Research reports show devil's in (too much of) the details

Even without an academic study of the psychology of number perception, we know that large numbers are impressive, as are densely detailed numbers. Many researchers try to make their reports look like accounting summaries or engineering analyses in the hope of earning the audience’s respect.

It’s understandable; researchers feel they don’t get enough respect (it’s partly their own fault, but that’s a story for another column), but using numerical detail is not the way to get it. The detail helps to set up unrealistic expectations—a counterproductive effort in the long run.

Showing survey results in fine numerical detail may draw attention from the broad import of the data to the detail, a matter of focusing on the trees (or even the leaves) instead of the forest. It also provides an impression of information quality that is desirable from the researcher’s point of view, but potentially misleading for the user. Survey research rarely presents factual data that are both accurate (unbiased) and precise. Most of the information produced is a summary of hearsay, telling how many respondents said what. What they said may be perfectly honest but not necessarily right.

In what detail should our results be shown? Say we have interviewed 205 adults in a market and asked them whether they had visited one of our client’s retail stores in the past month, and 23 of them said they had. According to reliable secondary sources, the market’s adult population is 678,000. Projecting the survey result to that population yields 76,169 store visitors.

Showing the projection in that detail implies that we have enough precision to differentiate 76,169 from 76,168. We obviously do not, but how much do we have?

One sample respondent represents 678,000/205, or 3,312 adults in the population. That number is the “unit error,” the difference one single respondent makes and the smallest difference our survey can reflect.

An implication that it can reflect smaller differences—in effect that its results are precise to any smaller level—is dishonest. Projections should be rounded to the nearest multiple of a round number no smaller than the unit error. In this illustration, I would round to the nearest 5,000 and note that fact in an introductory note of the report or as a standard footnote on all pages showing projections.

Numerical nitpickers may object that we lose precision by rounding, but they are wrong; all we lose is the illusion of precision. We never had precision in the first place, both because of the unit error and because the population supplied by that reliable secondary source is itself imprecise to an unknown degree.

Even when results are not projected, the unit error should govern the presentation detail for percentages. So 23 out of 205 is 11.219% ± .%

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Innovative Brand Naming

By Thomas T. Semon

MARKETING RESEARCH

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