How to effectively commission research

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This guide provides a checklist of things to think about, including the different research methods open to you, their uses and limitations and the insight you can expect from primary research. You'll find examples of key considerations and challenges to take into account when commissioning new research, such as costs and timescales, sampling, reliability, statistical confidence and report assessment.

The Audience Agency is a not-for-profit organisation created out of the merger between All About Audiences and Audiences London Plus in 2012.

How to effectively commission research
Audiences London Free Resource – How-to Guide

"Marketing research is like a taxi: it will go anywhere you want (providing you have the fare) but the cab-driver must know how to drive, must have a working knowledge of the Highway Code, and the passenger and driver must agree at the outset as to the final destination"

Webb, 1993, Understanding and Designing Market Research

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Section 1: Advising clients

Clients approach us with a research issue they feel they need to address, insights and ideas for action that we can add, or a skills set they feel we can offer. After a discussion to pinpoint more precisely your needs at a given moment, we may direct you to relevant 'How-to' guides or other free resources on the website, suggest a 2-hour surgery to give specific advice on research or marketing approaches, invite you to join one of our training events, or identify one of our research packages which will give you an ‘off-the-peg’ solution. Where your needs are more profound or specific, we will offer bespoke research, community engagement or consultancy services.

Audiences London works from the perspective that organisations’ level of motivation to gather information on its audiences is increased if they are engaged with what they will do (and do differently) as a result of finding out more.

Where a need for further knowledge is identified by you, the purpose to which it would be put also frequently needs further definition. As a consultancy of marketing and community engagement professionals, our role is to help refine these questions, so any research or consultancy will genuinely meet your needs and generate insights. The research should result in actions for the development of your audiences or your organisation, and we can help identify existing information you hold; or draw on our own knowledge and signpost you to other resources produced by external bodies. As an independent, research-based agency we can ensure questions are addressed in the most effective, cost-efficient way.

Section 2: Considering new research

2.1 Different research methods and their uses

Research approach	Uses and limitations
Commission full primary research	Usually the best option for a large or complicated piece of research, or where the necessary resources are not available (either skills or time), or for research where the neutrality of a researcher/agency would be beneficial
Establish ongoing monitoring processes	Often best set up by working with a research specialist, but then usually possible to manage and continue in-house.
Face-to-face interviews using fieldworkers (Fieldworkers approach people, and ask each question and record all responses)	Best for longer surveys, or more in-depth questions that would benefit from additional probing or clarification by a fieldworker
Assisted self-completion using staff/volunteers (ie staff/volunteers approach people and ask them to complete the survey, but then leave them to complete it themselves)	Good for low-cost, light-touch monitoring and evaluation. Best used with short questionnaires, asking simple tick-box questions.
Esurvey – one-off or regular surveys,	Again, good for low-cost option, and

Research approach	Uses and limitations
either sent to mailing list or emails collected on-site	technology allows for slightly longer, more complicated questionnaires than self-completion paper questionnaires. Although control over the sample is less, as it relies on self-completion.
Phone surveys	Good for getting a bit more depth of information than through self-completion questionnaires, and generally a bit cheaper than undertaking the same number of interviews face-to-face using fieldworkers.
Occasional qualitative research	Good to either explore an area about which you do not know very much, and therefore want to discover new perspectives. Or to dig deeper into a particular issue, usually as a result of findings from a wider scale quantitative piece of work. Qualitative work, done well, is fairly heavy on resources, and so should be planned carefully, and used for specific purposes.
Informal group discussions	These can be useful to gain some additional insight, or to generate ideas. Assuming that the make-up of the groups is not going to be representative of the whole audience, the material generated from group discussions should be treated cautiously. Skills required to successfully facilitate group discussions should also not be underestimated.
VoxPops	Great for generating material and quotes for marketing and publicity. Good to get an initial feel from an audience. Unlikely to provide robust data upon which generalisations can be made, unless the research strategy is designed in that way.
Build data-capture into existing practice	One of the best ways to start building a rich set of data is to incorporate key questions into existing activity (eg box office staff asking about information sources at the point of sale)
Participation activities - registration forms	For participatory activities in which people have to 'sign-up' to be involved, a short registration form can be a good way of capturing monitoring information.

