QUIRK'S

For marketing research and insights professionals

Curation, then implementation

How to mitigate AI's impacts on your marketing research

PLUS

Catching the qual bug

Is your literacy bias affecting your data?

A plea to researchers: define before you ask

ADVERTISING SECTIONS

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22 Top Online Qualitative Research Companies

Quirk's Marketing Research Review
MARCH/APRIL 2026
VOLUME XL NUMBER 2
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Companies hire me to find out what their customers REALLY think about their brands. And the best way to do that is to talk to them directly, in-person, face-to-face. There's no better way to connect with a customer, experience empathy, make them feel comfortable, and encourage them to share their thoughts.
Bruce Peoples, Consumer Insights Consultant at Peoples Marketing Insights

As global travel continues to increase, we're excited to welcome our clients in-person both near and far. It's been exciting to dig back in the toolbox and pull out some of the more robust methodology options that involved a more personal, face-to-face experience. Our clients are loving not only the rich insight gains but also the unique experience of visiting participants in their city and immersing themselves in their culture.
Abby Goodell, President of Fieldwork Network International

There's a richness of interaction and that transmission of feeling, of communication, that comes with the sync of not only words but body language. And simply put, the humanity of being with others. The acoustics are not quite the same when a song is compressed into digital bits of data, and human interaction is no different. Some of the richness of that interaction and some of the opportunity for empathy is simply lost along the way.
Cory Lebson, Principal at Lebsontech

It is estimated that over 70% of communication happens below the neck. Product features like touch, weight, and contrast are simply not conveyed correctly in digital environments.
Jamin Brazil, Happy Market Research Podcast Host

#facetofacemrx

In-person research always has and always will play an important role for market researchers. In-person research is important for behavioral research whether testing reactions to life-sized stimuli, conducting eye-tracking, observational research or ethnography. Many game changing insights for companies would not have happened without in-person research. We behave differently in-person versus online and while each tool plays a different role in the market researchers toolkit, in-person is irreplaceable for certain research initiatives. With in-person research you can observe behavioral nuances, understand cultural influences and capture the impromptu moments when true inspiration and insight can happen. We've all been there when the biggest insight comes when the moderator leaves the room and the respondents talk on their own! Here's to a return to in-person research, enhanced collaboration, stronger emotional connections and measuring behavior.
Anne Stephenson, Partner at Explorer Research

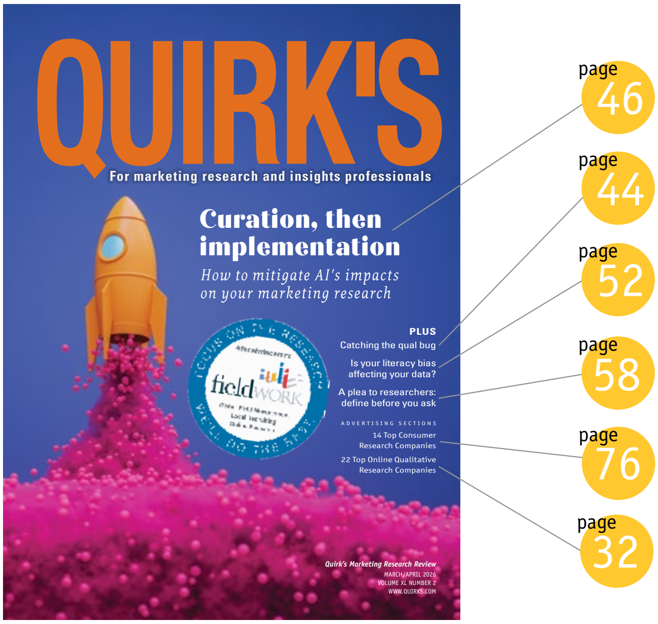
CONTENTS

••• Write for Quirk's

Quirk's is looking for interesting, objective articles on all aspects of marketing research and insights.

CONTENTS

Quirk's Marketing Research Review
March/April 2026 • Vol. XL No. 2



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Quirk's Awards now accepting nominations

Since 2019, the Quirk's Awards have put a much-deserved spotlight on the researchers, suppliers and products and services that are adding value and impact to marketing research. Continue the tradition! Until June 16 at noon ET, submit nominations for one of the many categories within the awards. For more information on how to enter, go to **QuirksAwards.com**.

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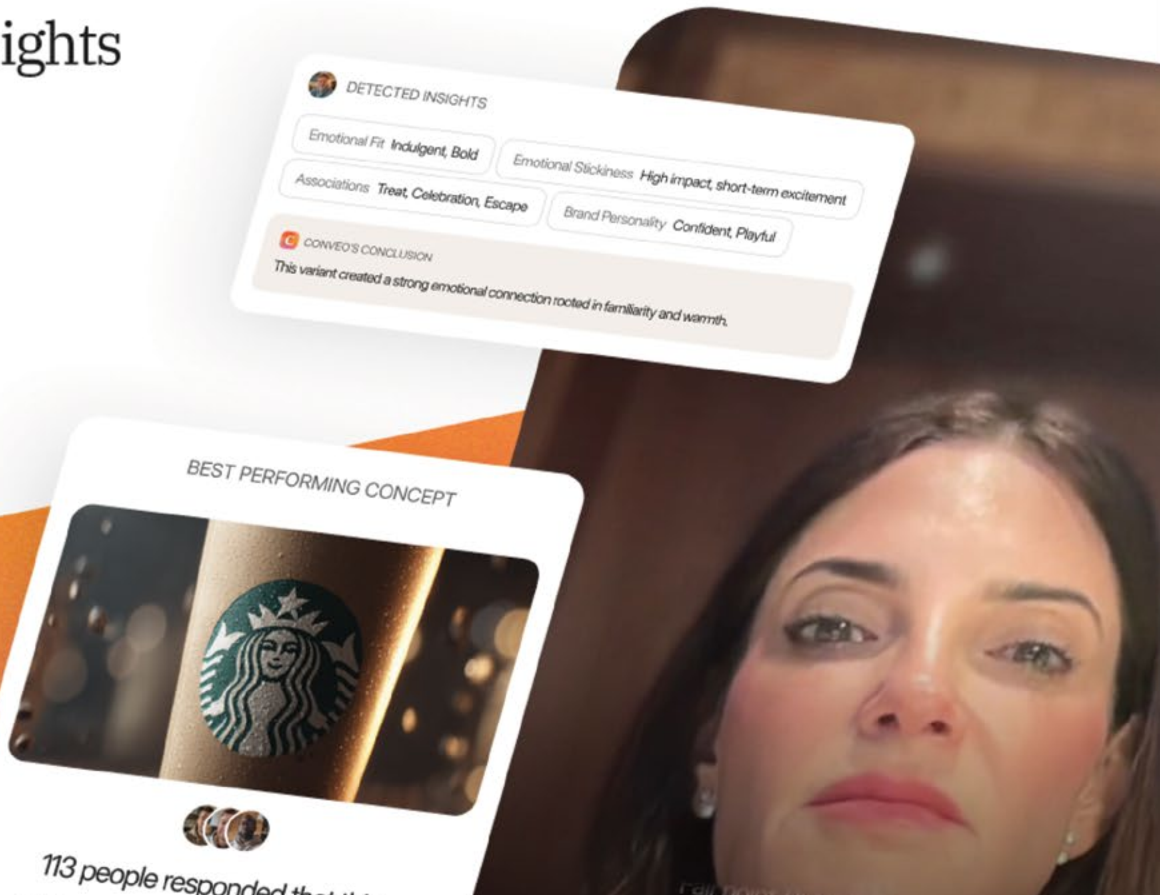
Let’s talk insights



••• shopper insights

Chatbots introduce positive bias to review summaries

Customers are 32% more likely to buy a product after reading a review summary generated by a chatbot than after reading the original review written by a human. That's because large language models introduce bias, in this case a positive framing, in summaries. That, in turn, affects users' behavior.

