of targeted audience members and so their observations and suggestions are based on selective information. Input from the field, therefore, needs to be given appropriate weight, and organizational managers should use other forms of research to confirm or disconfirm this information when appropriate.

COMMUNITY FORUMS/GROUP MEETINGS

Community relations specialists may attend community forums or other public meetings to better understand issues of concern to community citizens and the community members who are vocal and involved in an issue (Wilson, 1997). Organizational managers should not conceal their presence at such meetings but, in most cases, also should not be vocal. Managers who attend meetings to learn the views of others run the risk of gaining a wrong sense of opinion if they involve themselves in the process because they may temporarily influence or alienate those who might otherwise share their opinions. Instead, those who attend these meetings should report useful information back to an organization so that managers can consider the need for additional research and develop a strategic response to emerging issues or other situations. When conducted properly, this type of informal research helps practitioners monitor their internal or external environments, keep abreast of issues and opinions as they develop, and position the organization as both positive and negative developments occur.

TELEPHONE CALLS, MAIL, AND ELECTRONIC MAIL

It is in the best interest of organizational managers to listen carefully when individuals, whether local community members, consumers, members of activist groups, or others, go out of their way to communicate with them. Many people who have questions, concerns, or grievances never make

the effort to communicate with an organization. They simply may sever their ties with the organization or, depending on their options, complain to their friends and colleagues as they maintain a frustrating relationship with an organization they dislike. In an era of greater consumer sophistication and public activism, individuals and groups are increasingly likely to express their anger in ways that attract media attention. Depending on the situation and organizations involved, such expressions may include, for example, public protests, meetings with legislators or government regulators, demonstrations at shareholders' meetings, letter-writing campaigns, or other efforts designed to pressure administrators to respond to issues and change organizational behavior.

Organizations can track phone calls, mail, and e-mail to learn about issues, gauge the level of individual concern, and help determine how to address these situations. Toll-free telephone numbers, in particular, are a relatively quick source of information for organizations and can be used to help track the concerns and issues expressed by important publics. Proctor & Gamble, for example, had been the target of vicious rumors that it was a proponent of Satanism. At the height of the crisis, the company handled more than 39,000 calls during a 3-month period (Cato, 1982). The calls not only were a valuable source of information for Proctor & Gamble but also gave the company the opportunity to respond individually to consumers' concerns. Similarly, the American Red Cross analyzed more than 1,700 telephone calls in response to the public's concerns about HIV and AIDS in its blood supply. The Red Cross not only answered individual questions but also determined the informational needs of targeted publics by analyzing a brief form that workers completed for each call. This simple analysis provided the organization with invaluable information, even helping administrators determine specific words to avoid when addressing questions concerning the transmission and prevention of the disease (Davids, 1987).

Organizations routinely use toll-free telephone numbers to establish, maintain, and strengthen relationships with consumers. Butterball Turkey, for example, established a Turkey Talk Line to answer consumers' questions about all aspects of turkey preparation, ranging from thawing to cooking to carving. Staffed by professionally trained home economists and nutritionists, the line runs 24 hours a day in November and December and receives 8,000 calls on Thanksgiving Day alone (Harris, 1998). Butterball also established a website in conjunction with the Turkey Talk Line that offers a complete array of product-related information concerning food preparation, storage, and serving. Consumers can even sign up for the *Turkey Lovers Newsletter* at the site. The Turkey Talk Line and website serve as important reminders to consumers about Butterball's expertise in turkey preparation and provide the company with important information about consumers' questions and interests.

Organizational employees can track both regular and e-mail in a manner similar to telephone calls. Once again, tracking mail may be a way for organizations to discover issues of consequence to important audiences and help them assess the need for formal organizational action concerning an issue or event. Most of the time, those who write or call an organization have problems or complaints. As with many informal methods of research, the sample is not representative of the range of opinions and attitudes that exist among all members of a target public because it is self-selected. At the same time, however, organizations that dismiss negative comments, questions, and criticism as the off-base complaints of a few disgruntled people risk making a serious error in judgment. It is best to take all potential issues seriously, recognizing that the few who speak often represent the opinions and attitudes of a much larger but silent group. In some cases, early warning signs produced through this type of informal information gathering indicate a clear need for additional research to further investigate an issue.