2.2 What is your starting point?

- What size is your audience?
- How much of your potential/capacity are you achieving?
- What kind of relationships do you have with your audience?
- What data do you have about your audience?
- Who uses that data and what do they do with it?
- Do you do any additional research or information about your audience?

2.3 What is your capacity to find out more about your audience?

- How does any existing data or research support strategic aims/plans?
- What resources are available internally for undertaking data capture or research? eg money, staffing, time, expertise
- Is there additional resource accessible to commission data gathering?
- What potential is there to act on the findings?

(a) Organisations with ticketed events

For ticketed venues that have computerised box-office systems, there is potentially a wealth of information at your fingertips. We say 'potentially' because the extent to which a venue can make use of this information really depends on the levels of resources and skills within the organisation to use that system.

For ticketed venues that do not use computerised box-office systems, there is still likely to be a good amount of data that can provide insight about audiences.

Assuming data is available, and given appropriate resources and staff skills, most ticketed venues would be able to draw on the following key pieces of audience information, to give you insight about your audiences.

Data	Insight about audiences
Audience numbers	Size of audiences
Postcodes (either from transaction data, or from mailing lists)	Geographic spread of audiences Catchment area Hot and cold spots Lifestyle information from Mosaic profiles of their audience
Churn	The rate at which new customers are acquired and others lost or lapsed
Booking patterns of individuals (ie booking history, types of event booked for, repeat attendance)	Size of 'core' audience Levels of cross-over between production type or artform Recency, frequency and monetary values of individual customers

Data	Insight about audiences
Monitoring marketing campaigns	Which types of audiences respond to different kinds of offer
Cross-over with other venues	If the organisation is part of Snapshot London, standard reporting includes a report on the percentage of their audience that attend other Snapshot venues, and vice versa

(b) Organisations with non-ticketed events (eg galleries)

We would normally advise that establishing an integrated system of monitoring and evaluation is the best way to build up a picture of audiences for these events. This should be an ongoing, long-term approach, and embedded within everyday activities and processes to ensure that the impact on the organisation and its resources is minimised.

Audiences London has worked with a number of organisations of different scales and types, and can advise on successful approaches. In addition, there are a number of free resources on our website that can help organisations start to think about their plans, eg guidelines about monitoring diversity.

It is also beneficial for ticketed organisations to set up systems of monitoring and evaluation, as it provides additional profiling information (eg demographics), and additional information about audience motivations, satisfaction and impact of marketing.

2.4 When would you use primary research?

- To report to funders, supporters, board
- To record what happened
- To test new ideas and inform future plans
- To generate evidence to support decision-making processes
- To be able to respond to changing circumstances more quickly

2.5 What questions can primary research help to address?

- Who are your audiences?
- How satisfied are they with the service you offer?
- What are their perceptions of your organisation?
- What are the motivations of your audiences?
- Are your marketing materials reaching the right people in the right way?
- How have recent changes in policy been received by your audiences?

2.6 What insights will monitoring and evaluation (primary research) give you?

Any kind of information can be gathered through primary research activity. The main elements of standard monitoring and evaluation systems that Audiences London has assisted organisations to establish are as follows.

Data	Insight about audiences
Demographics (eg age, gender, ethnicity)	Whether different offers appeal to different groups Whether different groups are having different experiences of the offer Whether particular groups are over/under-represented, and how this relates to any targeting campaigns
Self-reported frequency	Levels of attendance at this and other venues Indications of venue cross-over
Interests	Topics/subjects of interest, to inform targeted marketing and programming
Sources of information	Which communication channels are reaching different audience groups most successfully
Satisfaction	The audience experience

Section 3: Commissioning new research

3.1 Key considerations and challenges for organisations wanting to use primary research

- **Ensure clear objectives from the outset:**
  - what is it for and how will it be used? Where are you now?
  - Where do you want to be?
  - How might you get there?
  - How will you know when you've arrived?
  - What will you do when you're there?
- **Only conduct research where real outcomes and action are likely:** there must be a real possibility of change
- **Remember to involve key stakeholders:** balance of internal and external input
- **Need to ensure appropriate level of resources are available:** time, cost, impact of doing it - allocation should be appropriate to size of problem/question (and organisation)
- **Should the research be undertaken in-house or externally commissioned:** availability of resources, independent viewpoint, expertise
- **Are there any training requirements:** to undertake, analyse, interpret, use
- **Consider the sustainability of the research approach:** especially for monitoring
- **Ensure cross-organisational buy-in and dissemination**
- **Consider using incentives to improve response rates or participation**: be aware that incentives must not be closely tied to the organisation's offer (eg free tickets), as this can be seen to be direct marketing, not research

– **Ensure compliance with the data protection act**: see www.ico.gov.uk for information about organisations' responsibilities about data

3.2 Examples of costs and timescales of primary research

NB: These costs are based on how much it might cost for an organisation to engage Audiences London in these activities. The costs may vary, however, depending on the particular circumstances or research questions. If you choose to work with other research providers, the costs may also be quite different.