These are the findings of a study ("Quantifying cognitive bias induction in LLM-generated content") by computer scientist authors from the University of California San Diego showing evidence that cognitive biases introduced by large language models have real consequences on users' decision-making, whether they are consuming product reviews or news items.

The researchers found that LLM-generated summaries changed the sentiments of the reviews they summarized in 26.5% of cases. They also found that LLMs hallucinated 60% of the time when answering user questions, if the answers were not part of the original training data used in the study. The hallucinations happened when the LLMs answered questions about news items, either real or fake, which could be easily fact-checked. "This consistently low accuracy highlights a critical limitation: the persistent inability to reliably differentiate fact from fabrication," the researchers write.

The researchers presented their work at the 14th International Joint Conference on Natural Language Processing and the fourth Conference of the Asia-Pacific Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics in December 2025.

••• health care research

No patience for these patients

A systematic review of 45 studies found that physicians perceive one in six patient visits in non-psychiatric clinics as "difficult," and these encounters are more likely to involve patients with mental health disorders or chronic pain.

The review ("The prevalence and characteristics of difficult patient encounters: A systematic review and meta-analysis") was published in Annals of Internal Medicine.

Researchers from Clement J. Zablocki Veterans' Administration Medical Center and Medical College of Wisconsin sought to understand how often clinic visits are considered difficult and what factors contribute to these challenging interactions.

Patients with depression, anxiety, chronic pain, substance use disorders or personality disorders were significantly more likely to fall into the "difficult" category. Provider characteristics that increased the prevalence of difficult clinic visits included level of provider experience, burnout and job satisfaction. Indeed, the analysis found that less-experienced providers report more difficult interactions and these visits often leave patients less satisfied and with unmet expectations. The findings suggest that improving training for nonpsychiatric physicians so they could better address underlying mental health and pain issues could make visits more productive and positive for both patients and clinicians.

By Joseph Rydholm, Quirk's Editor

Ask less, listen more

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Joe Rydholm can be reached at joe@quirks.com

It was one of those fun coincidences that comes out of nowhere. I had just recently read an article about how companies were swamping consumers with too many surveys about too many trivial topics and as I boarded a crowded elevator at the recent QRCA conference, my liftmates (researchers all) happened to be one-upping each other with the inane questionnaire permutations they expected to get from the hotel chain after their stays. How was the oxygen in your room? Was the springiness of the buttons in the elevators to your liking? Could the hotel's feng shui be improved?

The article, "Survey overload: Companies are inundating customers with endless surveys – and getting worse insights," by Phil Wahba, has its own litany of "this would be funny if it weren't so dispiriting" examples. (The piece was originally behind a paywall at Fortune magazine but I was somehow able to access it for free on Yahoo if you want to track it down.)

Reading it brought to mind all the conference sessions I've attended over the decades in which a speaker bemoans poor questionnaire design and our overreliance on screen after screen of mind-numbing radio-button grids, while audience members chuckle in total agreement about the awfulness, knowing full well they or someone else in their insights department either just sent out or was planning to send out that very kind of survey.

We are all aware that we are oversurveying and yet we can't or don't stop it. Declining response rates mean it takes more and more asks to get enough completes to cram into the gaping maws of all the tracking surveys companies are running. And each new wave of customer-centricity that washes over various industries results in a flood of management-driven "How are we doing!?" entreaties.

I know quantitative research is essential and more qual is not the panacea but this proliferation of surveys, coupled with the concern about survey fraud, makes me feel like we need to tip the scales back toward the in-person/face-to-face approach, where you can see the person whose opinions you are seeking and, at least in theory, get more nuance and color from word choice and body language than just a 7 on a 10-point scale.

Believe me, I know most researchers are caught in the middle here. They're aware of the best practices, the dangers of oversurveying, the decreasing ROI on their efforts. But the Fortune article puts some useful numbers behind what most of us already feel in our bones. Qualtrics reports that the total number of customer and employee interactions processed on its platform has doubled since 2023, now topping 3.5 billion annually. U.S. firms were on track to spend $36.4 billion on market research last year. That is an awful lot of "How did we do?" emails generating an awful lot of noise – and, the experts quoted in the piece readily acknowledge, not a lot of signal.

Wharton's Peter Fader puts it bluntly: "If only all of this email besiegement was leading to meaningful insights. But it rarely does." Part of the problem is structural. Surveys overindex for the strongly opinionated – the delighted and the furious – while the vast middle, where most customers actually live, stays largely silent. You end up with a distorted picture that may feel like data but functions more like a funhouse mirror.

The article gestures toward AI as a potential corrective and perhaps it is. Smarter surveys that adapt in real time, that know when a customer has already been surveyed three times this month, that can route a complaint about a hotel's broken fitness center to the property's maintenance queue – all of that sounds like progress.

But I'd argue the more fundamental fix isn't technological. It's philosophical. The industry needs to get honest about what surveys can and can't do, resist the institutional inertia that keeps bloated tracking programs alive long past their usefulness and – yes – invest more in the kinds of human conversation that produce genuine understanding rather than a river of 7s and 8s.

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS SPOTLIGHT

The marketing research and insights landscape is moving forward at an unprecedented rate. Approaches are shifting, tools are advancing and new solutions are entering the market almost daily. Staying informed can feel overwhelming – but it doesn't have to be.

Here you'll find a curated look at some of the newest and most forward-thinking products and services shaping the industry. Whether it's breakthrough technology, innovative platforms or emerging research approaches, this is where you can explore what's next and keep your work ahead of the curve.

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Reinventing the research ecosystem: A unified approach to insights

Building on the technical precision of our February product enhancements, we are advancing the delivery of qualitative insights. By focusing on critical pain points in the research lifecycle, these updates to CyberFacility and Quillit provide a more integrated path from raw discovery to high-impact storytelling.

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When AI meets human-centered design:

Revolutionizing product innovation through augmented intelligence

Conveo

The unexpected synergy between artificial intelligence and design thinking transforms insights-based innovation

At first glance, artificial intelligence and design thinking appear incompatible. One represents computational precision and algorithmic processing; the other embodies human empathy and creative exploration. Yet this apparent contradiction masks one of the most transformative ways of working emerging in consumer insights today. This was recently demonstrated through a groundbreaking Unilever product innovation trajectory that achieved what traditional methods struggle to deliver: two "superstar" product concepts developed through an accelerated process that compressed a year's worth of conventional research into efficient, iterative cycles.

The question facing innovation leaders is no longer whether AI and human-centered methodologies can coexist but rather how to harness their combined power to drive breakthrough results.

The contradiction that is not one

Design thinking has established itself as a proven methodology for developing products that genuinely resonate with consumers. Its foundational principles remain essential (see https://designthinking.ideo.com/ and https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/5-stages-in-the-design-thinking-process):

- **Human-centeredness:** placing consumer understanding at the core of decision-making.
- **Empathy:** deep comprehension of motivations and needs through qualitative exploration.
- **Problem definition:** precise challenge framing–recognizing that well-defined problems are more than half-solved.
- **Divergence and convergence:** generating multiple options before focusing on optimal solutions.
- **Iteration:** continuous refinement rather than single-attempt development.
- **Tangible solutions:** practical, actionable outcomes for implementation.

These principles have guided successful innovation for decades. What's transforming the landscape is the scale, speed and depth at which they can now be applied through AI augmentation as well as enabling opportunities for doing things that were previously impossible.

Modern generative AI platforms such as Conveo offer end-to-end capabilities that seamlessly align with design thinking principles. Rather than replacing human insight, the Conveo platform amplifies it, transforming "artificial intelligence" into "augmented intelligence." The reframing is crucial: AI doesn't supplant the human elements of design thinking; it supercharges them.