LIBRARY RESEARCH

Almost any public library contains numerous resources of use to practitioners, including Internet access. In addition to books and other publications, many libraries contain comprehensive media collections that include, for example, years of national, state, and local newspapers and magazines. University libraries, and some state libraries if there is a state capital nearby, contain an almost overwhelming amount of material practitioners will find useful including reference material, special collections, archives, government documents, and similar resources. In fact, large universities typically have one primary library and several smaller, specialty libraries such as a business library or science library. In addition, many metropolitan areas contain special libraries or collections that are privately maintained by a business or association. These libraries contain a depth of material unavailable from other sources on specific topics such as advertising or broadcast history, some of which may be accessible online.

Practitioners looking for specific information or resources but not sure where to begin may find it useful to start with a reference librarian. These experts can locate a surprising number of directories, statistical facts and figures, studies, and other information, much of it now available online or in a digital format. If you are looking for specific information, the chances are excellent that there is a directory, abstract, book, or other resource that a reference librarian can locate, often in a short amount of time. Although the list of available reference materials would fill volumes, basic indexes include the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, which contains a listing of articles in numerous major magazines and journals categorized by topic; the *Business Periodicals Index*, which indexes articles in hundreds of

business publications, and the *New York Times Index* (also available online), which provides abstracts of news stories chronologically by subject. Other resources include, for example, the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, which also is available online or in a CD-ROM version and contains more than 1,000 pages of tables and data about aspects of the United States. It is beyond the scope of this text to list and explain the wealth of reference material available at many university libraries; however, this brief discussion provides some idea of the potential resources available.

One additional library resource that merits special attention because of its potential benefit to campaign planners and its ease of access is the Census Bureau data contained at many university libraries. The work of the Census Bureau results in one of the most abundant and beneficial sets of data available to practitioners, and it is free. The Census Bureau uses forms of different lengths when it conducts the census. Most citizens respond to a basic, short questionnaire that provides a small amount of information. A sizeable portion of citizens, however, fill out in-depth questionnaires that provide additional information of benefit to practitioners. The results indicate where people live and provide additional information, including demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, size, and disposition of their living unit, type of dwelling, and rental or value of their dwelling unit. This information is available for any individual or organization to use.

Campbell's Soup, for example, uses Census Bureau data to guide its development of products and refine its marketing strategies for existing products. In one case, marketers for the company surmised that Americans' eating patterns were changing and that breakfast no longer was a traditional group meal. They based their conclusion on Census Bureau data indicating that the number of two-income families was increasing, even though the number of members in a household were declining. The company launched a line of single-serving frozen breakfasts following additional research to confirm its conclusions. The product line quickly gained a sizable share of a rapidly expanding market. In another instance, the company used Census Bureau data indicating that the population was aging, along with other market research concerning the health interests of older people, to estimate the demand for reduced-salt soups. The result was a line of healthier soup products. In each of these cases, managers used Census Bureau data in conjunction with other market research to inform the company as it attempted to meet consumer needs and increase company success (Blankenship, Breen, & Dutka, 1998).

Census Bureau research results and a vast array of reference works are just some of the many library materials available. Other useful resources include trade and professional publications, archives, and other materials. Practitioners generally make the best use of these materials if they have as much information as possible when they begin an information search.

When practitioners are seeking specific information, they are likely to find an existing resource that contains the desired information, and both the library and online resources are excellent places to start the research process.

INTERNET RESEARCH

The Internet, which began as a computer network to share information among multiple locations in the 1960s, has proven itself to be an irreplaceable tool in the collection and distribution of information. The Internet is an almost instantaneous source of an astounding amount of information and it allows organizations to communicate directly to potentially interested individuals with no media gatekeeper and few conventional geographic, political, or legal boundaries. The Internet allows organizations to conduct competitor research, place key documents online to promote themselves, build customer relationships, sell products and services, and more. Every business with a website is a potential publisher, and most organizations provide a wide range of promotional literature, product and service manuals, annual reports, position papers, speech texts, customer resources, and other materials online. Powerful search engines allow everyone from elementary school students to communication professionals to learn about and access these documents easily.

Organizations also may actively solicit information over the Internet by posting questionnaires or by using bulletin board systems and chat groups that allow people to “talk” online. In fact, this form of communication greatly broadens the range of experts that practitioners can contact for advice or other important information. Keep in mind, however, that not everyone engaged in online communication is listening or participating in an attempt to be helpful to an organization. The advice or other information received from an unknown online source may be from an experienced professional, a college freshman, or a fourth grader (Wilson, 1997).

