AMSRS
Australian
MARKET & SOCIAL RESEARCH SOCIETY

GUIDELINE ON GOOD PRACTICE FOR MARKET AND SOCIAL RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

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The goodwill and cooperation of the general public is vital to maintaining the viability of market and social research. People's experiences when they complete a market or social research interview can have a significant effect on their feelings about research and their likelihood of participating in future research projects. It can also have an impact of the quality of the data collected.

A short, interesting interview will likely be a positive experience; a long, boring interview, with a misleading suggestion of time needed or questions that are difficult to understand, may result in poor data quality (as participants drop out or do not answer thoughtfully) or lead to people declining to participate in market or social research in the future.

This document offers some guidelines for market and social research interviews, designed to:

- minimise the intrusiveness of research interviewing
- help secure the continuing cooperation of the public and
- maintain data quality.

The guidelines cover all types of research, by whatever method, including business to business research and screening interviews for participant recruitment.

1. Interview length and incentives

As a general principle, make interviews as short as possible, given the requirements of the research.

State the likely length of time an interview will take accurately at the beginning of the interview. Not doing this contravenes Rule 16 of the AMSRS Code of Professional Behaviour (the Code), as it is misleading participants in obtaining their cooperation.

A key determinant of how long a participant will spend on an interview is the method used. The following table gives suggested maximum interview lengths for different methods, based on whether or not an incentive is offered. Of course, the amount of time a participant is willing to spend will vary according to other factors such as subject matter and the ease of answering the questions.

There are, however other factors to take into account. A longer interview may be appropriate:

- where a substantial incentive is provided or
- for certain business to business interviews or
- where the inherent interest or variety of topics can sustain a longer interview or
- where the interests of the participant or of society in general are clearly served by participating.

METHOD	NO INCENTIVE	WITH INCENTIVE
Telephone	10 minutes	30 minutes
Mobile Phone	10 minutes	15 minutes
Face to face	20 minutes	50 minutes
Intercept	10 minutes	30 minutes
Online self-completion	10 minutes	20 minutes

The offer of an incentive is not appropriate for some types of participant, for ethical or legal considerations; for example, some business or government representatives. In these cases researchers are advised to take particular care to manage interview length.

Researchers may also take other steps to encourage participants to continue, such as stressing the benefit of the research or asking permission to continue, many online interviews are conducted with members of opt-in panels. These panelists generally receive incentives in the form of points that accumulate and may have monetary value. Interviews conducted online should still follow the interview length guidelines above.

2. Interview structure and language

Always structure interviews to maintain participants' interest and avoid repetitive or burdensome questioning, regardless of their duration or the interview method.

The language should reflect people's normal everyday way of speaking wherever possible, so that it readily understood by the majority of people. Always pilot test a questionnaire to ensure that it is clear and comprehensible.

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Bear in mind that literacy levels vary greatly and may be relatively low - the ABS data for the 2011-2012 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) suggest that 44% of Australians aged 15-74 years have literacy levels at the lower end of the scale and among over 60 year olds specifically this rises to 65%. (reference ABS catalogue no 4228.0)

Make sure that the subject matter and specific questions are appropriate for the people being interviewed; for example, special care should be taking in designing questions for children, people with special needs or people for whom English is a second language.

Interview language or structure may need to be adjusted for different interview methods; landline phone, mobile phone, online, self-completion or face-to-face.

3. Participants' right to withhold information and sensitive information

It is good practice to make it clear to participants in any research project that they may withhold information at any time.

The Privacy Act makes it a legal imperative that members of the public may withhold any information that is defined as being of a "sensitive" nature.

"Sensitive information" is defined in the Privacy Act to mean information or an opinion about an individual's:

- racial or ethnic origin
- health information
- political opinions
- membership of a political association, professional or trade association or trade union
- religious beliefs or affiliations
- philosophical beliefs
- sexual orientation or practices
- criminal record
- genetic information
- biometric information that is to be used for certain practices
- biometric templates.

4. Avoiding harm or adverse effects

Always consider how participants may react to the topics discussed in an interview.

Rule 8 of the Code says that: *'Researchers must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that participants are in no way harmed or adversely affected as a direct result of their participation in a research project".*

Harm is defined in the Code as 'tangible and material harm (such as physical injury or financial loss), intangible or moral harm (such as damage to reputation or goodwill), or excessive intrusion into private life.'

Some topics may upset people or arouse disturbing thoughts. Researchers are advised to offer appropriate help to participants who are concerned about the nature of any questions or disturbed by them. This can take a number of forms including making available the details of relevant help lines or websites that people can access if they are upset or worried about anything in the interview and/or talking with senior staff within the researcher or client organisation to offer additional help with the participant's permission.

With the growing use of mobile phones and tablets computers to take research calls and online interviews, it is incumbent on the researcher to make sure that people are located in a safe place either when they are invited to participate or when they choose to do so. It is also important that appropriate screening procedures are put in place to ensure that children and young people are not inadvertently invited to participate without the permission of a parent or guardian.

5. Qualitative recruitment screening questionnaires

Interviews designed to screen people for inclusion in qualitative research projects differ from other interviews: the information obtained is used in a different way and people are contacted on the basis that they may be asked to participate in further research. Researchers should detain the person for as short a time as possible, to minimize the intrusiveness of the contact, especially for those people who are not eligible to participate.

Screening questionnaires should:

- be as short and simple as possible and no more than a maximum of 10 minutes in length
- avoid complex qualification requirements that involve lengthy and/or boring questioning and
- only include questions that are relevant for selecting people for participation in the research activity.

Researchers should also consult the AMSRS fact sheet on Market and Social Research and Anti-Discrimination Law to ensure that screening questionnaires comply with legal requirements in this area.

6. Summary

In summary, researchers are urged to   make the participant experience of a research interview as easy and pleasant as possible. Doing this will maintain the goodwill of the general public and assist data quality for the research project.