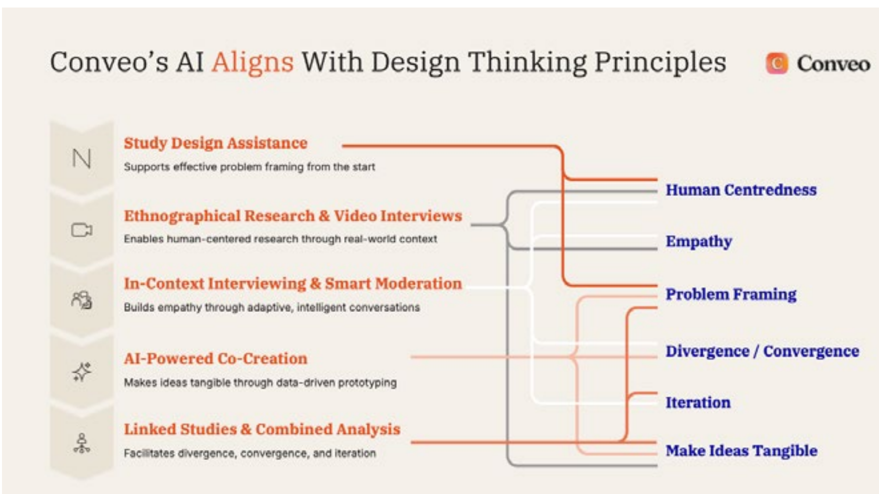
Consider how Conveo's AI capabilities map directly to design thinking tenets. Video-based ethnography enhances human-centeredness by capturing authentic real-world context. Behavioral and emotional analysis bridges the gap between stated preferences and actual behavior, deepening empathy. AI-assisted synthesis helps teams define challenges with greater precision. The technology's ability to rapidly diverge (generating multiple concepts) and converge (screening and optimizing) mirrors design thinking's natural rhythm. And continuous iteration becomes not merely possible but practical at enterprise scale.

The innovation challenge

Unilever's consumer and market insights team faced a challenge familiar to innovation leaders across industries. The objective required simultaneously achieving multiple critical outcomes: understanding genuine consumer tensions, creating differentiated solutions that consumers would actively purchase, and – perhaps most challenging – generating true brand incrementality rather than merely cannibalizing existing product lines.

In today's volatile market environment, achieving all these objectives through traditional research methods presents significant resource and timeline constraints. The business challenge required an approach that maintained real humans at the heart of the process from inception through optimization and validation, with continuous engagement of a matched consumer cohort across four rounds of iterative testing – all enabled by AI-powered capabilities.

This perfectly fits the Double Diamond framework.



Phase 1: Discover – Mapping foundational consumer needs

The innovation journey began with fundamental consumer understanding: exploring actual category usage patterns, benefits sought, underlying tensions and core motivations. Through 76 AI-enabled video interviews of 30 minutes, the research mapped consumer needs while in people's real-life contexts.

From this rich dataset, three distinct, data-driven personas emerged, representing authentic consumer segments with validated behavioral patterns.

Phase 2: Define – Human-AI collaborative ideation

An innovative aspect of the methodology emerged in the ideation phase. Rather than simply presenting persona data to stakeholders through static reports, our approach integrated human expertise with AI capabilities in real-time collaborative workshops.

The Conveo platform distilled the interviews from phase one into responsive personas capable of evaluating concepts, answering strategic questions and providing consumer-grounded feedback instantaneously. Marketing and innovation teams interacted and collaborated with the personas. All stakeholders learned about their market in, generated insights that stuck and co-created solutions in an engaging and empathic way.

Stakeholders could develop solution concepts and iteratively query the AI-powered persona: e.g., Does this address the identified tension? What concerns might arise? How do we optimize the idea? The system provided evidence-based responses drawn from actual consumer data, keeping ideation grounded in market reality while maintaining creative momentum.

The results proved remarkable: 14 viable product concepts emerged from a single three-hour workshop. The efficiency gain didn't come from rushing creativity but enhancing it, and the ability to bring the consumer into the boardroom, close to decision makers.

Phase 3: Develop - Intelligent product prototype optimization

Fourteen product concepts presented a strategic challenge: identifying the most promising candidates without prematurely eliminating ideas that possessed potential but required refinement. In this phase of product development, there was often no place for research due to time and resource constraints. Managers relied on gut feel to reduce the list and hardly enhanced the concepts; often, concepts got killed that may have been category winners with proper development.

Our approach employed AI-enabled qualitative concept optimization among 212 consumers and applied quantitative KPIs e.g., brand fit, appeal, believability, purchase intent – within a qualitative research context. Concepts were presented (sequential) monadically to ensure a clean experimental assessment limiting bias.

This hybrid method revealed concepts with immediate strength, which required further development and which faced fundamental barriers. With that input, by prompting the interview data and co-creating with Conveo's AI engine, the team further refined the portfolio to four high-potential concepts warranting optimization.

Phase 4: Deliver – Optimization high-potential propositions

The final iteration focused on refined product concept optimization: eliminating extraneous messaging, strengthening reasons to believe and identifying the most compelling benefit claims. The research tested identical concepts with single-claim variations to isolate the impact of specific benefit statements, as well as pack and price perceptions. We finalized four concepts with 90 consumers.

This refinement process yielded two polished concepts ready for quantitative validation through NIQ Bases testing. Both concepts achieved Superstar status in the test – the highest possible ranking in quantitative assessment and an uncommon outcome.

The success rate was not coincidental. The iterative approach, continuous consumer engagement and AI-enabled depth of analysis created concepts genuinely aligned with consumer needs and motivations. The methodology didn't just accelerate innovation; it improved innovation quality.

Platform capabilities enabling transformation

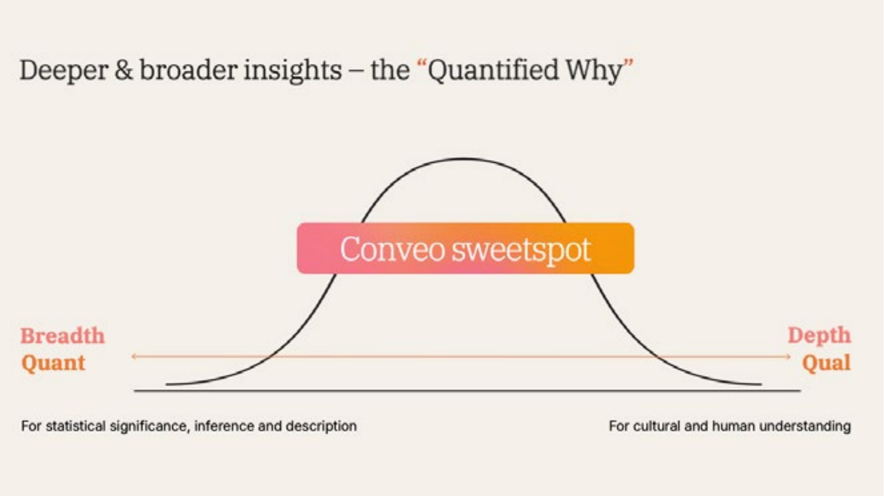
Conveo's AI occupies a strategic position in the insights research toolbox that lies in a middle ground between quantitative breadth and qualitative depth – delivering qualitative richness at quantitative scale, a combination previously unattainable.

Several specific AI platform capabilities proved essential to this outcome and design thinking journey:

1. Cross-study knowledge integration: the system mines insights within and across multiple research initiatives, enabling teams to build on

previous learning rather than starting fresh with each project. Existing personas can be uploaded and augmented with new information, creating compounding knowledge assets.