This certainly is the case with web logs, or blogs, which are online diaries kept by individuals who write about nearly anything that interests them. Bloggers gained notoriety when they were among the first to expose problems with a CBS News report concerning the military service of President George W. Bush, and practitioners were quick to recognize the potential source of useful information they provide including insights into the thinking of target audience members and their responses to issues and trends. Although some companies have tried to create blogs for corporate personnel and use them as a way to reach audience members, the majority of blogs serve a more genuine, if not mundane, purpose. When dealing with online sources of information such as blogs, bulletin boards, and many online surveys, it is important for practitioners to remember that the opinions expressed in these formats are self-selected and in no

way represent all of the opinions and attitudes among members of a target audience. Even with these limitations, however, online communication vehicles provide a seemingly endless array of potentially important sources of information to practitioners.

There are several thousand online databases available to practitioners that provide access to a previously unimagined amount of information, including original research collected using both formal and informal methods. Numerous online directories help practitioners find database resources, such as SearchSystems.net, the largest directory of free public databases on the Internet with access to more than 32,400 free searchable public record databases, or DIRLINE, the National Library of Medicine's online database with more than 8,000 records about organizations, research resources, projects, and databases concerned with health and medicine. One of the most important and quickly growing uses of the Internet for public affairs managers is to engage in issue tracking and other forms of information retrieval using online subscription databases such as Lexis-Nexis, Dun & Bradstreet, and Dow Jones News/Retrieval. Practitioners access these databases to seek information in news and business publications, financial reports, consumer and market research, government records, broadcast transcripts, and other useful resources. Online database searches typically provide comprehensive results with speed and accuracy. Although such services can be costly, their use often is relatively cost-effective given the benefits of the information they provide.

In addition, the results of research conducted by governments, foundations, and educational organizations often is available online at little or no cost. Such research may provide important information about trends and major developments in fields as diverse as agriculture, education, and labor. In each of these cases, online technology has made it possible for practitioners to gather a wealth of information with amazing speed.

CLIP FILES AND MEDIA TRACKING

Practitioners use media clips to follow and understand news coverage, to help evaluate communication campaign outcomes, and to attempt to get a sense of public opinion based on reporters' stories. In fact, it is safe to say that any organization that is in the news on a regular basis has some way to track media coverage, the results of which typically are organized into some sort of useful file system and analyzed. Although clip files do not serve all purposes well—as the Institute for Public Relations has noted, they measure “outputs” rather than “outcomes” such as changes in public opinion (Lindenmann, 1997)—they do allow organizations to track and analyze media coverage. When practitioners desire greater accuracy, precision, and reliability, they need to conduct a formal content analysis (discussed in chapter 9). Most organizational clip files and other forms

of media tracking fall far short of the demands of a formal content analysis, but still serve useful purposes.

The Clip File

A clip file is a collection of media stories that specifically mention an organization, its competition, or other key words and issues about which an organization wants to learn. In terms of print media, for example, a clipping service is likely to clip from virtually all daily and weekly newspapers in any geographic region, including international regions. Other print media that may be covered include business and trade publications and consumer magazines. Once a service locates stories, it clips and tags them with appropriate information, typically including the name of the publication, its circulation, and the date and page number of the story. Clients or their agencies then can organize and analyze the clips in whatever format is most beneficial, as Figures 7.1 and 7.2 demonstrate. Services are available to monitor all types of media outlets. Companies such as BurrellesLuce Press Clipping or Bacon’s MediaSource, for example, offer comprehensive services for national and international media. Organizations can arrange for specialized services as well, such as same-day clipping to help organizations monitor breaking news or crises or broadcast monitoring to track video news release use.