Research element	Timescales	Very rough estimated costs
Set up ongoing monitoring processes	At least a month for set-up Ongoing and regular Basic topline reporting can be within couple of weeks	Esurvey-based: from £1000 Paper-based including staff/ volunteer training: from £1500 Realistic: £2-3000
One-off short-term quantitative research	Minimum of 8 weeks for simple set-up and basic reporting	Esurvey-based: from £1300 Paper-based using fieldworkers: from £2000
Focus groups	Minimum 6 weeks set-up 4 weeks transcription, analysis and reporting	From £2000, including incentives
VoxPops	Can be very quick	From £200 for minimal support From £600 with fieldworkers, transcription and analysis
Combination, strategic research	Spread over at least 6 months	£7-10,000 would incorporate data analysis, quantitative research, qualitative research, analysis, reporting and org development

Section 4: How reliable is your research and your researcher?

4.1 Samples and sample sizes

One of the most common questions about primary research is 'How many people do I need to talk to, so that the results are meaningful?'

The answer to this question is not straight-forward. It depends on a number of things such as whether the research approach is quantitative or qualitative, what you intend to do with the findings, what is the size of your 'population' (ie the wider group about which you want to make some assumptions, eg all visitors to an exhibition). The easy answer to the question is that there is no right or wrong size of a sample. The important part is what you do with the results, and if claims are made about a large group, based on an insufficient sample, the outcome could not only be wrong, but the decisions made on the basis of those findings could be very detrimental.

Generally, quantitative research (eg surveys) needs larger sample sizes that qualitative research, as the intention of quantitative research is usually to make assumptions about a wider group. It is often best to aim for representation from across your whole offer (ie ensuring sampling at different times of day, on different days, at different parts of your offer etc), and to use a random sampling approach within that.

For qualitative research, sample sizes will be much smaller, by definition of the type of exercise, and the results will be useful for an in-depth look at an issue, rather than estimating the proportion of the whole audience that share an opinion or characteristic.

For quantitative research, there are certain conditions that affect the required size of a sample, but as a very general rule of thumb, a sample of around 350 for total audience/visitor figures of 5000+ is acceptable. The following table outlines some relatively good target sample sizes, based on the overall size of the population (ie total audience size).

Total audience size	**Good target sample size** Based on margin of error of 5% at 95% confidence level
200	132
500	217
1,000	278
10,000	370
200,000	384
1,000,000	384

4.2 A note on statistical significance and confidence levels

If the findings are to be generalised to a wider group (eg the whole audience), then it is important to be aware of the extent to which you can be confident about the findings and how they apply to that wider group. This depends hugely on the sampling approach, as it doesn't matter if a huge sample is used, if the approach to sampling is biased (ie only including women), then so will the findings be biased.

But assuming an appropriate sampling approach, statistical calculations about the sample size compared to the population provide information about confidence levels and margins of error. These kind of findings are likely to be reported like this:

> 60% of the sample rated their experience Very Good
> (95% confidence level, ±5% margin of error)

What this means is that we can be 95% sure that between 55% and 65% of the whole audience would have also rated their experience as Very Good.

4.3 Assessing research and data reports– key questions to consider

- What was the methodology?
- How was the sample created, and what size was it?
- How many responses are the percentages based on?
- What claims are being made on basis of the sample?
- Who undertook the research? Did they have any training?
- Were the questions asked neutral?
- Do the findings fit with your own comparisons with other findings and other datasets?
- Have findings been quoted out of context?
- Does the report give information about the base i.e. total number of respondents

Where next?

To explore commissioning Audiences London to conduct new research or our other bespoke consultancy services call 020 7407 4625 or email info@audiencelondon.org – or view our staff biographies online to see which of us may best help you.