2. Automated behavioral recognition: computer vision identifies products, brands and consumer actions that participants don't explicitly mention, capturing the full behavioral context that verbal responses alone miss.
3. Interactive persona systems: the ability to query synthesized consumer intelligence transformed static research findings into dynamic strategic tools. Workshop participants could test concepts against consumer reality in real time, maintaining human-centeredness throughout ideation rather than losing it in the creative process.
4. AI-powered concept co-creation: the platform generates product concepts complete with target audience definitions, the friction points being addressed and reasons to believe – all grounded in actual interview data. It produces multiple visual representations that can be refined through iterative prompting, accelerating the concept development cycle.
5. Emotional intelligence: facial expression analysis, vocal tone assessment and non-verbal cue recognition provide psychological depth beyond surface-level verbal responses, revealing authentic emotional reactions to concepts and stimuli.



Strategic transformation beyond efficiency

While time compression represents an obvious benefit, the methodology's strategic impact extends far deeper. The traditional approach to this scope of research would have required approximately six to 12 months and substantial agency investment. The AI-augmented approach delivered superior results in a fraction of the time and cost. In addition, AI does more than remove tedious tasks – it starts to act as a true co-creation sparring partner.

More fundamentally, the methodology transformed how innovation teams approach product development itself. Organizations have historically limited qualitative research due to time and budget constraints. The AI-enabled approach removes these barriers, enabling continuous qualitative engagement throughout the innovation lifecycle.

The ability to "revert back to the data" – to continuously query accumulated consumer intelligence – creates connected insights rather than isolated research projects. Each study builds on previous learning, creating institutional knowledge assets that appreciate over time rather than depreciating after project completion.

This all represents an opportunity gain: conducting research in contexts where teams previously couldn't justify the investment, while maintaining knowledge in-house rather than outsourcing it to external agencies. The result is both cost efficiency and strategic capability building.

Implications for innovation leadership: The essential coalition

Despite sophisticated AI capabilities, human judgment remains central to innovation success. The technology doesn't solve all insights challenges – it amplifies human capacities to make them better and more effective.

This reflects the true nature of augmented intelligence: technology serves human requirements, continuously evolving to address emerging challenges.

The platform provides what might be termed "innovation superpowers" – the ability to scale research capacity without proportional headcount increases, to conduct investigations that would otherwise be impractical, to iterate continuously rather than in discrete project phases. But humans define the problems, interpret nuanced findings, make strategic choices and ultimately create innovations that resonate with other humans.

Yes, AI handles the tedious, time-consuming aspects of research – freeing human researchers to focus on strategic interpretation, creative application and business integration. But AI also helps improve human decision-making. This coalition of labor optimizes both human and machine capabilities.

The future of insights-based innovation isn't human or machine – it's human and machine, working in integrated partnership to create products that genuinely resonate with consumers. What initially appears counterintuitive proves perfectly complementary in practice.

For organizations willing to embrace this augmented approach, the results demonstrate clear competitive advantage: more concepts, faster development cycles, deeper consumer understanding and ultimately, breakthrough innovations that drive measurable business growth. The question is no longer whether to integrate AI into innovation processes but how quickly organizations can build the capabilities to do so effectively.

Niels Schillewaert, Ph.D.
Head of Research and Methodologies
Conveo

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Justin Chen - Co-founder at PickFu

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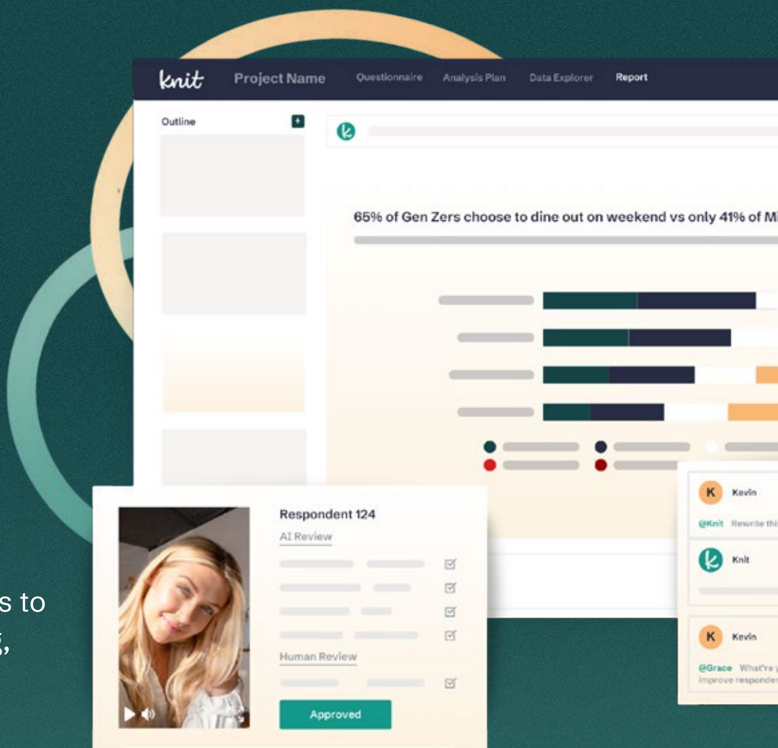

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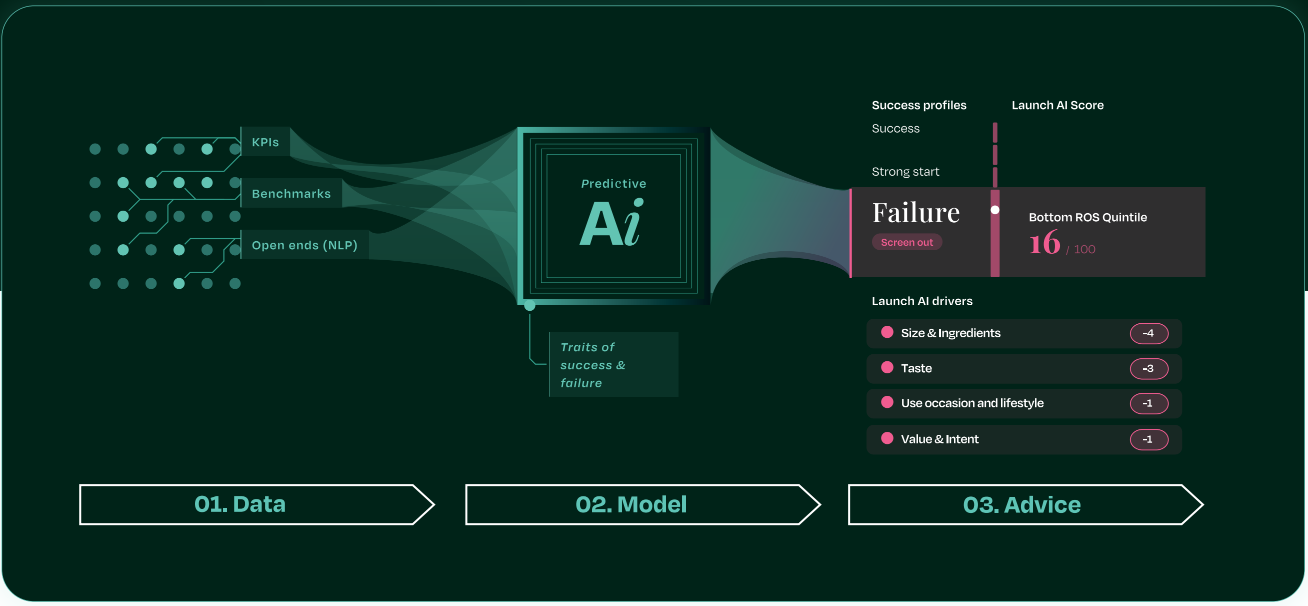

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QUIRK'S IN FOCUS

A digest of survey findings and new insights for researchers

••• consumer psychology

On the side no more

Secondary income moves from handy extra to necessity

What began as a stopgap during high inflation has transformed into a long-term financial strategy, as side hustles shape how Americans navigate rising costs, stagnant wages and economic uncertainty.