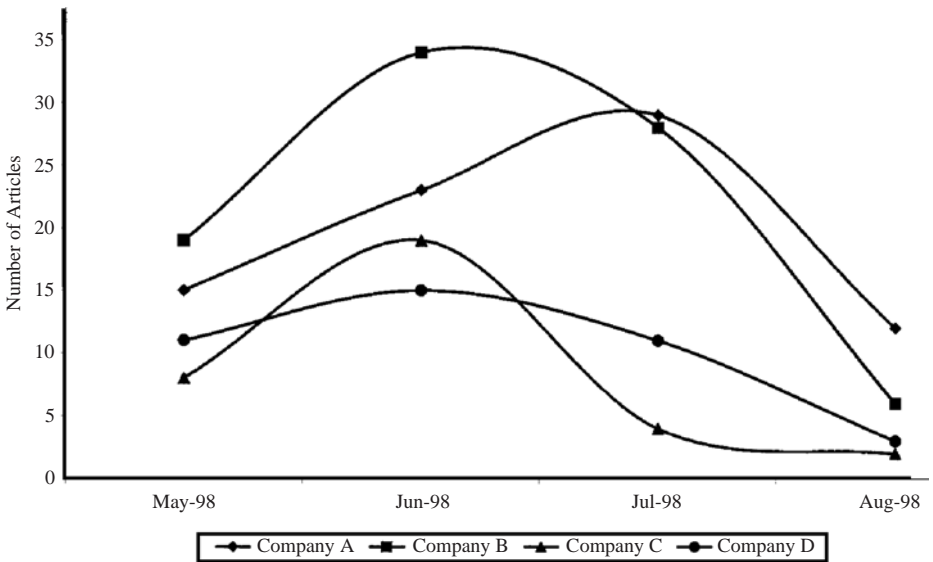


FIG. 7.1. Clippings organized by company and article frequency. Clipping frequency is one way for organizations to compare their media coverage with competitors’ media coverage. Courtesy of KVO Public Relations, formerly of Portland, Oregon.

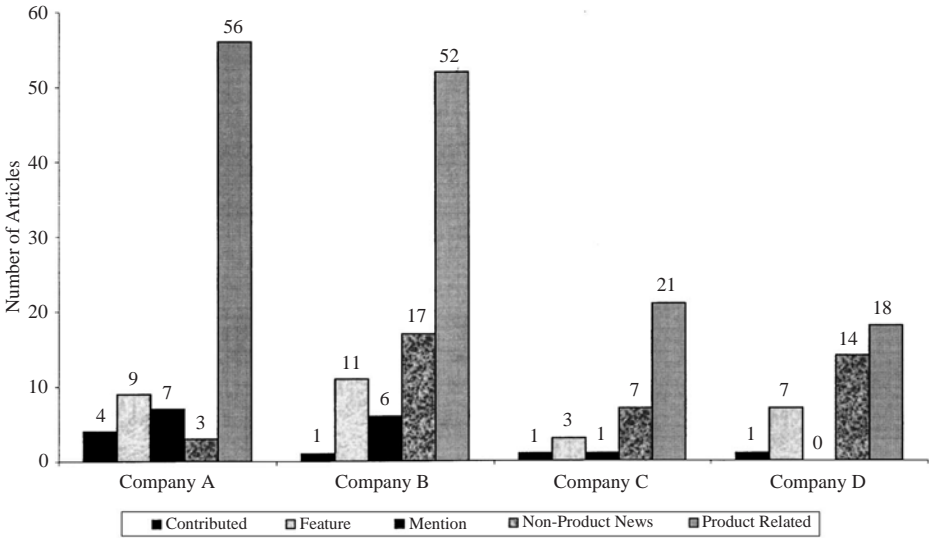


FIG. 7.2. Clippings organized by company and article type. Analysis of content in media coverage can provide organizations with information about types of stories that have attracted media attention. Courtesy of KVO Public Relations, formerly of Portland, Oregon.

Although differences exist among each of the services in terms of how they operate, a client generally provides a list of key words, terms, and topics that it wants its service to locate in specific media. The words and terms provided by an organization vary considerably but typically include its own name and the names of its products and services. Other information to track may include the names of competitors and their products and services, the names of senior management, or other important topics or individuals an organization wants to track. The client also may send its service information about its print or video news releases, public service announcement copy, or other material it expects will generate news coverage.

Practitioners can analyze clip file contents using various techniques. In many cases, they simply count the number of media clips a campaign produces and use their own judgment concerning the purpose of their campaign and the media’s treatment of a topic. Such an analysis may be useful for informal campaign reviews and exploratory decision making, but it lacks the quantitative specificity and accuracy necessary to truly determine a campaign’s effect on targeted audience, members’ opinions, attitudes, and behavior.

Advertising Equivalency

In an attempt to quantify the value of media placement, many practitioners compare the results of their publicity efforts with equivalent advertising

costs. It is relatively common, for example, to compare the column space and broadcast time generated by a campaign with the “equivalent” cost for advertising placement had the space been purchased. This method of clip evaluation allows practitioners to claim a dollar amount for the media coverage their campaign generates. In some cases, practitioners increase, or more commonly decrease, the value of publicity placements using an agreed-upon formula. Practitioners do this because publicity placements commonly lack some of the benefits of advertising: in particular, a specific message delivered to a specific audience and timed according to a planned schedule. The result is that managers sometimes give editorial placements less value than advertising placements because they cannot control their contents and placement.