A survey by MyPerfectResume of 1,000 U.S. workers for its 2026 State of Secondary Income Report shows that for millions, side work doesn't just fill gaps, it creates stability that their primary job can't. Rising costs, debt burdens and uncertain wage growth have made secondary income a critical part of everyday financial survival.

Workers report earning supplemental income through: freelance or gig work (14%); investments (stocks, crypto, etc.) (14%); side businesses they own (9%); passive income (rentals, royalties) (9%); a second job for another employer (4%).

Last year's report showed that only 5% relied solely on their main job. Today, that number is even lower, meaning side work is becoming the norm, not the exception.

Inflation may be cooling on paper, but workers are still feeling the pressure. When asked what increased their reliance on secondary income, workers cited: rising prices and inflation (29%); saving or paying down debt (11%); seeking financial stability (10%).

Almost three-quarters (72%) say inflation has made side work more necessary (up from 64% last year), while only 28% report no impact. And when asked about their personal motivations: covering basic living expenses (26%); paying off debt or loans (18%); building an emergency fund (17%); saving for a major life goal (16%); affording nonessentials like travel or hobbies (15%).

Balancing multiple income streams comes with consequences. Workers say side income has impacted them in the following ways: decline in health (21%); less time for family or hobbies (20%); increased burnout (15%).

Yet not all impacts are negative, as 28% say their workload now feels "very sustainable," suggesting that many Americans are adapting to the two-income lifestyle.

Even if side work doesn't make workers financially invincible, it does provide psychological security. Over half (52%) say having additional income makes them feel more secure and 68% say their side work has never interfered with ambition or availability at their main job.

Looking ahead, 54% expect to maintain their current level of side work in 2026, 32% expect to increase it while only 14% plan to scale back.

A growing share of workers no longer expect raises to keep up with inflation or living costs. In fact, 26% believe side income could eventually replace traditional raises.

That shift speaks volumes. Workers are no longer waiting for employers to close the financial gap; they're closing it themselves through supplemental work.

Most workers expect supplemental income to become even more common in 2026: 71% predict secondary income will rise this year; half say only a significant raise could convince them to quit; 25% say they would never stop their side income at all.

The findings are based on a nationally representative survey conducted by MyPerfectResume using Pollfish in October 2025. The survey collected responses from 1,000 U.S. adults who are currently employed full-time or part-time. Respondents answered a mix of single-selection and multiple-choice questions about secondary income sources, financial motivations, job performance and future income expectations. Respondents were 43% male and 57% female. The age distribution was diverse: 8% aged 18-24, 15% aged 25-34, 20% aged 35-44, 16% aged 45-54, 17% aged 55-64, and 23% aged 65 or older. Education levels included 15% with graduate degrees, 27% with bachelor's degrees, 15% with associate degrees, 40% with high school diplomas or equivalents and 2% with less than a high school degree.


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••• health and wellness research

Still part of the regimen

Consumers sticking with vitamins and dietary supplements

As GLP-1 drugs rise in popularity, dietary supplements are holding their own, according to a recent survey commissioned by supplement maker NOW Foods. In the survey of 2,024 participants ages 18 to 65, 76% said they take vitamins and dietary supplements daily, with the remainder taking supplements at least weekly. Additionally, 44% respondents said they take more dietary supplements now than last year, while 41% take the same amount.

The survey found consumers most use multivitamins, followed by letter vitamins and probiotics. Of those surveyed, 58% reported taking vitamins and dietary supplements for general health. Rounding out the top five, other top need-states driving supplement use are: immune health; energy; gut health/digestion; and bone health/joint support.

Efficacy, safety/quality and confusion over too many choices were the top three concerns among those surveyed.

When asked what holds them back from starting a new wellness habit, cost and confusion over too many choices were the top two answers. On the flip side, having a workout buddy/sharing results and progress, app tracking and social media inspiration were the top three ways participants said they stay on track toward their wellness goals.

Taken together with consumer desires for science-backed solutions, supplement brands have an opportunity to connect with consumers via education, apps and social media. By helping them understand the benefits and making product use part of an experience or community, brands can improve their bottom line while supporting consumers on their path to health and wellness.

The survey of 2,024 participants ages 18 to 65 was conducted by research firm Suzy in September 2025.

••• ai and health care

Consent is key

Transparent use of AI OK in behavioral health settings

Americans are open to the use of AI in behavioral health when it is implemented with transparency, clinician oversight and strong privacy safeguards, according to a survey released by health technology firm Qualifacts.

The survey reveals patterns in how patients are already engaging with AI and the conditions under which they are comfortable doing so.

Key findings include:

Demand for care remains high: More than 80% say they saw a doctor or mental health professional in the past year.

Safeguards shape confidence: 77% say patients should always be informed when AI is involved in their care and 76% say it's important that behavioral health providers meet international AI certification standards, including ISO-aligned frameworks. Privacy expectations remain high, with 60% expressing concern about AI-enabled transcriptions of doctor or therapy visits.

Administrative uses are widely accepted: 74% are comfortable with AI handling tasks such as scheduling, billing or reminders.

Clear boundaries exist around decision-making: Only 10% would trust an AI-generated medical or mental health recommendation on its own, while 37% would consider AI guidance when a health care provider remains involved, reinforcing expectations for human oversight.

AI use is already underway outside of clinical settings: Nearly 29% say they use AI tools – such as chat-based assistants like ChatGPT, Claude or Gemini – to explore mental health concerns or better understand how they're feeling.

Trust depends on how AI is used: 47% say they trust AI either fully or in limited ways in health care, while only 9% say they fully trust it, signaling broader comfort when AI supports care rather than acting independently.

The findings are detailed in the Qualifacts 2026 State of AI for Behavioral Health report, which shows early AI adoption is already underway in mental health settings and underscores that long-term acceptance will depend less on the technology itself and more on how responsibly it is implemented, particularly when personal and sensitive information is involved.

As AI becomes more embedded in behavioral health workflows, the survey points to a defining challenge for the industry: building trust as deliberately as the technology itself. Adoption is already happening, but long-term success will depend on governance, certification and clear evidence that AI improves patient care, not just efficiency.

The data was derived from a national online survey conducted by Qualifacts via Pollfish on December 12, 2025. A total of 2,000 U.S. adults aged 18 and older completed the survey. The study examined health care and behavioral health access, attitudes toward artificial intelligence, trust and privacy concerns and expectations for oversight and international certification standards. Respondents were 56% female and 44% male. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and may not total 100%.

••• shopper insights

Aisle be seeing you – in the algorithm

AI guides nearly half of today's shopping journeys

Generative AI is reshaping the first steps of the shopping experience before consumers ever click "buy." From hyper-personalized suggestions to curated inspiration, influence now begins long before a store visit or app tap, moving where brands and retailers compete to a new level.

As reported by Dee Waddell, global head of consumer, travel and transportation industries, IBM Consulting, a new global study (Own the Agentic Commerce Experience) from the IBM Institute for Business Value, in collaboration with the National Retail Federation, found that while nearly three-quarters of surveyed consumers (72%) still shop in stores, almost half (45%) turn to AI for help during their buying journeys. Shoppers still want to see and touch products but today's savvy consumers increasingly arrive with a sense of what they're looking for and why. They are using AI to research products (41%), interpret reviews (33%), and hunt for deals (31%).

"AI is changing how consumers shop and every aspect throughout the shopping journey," says Caroline Reppert, senior director, AI and technology policy at the National Retail Federation. "As these technologies increasingly guide consumer discovery, comparison and choice, retailers that understand and respond to this shift will be best positioned to earn trust, relevance, and long-term customer loyalty."

For leading brands and retailers, this shift toward AI-shaped discovery is prompting a rethink of how and where they engage consumers. "AI is turning shopping into a trusted conversation, much more than a search. Consumers now rely on assistants that feel almost human, know their preferences and offer neutral, best-for-me advice that reshapes how they validate and decide what to buy," says Matthieu Houle, CIO at Canada-based retailer the Aldo Group.

While 35% of surveyed consumers still desire visually appealing stores with no wait times, AI-powered solutions are nearly as important. In fact, one in three consumers seek super apps that combine commerce with other services, 30% want smart homes with AI personal shoppers and autonomous delivery and 29% look for effortless purchasing through social platforms.

Consumers are growing increasingly accustomed to AI-powered shopping assistants helping them decide what to buy. That expectation, however, is forming faster than most retail operating models can keep pace, forcing the question: Is our data ready to guide and validate what customers ultimately choose? "AI is not a magic wand," says Stanislas Vignon, head of insights (AI and omnichannel) at Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy. "If you don't have the right data, it doesn't work. And you must test your solution to know whether it works and where it will bring value."

As AI transforms how consumers make choices, brands and retailers need to anticipate change and intentionally design experiences that meet shoppers where they are, with focus on:

Redesigning the journey around future decision moments. Identify where consumers will use AI to research, compare and look for value and ensure those moments connect seamlessly to purchase.

Using agents to reduce uncertainty earlier in the journey. Put deal-hunting, review interpretation and personal shopping support where it will help consumers decide, not only where it deflects service volume.

Making data-readiness and testing non-negotiable. With more than half of surveyed brand executives (54%) reporting persistent challenges across channels and systems, aligning product and policy truth and testing end-to-end is essential.

Amplifying what makes the brand distinctive. Use AI to scale relevance and remove friction while preserving creativity and authentic brand expression.

Investing in AI skills and partnerships. More than half of executives (51%) cite limited AI expertise, underscoring the need to strengthen internal capabilities while partnering strategically to scale AI responsibly and effectively.

AI is reshaping where, when and how decisions are made across every industry. In retail, understanding AI-influenced consumer behavior will become a defining competitive advantage, separating brands and retailers that shape decisions from those that simply fulfill them.

The IBM Institute for Business Value conducted two global surveys in Q3 2025: one of consumers and one of industry executives. The consumer survey included over 18,000 respondents from 23 countries, representing diverse shopping behaviors. The executive survey gathered insights from 200 senior leaders across retail, consumer goods and e-commerce organizations. Respondents were segmented by engagement style, price sensitivity and AI-related knowledge. Descriptive analyses identified key patterns and validated statistical techniques were applied to compare priorities and assess trust-focused engagement strategies.

••• technology research

Upgrade slowdown

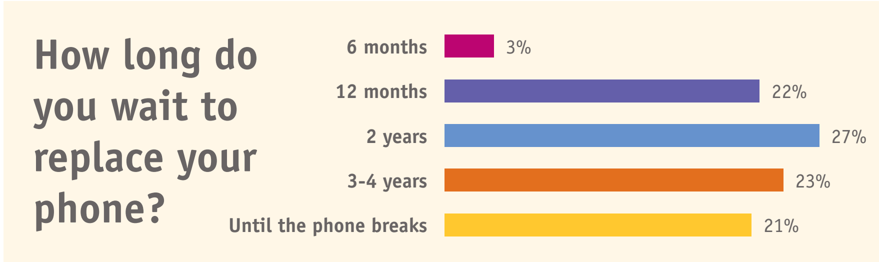
Consumers stretch the lifespan of their phones

Instead of disposable tech, smartphones are now seen as long-term personal assets, extending replacement cycles and disrupting traditional industry norms. With performance, storage and battery life hitting plateaus, American consumers are no longer chasing the latest device, according to a survey conducted by Allstate Protection plans: 27% upgrade every two years (likely at the end of carrier contracts); 23% now stretch devices to three to four years; 21% delay upgrading until their phone breaks; 22% upgrade within 12 months; only 3% replace a device within six months.

As budgets tighten, consumers are redefining what "premium" means. Practicality now matters more than hype, with people choosing phones for core performance, not experimental features. For the first time, battery life has overtaken price as the top driver of purchase decisions, signaling a clear shift in what people value. The factors that matter most today include: battery life (up from No. 2 in 2023, when the last full-scale foundational survey on consumer buying drivers was conducted); price (down from No. 1 in 2023); storage (unchanged from 2023); camera quality (up from No. 5 in 2023); screen size (down from No. 4 in 2023); and brand reputation (up from No. 7 in 2023).

Despite the hype, only 17% of Americans say AI features are a big influence on their buying decisions today. However, that number is expected to grow as AI becomes more integrated into consumers' daily lives.

Despite strong interest in the environmental impact of tech products, refurbished device adoption has stagnated, revealing a growing trust gap. Consumers support the idea of purchasing used/refurbished devices ("circular tech") but struggle to trust it: 52% say the environmental impact of smartphones is "extremely or very important;" 65% agree refurbished electronics are economical and sustainable; 37% say they are likely to buy refurbished electronics; but only 18% have purchased refurbished phones.



Many associate "new" with "safe." When asked why they are less likely to choose a refurbished device, 52% worry about quality, 51% worry about defects and 40% worry about data privacy.

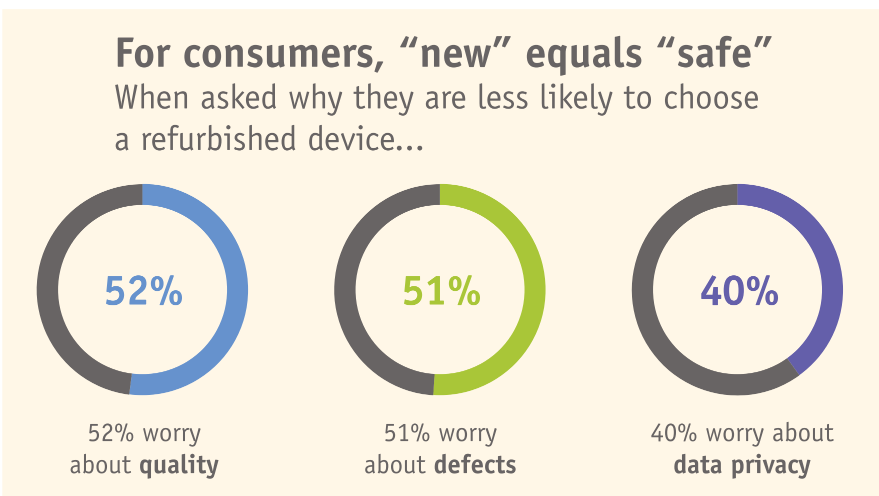
Even though consumers care deeply about the environmental impact of their tech, they are still unsure what to do with their old smartphones. Twenty percent recycle old phones; 8% still throw them in the trash; and 26% are not confident they know how to recycle a phone. The average household contains 1.8 unused smartphones – a sign of "sustainability inertia."

This disconnect reveals a major opportunity for clearer recycling guidance and trade-in programs that make doing the right thing easier.

While consumers don't always act on their green conscience, they're increasingly rewarding brands that take visible responsibility for their devices' footprint: 34% say they are more likely to buy from manufacturers committing to emissions reductions; 34% say recycled ocean plastics increase purchase likelihood; 30% say recycled glass makes them more likely to buy a smartphone (30% say recycled packaging has the same effect); 27% say knowing their device will be responsibly recycled makes trade-ins more appealing.

As subscription models reshape everything from entertainment to transportation, smartphone ownership is also becoming optional. Like leasing a car, 29% of Americans surveyed say they would be likely to lease a smartphone when they next upgrade or replace their device. This "device-as-a-service" mind-set is driven by: lower upfront cost (24%); more frequent upgrades (24%); greater flexibility (21%); and the ability to include protection, insurance or repair services as part of their lease (20%).

The Allstate Protection Plans 2025 Mobile Survey was conducted in October and November 2025, gathering 1,000 responses among a representative sample of U.S. adults.