This issue raises a point of contention concerning the benefits of advertising versus the benefits of publicity, and it reveals some of the serious problems associated with claiming dollar amounts for publicity media placements. In reality, it is nearly impossible to compare advertising and publicity placements in terms of their relative value. How do you compare, for example, the value of a full-page print ad that appears in the middle of a publication with a front-page story that publicizes an organization’s good works in a community? In terms of different publicity placements, how do you determine the value of a story on the front page with a story placed in the middle of a section? Or, how do you compare the value of clips in different media—a narrowly targeted publication that reaches an identified target audience, for example, with general media placement that reaches the public broadly? Also, how do you compare the value of different editorial contexts: a story that is positive, for example, versus a story that is negative or mixed? These issues, and more, present practitioners with difficult obstacles when determining the relative value of advertising versus publicity and when determining the value of different publicity clips.

Cost per Thousand

Another common method practitioners use to determine the value of publicity clips is based on the cost of reaching audience members. Advertisers, for example, commonly determine the most beneficial combination of media, programs, and schedules by evaluating and comparing the costs of different media and different media vehicles, as well as by considering the percentage of an audience that is part of a specific target audience for a campaign. One of the simplest means of comparing media costs is to compare the *cost per thousand* or CPM (*M* is the Roman numeral for 1,000) of different media. This figure tells media planners the cost of reaching 1,000 people in an audience. If a daily newspaper has 500,000 subscribers and charges \$7,000 for running a full-page ad, for example, the cost per thousand is \$14 ($7,000 \div 500,000 \times 1,000$).

Cost Efficiency

To determine the relative cost efficiency of different media, media planners use the same general formula but reduce the total audience figures to include only those audience members who specifically are targeted as part of a campaign. Using the previous example, if the campaign primarily is directed at males 18 to 34 years old and 30% of the newspaper's audience fits into that category, the circulation figure can be reduced to 30% of the total audience, or 150,000. The resulting cost efficiency figure is approximately \$47 ($7,000 \div 150,000 \times 1,000$).

Cost per Impression

Practitioners can use these same formulas to measure the relative value of publicity clips. Sometimes practitioners refer to publicity clips as *publicity impressions*. They can calculate the *cost per impression* (CPI) of publicity clips after they have completed a campaign and compare the results with advertising campaign costs or other campaign costs. In the same way, practitioners can calculate cost-efficiency measures of publicity impressions. CPM-type measures are difficult to use to compare the value of advertising versus publicity clips, primarily because CPM calculations are performed in the early stages of an advertising campaign and used for planning and forecasting, whereas a campaign must be over before practitioners can calculate final publicity impression costs because clips depend on media placement, which normally is not guaranteed in promotional campaigns.

More important, neither CPM nor CPI calculations measure message impact; they only measure message exposure. In fact, they are not even a true measure of message exposure but instead are a measure of the greatest potential message exposure. The exposure numbers they produce are useful in a relative sense but are likely to overestimate audience size.

Limitations of Clip and Tracking Research

Although practitioners can use any of these methods to quantitatively evaluate publicity-clip placements, these methods are relatively unsophisticated and must not serve as the basis for determining message impact or campaign success. In most cases, formal research methods are necessary to evaluate a range of campaign outcomes from changes in the opinions and attitudes of target audience members to changes in individual behavior. This is not meant to suggest, however, that the use of clip files is not beneficial as a form of casual research. In fact, there are various potential improvements on the standard clip file and several valuable ways practitioners use such information.

Diabetes is a disease that receives a large amount of media coverage, for example, yet many people fail to understand how to resist the disease. Media tracking revealed that, although reporters were covering diabetes as a disease, they largely were ignoring the link between insulin resistance and cardiovascular disease. To address this issue, the American Heart Association joined with Takeda Pharmaceuticals North America and Eli Lilly to produce an award-winning campaign to help people learn about insulin resistance, better understand the link between diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and help reduce their risk of developing cardiovascular disease. The campaign included a major media relations effort designed to reach members of at-risk publics. Postcampaign media tracking indicated that the program received extensive media coverage, including coverage in key media targeted to members of minority groups who were a specific focus of the campaign. More important, 15,000 people enrolled in a program to receive free educational materials, double the number campaign organizers set as an objective (PRSA 2005b).