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Travis Fei, CEO

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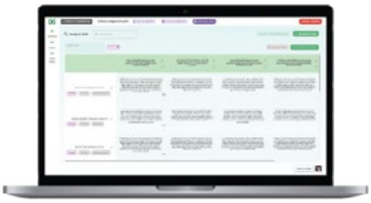

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Culture Wise Insights

Founded 2021 | 5 employees
Fernando Castro, Ph.D., Founder
Amanda Bagatelli, Senior Project Manager
Vivian Chaves, Associate Project Manager

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Alok Jain, Founder, CEO and Chief Researcher

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Founded 2022 | 15 employees
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Fieldwork

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Nikki Darre, President

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Founder 2015
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Founded 2025 | 12 employees
Stu Sjouwerman, CEO

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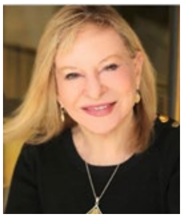
Founded 1984 | 50 employees
Ruth Stanat, CEO



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Jason Thomas, CEO
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www.symmetricsampling.com/panels

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Founded 2010 | 13 employees
Liana Morgado, CEO and Founding Partner
Ruth Behr, Managing Partner

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www.letstalkshoppe.com

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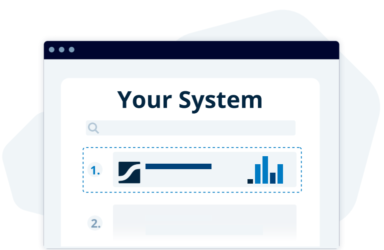

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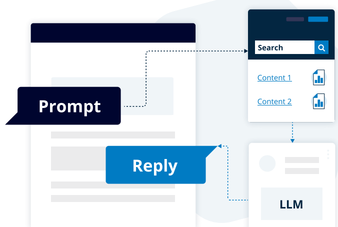

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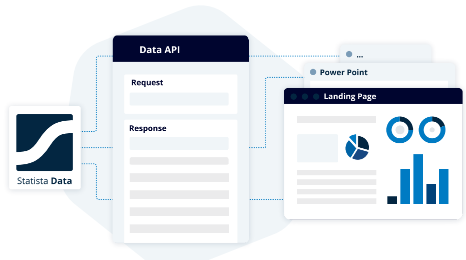

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The trust business: Why courage and clarity will define the next era of insights

| By Pepper Miller

abstract

In a preview of her session at the Quirk's Chicago Event in April, Pepper Miller explores the breakdown of trust in society and explains how researchers can use courage and clarity to help restore it.

Let's tell the truth: Trust is collapsing everywhere – and the insights industry is not immune.

The Edelman Trust Barometer makes it plain: 51% of people worldwide do not trust major institutions – government, media, business, non-government organizations; nearly 7 in 10 worry that misinformation is being weaponized against them.

And globally, people believe leaders are more likely to mislead them than tell the truth.

We're not dealing with a "trust challenge." We're in a truth abandonment era – a moment where truth feels negotiable, people feel unprotected and trust breaks quietly, then suddenly.

This moment demands courage, clarity and a new role in our field: the trust steward.

What is a trust steward? A trust steward is someone who restores clarity in moments of confusion. I name what's happening without shaming. I reveal consequences without punishing. I reintroduce the human beings behind the data, decisions and narratives.

Because when people feel seen, they trust you, they follow you and they hold you accountable in the best way.

The four forces fueling the trust crisis

Across organizations, four forces consistently undermine trust:

1. The legal fear factor. Leaders tiptoe around the truth to avoid lawsuits, public backlash or political pressure. Fear replaces integrity.
2. Budget bypass. Cultural insights and equity-centered work get cut first – even though trust lives exactly where nuance, context and lived experience exist.
3. Representation shrinkage. When communities stop appearing in research, decision-making and advertising, trust disappears with them.
4. Comfort over courage. Neutrality feels safer than truth but silence only protects the powerful.

These forces contribute to people feeling misunderstood and erased. Then trust collapses.

Let's look at two real-time examples of how trust can break quietly. They aren't from my client research; both unfolded publicly and I followed the community response closely.

THE ASIAN AD BACKLASH: WHEN INCLUSION TURNS INTO CARICATURE

A national brand released an ad intended to celebrate Asian American culture. The intention was inclusion. The execution was stereotypical.

Online conversations revealed the truth of what the ad really communicated:

"This feels like a cultural checklist."

"The rituals aren't even right."

"No one Asian was in the room when they made this."

"We're tired of being props."

The symbolism was off. The casting felt engineered. The storyline relied on clichés rather than lived experience. The brand saw "diversity." Viewers saw a misunderstanding.

This is how trust fractures – not always through outrage but through the quiet disappointment of being misrepresented yet again.

THE CULTURAL EXTRACTION TREND: WHEN CREATIVITY IS USED WITHOUT CREDIT

Another moment surfaced when major media celebrated the appropriators of a viral dance created by a Black teenager – but never acknowledged the creator or the cultural community behind it.

I followed the comments as they poured in:

"They want the rhythm, not the people."

"This is what extraction looks like."

"Give credit where it's due."

The media thought it was timely. Keeping up with trends. Black audiences recognized something else: "You borrowed our creativity, but you still can't see us."

That's a trust gap. And people feel it instantly.

The antidote: See people clearly

Trust does not come from polished messaging, glossy ads or even beautifully presented data. Trust is built when people feel seen.

Clarity creates alignment. Understanding creates connection. And truth – even uncomfortable truth – creates trust. This is where the work of a trust steward becomes essential.

Why does this matter for insights? The organizations that win in the next era won't be those with the most dashboards or the most AI.

They'll be the ones with: the courage to confront blind spots; the clarity to understand human truth; and the commitment to rebuild trust where it's been broken.

Data explains what happened. Trust explains why it matters.

And that difference will define the next era of insights.

In April, I'm taking this full conversation to the Quirk's stage in Chicago – unapologetically.

I'll dive into:

- more ad examples that reveal exactly where trust breaks – and how it's restored;
- how to find truth in a misinformed world when beliefs get in the way;
- why so many audiences feel misunderstood or unseen in advertising and insights work; and
- how researchers can lead with clarity and courage when everyone else is choosing safety.

Spoiler alert: In my session, we'll explore why clarity is more powerful than neutrality, why comfort has become the new bias in research and how one question – Whose experience is missing and why? – can reset an entire insights strategy.

And, given that comfort has become the new bias in research – meaning, before presenting findings, some researchers avoid naming cultural tensions or racial gaps even when respondents name them clearly – another question to ask is: Have we told the full truth of this community or just the comfortable version?

Most teams think the barrier is a lack of data. But the real barrier is a lack of clarity – the courage to name what's actually happening.

Must tell the truth

If we want to matter, we must do more than gather data – we must tell the truth before someone else distorts it. And if we rebuild trust, our industry becomes more honest, more human and more necessary.

See you in Chicago!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pepper Miller is a cultural insights strategist and trust steward who helps organizations deeply understand – not just target – communities. Rooted in Black cultural insight, her frameworks build trust, clarity and lasting relevance across audiences without erasing identity. Author of three books, she has advised AARP, American Cancer Society, CNN, Procter & Gamble and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

How to keep synthetic data grounded in reality

| By Graham Page

abstract

Synthetic data offers market research teams faster, scalable insights but introduces statistical, ethical and strategic trade-offs. Understanding where AI-generated augmentation adds value, where it distorts reality and how to pair it with real human input is critical to maintaining rigor and credibility.

At recent market research conferences, one theme has stood out: commercial research has moved from fearing AI to figuring out how to use it. A year ago, the mood was anxious. Now, those same people are being more pragmatic. The industry now sees clearer paths for adopting AI tools but one of the most hotly debated applications remains the use of synthetic data.

AI is already reshaping research in four major ways:

Moderation tools: Using large language models (LLMs) to design and even conduct interviews.