It is important to reiterate a key point in the use and interpretation of media tracking and clip files at this point. As a rule, this research reveals only the media's use of messages. Of course, it provides information concerning a targeted audience's potential exposure to messages, but clip files and tracking studies by themselves reveal nothing about message impact. Sometimes the results of media placements are obvious and no additional understanding is necessary. In fact, in many cases agencies do not conduct formal campaign evaluations because an organization or client believes it easily can identify the impact of a particular campaign. At other times, however, it is desirable to learn more about a message's impact on an audience's level of knowledge, attitudes, or behavioral outcomes. When this is the case, clip files and analyses of media-message placement tell practitioners nothing about these outcomes. In addition, campaign planners who claim success based on media placements as revealed by clipping services and tracking studies may be overstating the impact of their campaigns. Although clipping services and media tracking may have some value, practitioners are unwise when they attempt to determine public opinion and gather similar information based on media-message placement.

REAL-TIME RESPONSES TO MEDIA MESSAGES AND SURVEY QUESTIONS

Technological advances have made it easy and relatively inexpensive for researchers to collect information instantaneously through the use of handheld dials that participants use to select answers to survey questions or indicate positive or negative reactions to media messages. Researchers can use these systems, with trade names such as Perception Analyzer, to administer a survey question to a group of people such as focus group

participants or trade show attendees, collect anonymous answers to the question immediately, and project participants' aggregated responses onto a screen. Once participants have had an opportunity to consider the result, a moderator can lead a group discussion about the responses and what they may or may not mean to participants.

In a twist on this process, researchers also can use these systems to collect participants' moment-by-moment, or real-time, responses to media including advertising, speeches, debates, and even entertainment programming. Managers and campaign planners then can use this information to help their organizations and clients develop more effective media messages and programming, for example, or determine key talking points for presentations and media interviews. This research tool, which we discuss in greater detail along with focus groups in chapter 8, has the potential to provide researchers with highly valuable information. At the same time, practitioners must use information provided by these services carefully. Sample size and selection procedures normally will prevent researchers from obtaining a probability-based sample so, as is the case with almost all informal research methods, research results will lack a high degree of external validity or projectability.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

In-depth interviewing, sometimes called *intensive interviewing* or simply *depth interviewing*, is an open-ended interview technique in which researchers encourage respondents to discuss an issue or problem, or answer a question, at length and in great detail. This research method is based on the belief that individuals are in the best position to observe and understand their own attitudes and behavior (Broom & Dozier, 1990). This interview process provides a wealth of detailed information and is particularly useful for exploring attitudes and behaviors in an engaged and extended format.

Initially, an interview participant is given a question or asked to discuss a problem or topic. The remainder of the interview generally is dictated by the participant's responses or statements. Participants typically are free to explore the issue or question in any manner they desire, although an interviewer may have additional questions or topics to address as the interview progresses. Normally, the entire process allows an unstructured interview to unfold in which participants explore and explain their attitudes and opinions, motivations, values, experiences, feelings, emotions, and related information. The researcher encourages this probing interview process through active listening techniques, providing feedback as necessary or desired, and occasionally questioning participants regarding their responses to encourage deeper exploration. As rapport is established between an interviewer and a participant, the interview may

produce deeper, more meaningful findings, even on topics that may be considered too sensitive to address through other research methods.

Most intensive interviews are customized for each participant. Although the level of structure varies based on the purpose of the project and, sometimes, the ability of a participant to direct the interview, it is critical that researchers not influence participants' thought processes. Interviewees must explore and elaborate on their thoughts and feelings as they naturally occur, rather than attempting to condition their responses to what they perceive the researcher wants to learn. As Broom and Dozier (1990) noted, the strength of this research technique is that participants, not the researcher, drive the interview process. When participants structure the interview, it increases the chances that the interview will produce unanticipated responses or reveal latent issues or other unusual, but potentially useful, information.

In-depth interviews typically last from about an hour up to several hours. A particularly long interview is likely to fatigue both the interviewer and the interviewee, and it may be necessary to schedule more than one session in some instances. Because of the time required to conduct an in-depth interview, it is particularly difficult to schedule interviews, especially with professionals. In addition, participants typically are paid for their time. Payments, which range from \$100 to \$1,000 or more, normally are higher than payments provided to focus group participants (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

In-depth interviews offer several benefits as a research method. Perhaps the most important advantages are the wealth of detailed information they typically provide and the occasional surprise discovery of unanticipated but potentially beneficial information. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) suggested that intensive interviews provide more accurate information concerning sensitive issues than traditional survey techniques because of the rapport that develops between an interviewer and an interviewee.

In terms of disadvantages, sampling issues are a particular concern for researchers conducting in-depth interviews. The time and intensity required to conduct an interview commonly results in the use of small, nonprobability-based samples. The result is that it is difficult to generalize the findings of such interviews from a sample to a population with a high degree of confidence. For this reason, researchers should confirm or disconfirm potentially important findings discovered during in-depth interviews using a research method and accompanying sample that provide higher degrees of validity and reliability. Difficulty scheduling interviews also contributes to study length. Whereas telephone surveys may conclude data collection within a week, in-depth interviews may stretch over several weeks or even months (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

In addition, the unstructured nature of in-depth interviews leads to non-standard interview procedures and questions. This makes analysis and

interpretation of study results challenging, and it raises additional concerns regarding the reliability and validity of study findings. Nonstandard interviews also may add to study length because of problems researchers encounter when attempting to analyze and interpret study results. As a final note, the unstructured interview process and length of time it takes to complete an interview result in a high potential for interviewer bias to corrupt results. As rapport develops between an interviewer and an interviewee and they obtain a basic level of comfort with one another, the researcher may inadvertently communicate information that biases participants' responses. Interviewers require a great deal of training to avoid this problem, which also can contribute to study cost and length. Despite these limitations, researchers can use in-depth interviews to successfully gather information not readily available using other research methods.

PANEL STUDIES

Panel studies are a type of longitudinal study that permit researchers to collect data over time. Panel studies allow researchers to examine changes within each sample member, typically by having the same participants complete questionnaires or participate in other forms of data collection over a specific length of time. This differs from surveys, which are cross-sectional in nature. This means that surveys provide an immediate picture of participants' opinions and attitudes as they currently exist, but they provide little information about how participants formed those attitudes or how they might change. A strength of panel studies is their ability to provide researchers with information concerning how participants' attitudes and behaviors change as they mature or in response to specific situations.

If researchers were interested in learning about young people's attitudes toward tobacco use and their responses to an anti-smoking campaign, for example, a properly conducted survey would provide them with information concerning participants' current attitudes and behaviors. Because children mature at such a rapid rate, however, their developmental differences would have a major impact on their attitudes and behaviors. One way researchers might examine how developmental differences influence adolescents' attitudes and behaviors is to track these changes over time. Researchers might choose to interview selected adolescents as 6th graders, 9th graders, and 12th graders, and even follow them through their first years in college or in a job. To test the effectiveness of an anti-tobacco campaign, researchers might expose one group of panel participants to specific anti-tobacco programs throughout their time in school in between data collection. For other panelists, they would simply measure their attitudes and behaviors without exposing them to any special programming

other than what they might receive through the media or in school. This project would provide researchers with a variety of useful information, allow them to develop some idea of the effectiveness of an anti-tobacco program, give them an idea of how participants' attitudes and behaviors change over time, and give them insights as to the role of developmental differences in adolescents' responses to health messages.

Today, some research organizations conduct sophisticated, large-scale consumer panel studies made possible through online participation. These studies can be based on sizeable samples and provide organizations that purchase the results with a variety of useful information that has been nearly impossible for organizations to collect in the past. Practitioners considering conducting a panel study or purchasing information based on panel research should be careful, however. Although information that panels provide may be extremely useful, the samples that organizations use for many panel research projects typically are not representative because they are based on a nonrandom selection process, are too small to be representative, or both. As a result, the results of panel research may suffer from low external validity, or generalizability. This problem typically is compounded by high rates of attrition, or mortality over time. That is, many panel members drop out of studies because they move, become busy, or simply lose interest. When panel studies suffer from large-scale attrition, practitioners need to consider the results they produce with caution because they most likely lack representation. As an additional note, although panel studies do allow researchers to examine change over time, they normally do not allow researchers to make causal determinations because they do not eliminate all possible causes of an effect. For these reasons, we treat panel studies as an informal research method and, despite the clear benefits of the method, encourage practitioners to consider the results carefully.

Q METHODOLOGY

Q methodology is a general term Stephenson (1953) coined to describe a research method and related ideas used to understand individuals' attitudes. This method of research combines an intensive, individual method of data collection with quantitative data analysis. Q methodology requires research participants to sort large numbers of opinion statements (called *Q-sorting*) and to place them in groups along a continuum. The continuum contains anchors such as "most like me" to "most unlike me." Researchers then assign numerical values to the statements based on their location within the continuum to statistically analyze the results.

For the most part, Q-sorting is a sophisticated way of rank-ordering statements—although other objects also can be Q-sorted—and assigning numbers to the rankings for statistical analysis (Kerlinger, 1973). In public relations, a Q-sort might work like this: An organizations prints a set of

verbal statements concerning its image on cards and gives them to research participants. Researchers then ask participants to sort the cards into separate piles based on the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each statement. The result is a rank order of piles of cards placed on a continuum from “most approve” to “least approve,” with varying degrees of approval and disapproval between each extreme. Researchers assign the cards in each pile a number based on their location. The cards in the highest, “most approve” category, for example, might be assigned a 10. The cards in the next highest “most approve” category might be assigned a 9, and so on. The cards placed in the lowest, “least approve” category would receive a 0. The resulting Q-sort would contain a rank ordering of statements that reveal the participant’s beliefs about the organization.

The number of cards used in a Q distribution ranges from fewer than 50 to 140. For statistical reliability, a good range for most projects is from 60 to 90 statements (Kerlinger, 1973). The sorting instructions provide a guide for sorting Q-sample statements or other items, and researchers write them according to the purpose of the study (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Researchers may ask participants to sort opinion or personality statements on a “most approve” to “least approve” continuum, or to describe the characteristics of an ideal political candidate or organization on a “most important” to “least important” continuum. Q-sort instructions also can concern fictional or hypothetical circumstances.

Finally, participants may sort statements according to their perceptions. In a political study, for example, participants may sort statements using “what you believe is most like a liberal” and “what you believe is most unlike a liberal” for continuum anchors (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). There are many additional anchors and instructions that researchers can use in Q-sorts, and the flexibility of the method in this regard provides a wealth of opportunities for researchers.

Sample-selection procedures are a particular challenge in Q-method research. It is difficult to draw a large, representative sample, particularly given the time requirements and intensive nature of the data-collection process (Kerlinger, 1973). The result is that researchers typically draw small, convenience samples (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). The use of small, nonprobability-based samples makes it difficult to generalize study results from a sample to a population with confidence. Although some might suggest the use of nonrandom samples is a limitation of minor consequence, the reality is that both theoretical and descriptive research require testing on samples of sufficient size—ideally drawn using a probability-based procedure—to produce trustworthy results.

Q methodology is potentially useful but also controversial. The research technique is flexible and may be particularly useful when researchers are exploring the opinions and attitudes of important target audience members. In addition, researchers can statistically analyze study results, and

Q methodology provides an objective way to identify and intensively study individuals' opinions and attitudes. Nevertheless, the use of small, convenience samples greatly hinders the external validity of study results. There simply is no way to confidently generalize results from the sample of study participants to the population they supposedly represent. In addition, there may be complex statistical concerns about the assumptions of statistical tests applied to Q-sort results. In particular, Q-sorts may violate a key assumption concerning the independence of participant responses and, as a result, this creates challenges for researchers analyzing study results. These imitations are the primary reasons we describe Q methodology as an informal research method.

In addition to these concerns, some critics complain that the sheer magnitude of sorting 60 to 100 statements or more is beyond the ability of most participants, and a high number of categories requires participants to make numerous fine distinctions among items (Kerlinger, 1973). It is clear that, although Q-sorts provide a potentially rich and useful method of exploring the opinions and attitudes of key target audience members, they have limitations that practitioners must carefully consider when interpreting study results. It is particularly important to consider the use of follow-up research, such as a survey that uses a large, probability-based sample, to understand the results of a Q-sort as they relate to a larger population (Broom & Dozier, 1990).

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is important for readers to remember that informal research methods typically suffer from several limitations that make them difficult to use with confidence. This, in fact, is the reason researchers consider them informal and casual. This does not mean that practitioners should never use informal research methods. In fact, practitioners regularly use informal research methods, typically more frequently than they use formal research methods. Because of their limitations, however, practitioners must interpret the results of informal research carefully and understand the limitations of the methods they are using. Considering the advice of selected members of a target audience, for example, makes sense in most situations, and such input can be an invaluable help when engaging in research and planning. At the same time, however, the prudent practitioner will consider this information for what it is—the opinions of a few people—instead of giving it the full weight of a scientifically conducted, formal opinion poll.

What does this mean for public relations practitioners? When possible, practitioners should use informal research to supplement formal research methods rather than to replace them. This provides practitioners with a variety of research results they can use to support the planning

process. Unfortunately, practitioners may rely on informal research exclusively because of limited budgets and a lack of time. In these situations, it is wise to take every precaution in interpreting and using research results correctly. No research method is infallible, but managers should use special care when interpreting research results produced through informal methods.