Operational agents: Automating workflows to cut time and cost.

Automated analysis: Using AI to code open-ended responses, extract themes and visualize findings.

Synthetic data: Generating new data points based on patterns from real responses.

Each approach carries pros and cons but synthetic data is one that perhaps most challenges the core purpose of research: understanding real human behavior.

Synthetic data has already had a positive and powerful effect in industries like automotive, health care and finance, where it enables better AI training for rare occurrences. It enables safe crash simulations, privacy-preserving medical research and better fraud detection. In market research, however, the challenge is different. Instead of predicting physics or patterns in medical scans, we're trying to understand capricious human behavior. Still, synthetic data is being used in three key ways today:

Creating personas: LLM-powered "synthetic audiences," based on current and past research, that can be queried in natural language to explore how different consumer types might respond.

Filling gaps in data: Estimating missing survey responses using patterns from previous participants or similar studies.

Boosting sample sizes: Generating digital twins of hard-to-reach participants to strengthen small-sample studies.

The appeal is obvious. Recruiting real participants takes time and money. If AI can expand or enhance datasets, insights can be generated faster and more efficiently. But that efficiency comes with trade-offs.

Obviously, synthetic data isn't real data. And that distinction matters. It represents predictions, not observations, so treating it as equivalent to human data is potentially misleading. Updated industry guidelines rightly emphasize transparency when using or reporting synthetic data.

At a glance

Synthetic data can enhance research – if it stays tethered to human reality. Here are four other observations:

- Synthetic ≠ real: Synthetic data predicts behavior; it doesn't observe it. Treating it as real human data can distort results.
- Beware of averages: AI-generated data smooths out extremes, losing the "spikes" where breakthrough insights often hide.
- Bias in, bias out: Synthetic data amplifies the biases of its training data, especially when the base is small or homogenous.
- No free sample boost: Digital twins don't make a sample larger – just more synthetic. Apparent precision can be misleading.

Here are five issues researchers should bear in mind:

Regression to the mean: Synthetic data tends to produce "average" responses and tends to smooth out the highs and lows, which is often where the most interesting insights lie, especially when testing new products or ads. For example, in our testing, predicted eye-tracking data shows strong center bias. It may be accurate on average but misses nuance at the edges that real human data reveals.

Weakened relationships: Small estimation errors accumulate, diluting correlations between variables like brand perception and purchase intent.

Bias magnification: Synthetic data inherits and amplifies biases from its training data. The smaller or less diverse the base data, the greater the distortion.

No statistical magic: Digital twins don't increase the real sample size. Thirty real participants remain 30 participants, even if the model based on them generates 170 more. The answers may seem more precise but they are no more generalizable.

Cost misconceptions: Generating high-quality synthetic data can be more expensive than collecting real data. AI may be faster but it's not always cheaper.

Synthetic data has enormous potential to make research faster and more accessible but only if harnessed responsibly. That means:

Be realistic: Clearly distinguish between real and synthetic data in every report. Treat augmented results with appropriate caution.

Be pragmatic: Use real people when exploring new ideas or creative concepts. Synthetic models are more useful for iterative optimization or when speed matters more than accuracy. For example, use human testing to validate a new ad campaign concept but deploy AI to test the hundreds of executional iterations necessary in modern media plans.

Keep feeding the machine: Synthetic data can't replace real data as the training source. Models trained on their own output will drift from reality, "choking on their own exhaust."

Keep listening to humans

The arrival of generative AI is a transformative moment for market research. Synthetic data can augment our tools to accelerate insights and scale experimentation but it cannot replace the messy, emotional and unpredictable input of real people. Used transparently and in the right contexts, synthetic audiences can expand what's possible in research. But to keep our insights real, we also have to keep listening to humans, not their digital echoes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham Page is executive vice president, commercial research and innovation at iMotions, with more than 30 years of experience integrating biometric and behavioral measures in advertising research. During his time at Kantar, he led the team that built many of the brand and advertising research frameworks used today by advertisers worldwide.

I didn't know qualitative research was a career – until I watched a moderator in action

| By Mia Hurley

abstract

A brief stint in product development revealed the power of qualitative research, transforming a marketing student's uncertain career path into a passion for uncovering real consumer insights.

In May 2020, I graduated from high school, having little to no idea what I wanted to study in college. I arrived at Loyola University Chicago with a bold, yet naïve, optimism that I would figure it out as I went along. Cut to sophomore year, when I decided on a business degree in marketing. To be perfectly frank, it was a shot in the dark, but I had heard great things about the program and didn't think I could cut it in finance.

As I started exploring paths it seemed that my future entailed some sort of social media or brand management role. The first of several twists occurred when I managed to land a six-month position as a product development trainee at Robert Bosch Tool Corporation – Dremel, where I postponed a semester to work full-time and see what life after college might look like.

This experience transformed my perspective on marketing and what I could do with a marketing degree. In my role, I worked alongside many different teams: engineering, brand and, most influential to me personally, UX. At the time, Dremel was evolving as a brand, preparing to create a whole new product line, positioning itself as a go-to choice for the casual to serious DIYer. For me, this meant being tasked with developing a strong understanding of our target users. Months of journey mapping, competitive analysis and communication of common pain points with the product development team ensued. But it wasn't until we brought in Mindy Predovic from Pipeline Research to moderate prototyping sessions that I felt I fully understood our target user. As I watched Mindy moderate these sessions, so much of the work I had done in the previous months seemed to come to life. Instead of searching for answers behind a desk, she was actually uncovering insights in real time. This was my first true introduction to qualitative research; previously I didn't even know what a moderator was. Just like that, a whole new career path opened right before my eyes.

In school, I had a vague sense of what market research was. Of course, many SWOTs and PESTLEs were performed diligently but it took this experience to grasp just how comprehensively you must understand your consumer. I discovered that research is, at its core, due diligence. For example, you wouldn't just buy a new car without first reading reviews, looking for any model recalls, searching through Reddit threads, asking your dad for advice … you get my point. When you're about to invest in something, you do your homework. This is what marketing research is to me, gathering as much information as possible before making a decision that could cost millions or billions of dollars.

Part of this is being confident that you know the person your product is for – how they talk, what they value, what excites and frustrates them. It sounds so obvious that

I'm surprised at how little this important process was discussed in school – a sentiment that has been echoed back to me by almost everyone I've talked to working in the research sector. It seems few people set out to moderate and become qualitative researchers, most falling into the role accidentally, like me, not knowing it existed in the first place.

Perhaps it is overlooked and sometimes undervalued, how much qualitative and quantitative work can make or break a business initiative. This was made clear to me during my time at Dremel. I was surprised at how easily I lost sight of actual user needs while I was in product development. Especially since, most days, all that I worked on and thought about revolved around user pains. But when the time came to bring users into the lab to test prototypes, I was shocked by how off base some of my assumptions were about what actually frustrated them compared to my own carefully developed hypotheses.

As it happened, our cross-functional teams were so in-depth in our research and persona-defining that we developed faulty assumptions about pain points. In some cases, we thought the consumer was worried about something they weren't even thinking about. Eventually, we became trapped in a kind of echo chamber, repeatedly recycling the same assumptions. While frustrating, I have found that this is not uncommon and, thankfully, is very solvable.

Of course, the biggest lesson for me was that the best way to get out of this echo chamber is to actually talk to the people you want to sell your product or service to. One of the most important functions of marketing research is to connect brands with their audiences in a meaningful way. This is also perhaps my favorite part of qualitative research so far – being able to translate the insights we get from consumers into actionable recommendations for clients. Seeing that lightbulb moment when clients watch IDIs or immersions never fails to give you a sense of accomplishment.

By the end of my time at Dremel, I went back to school with a clear vision of what I wanted my career to look like. I took a leap and pursued the opportunity to work with qualitative researchers and moderators at Brand Riffs Inc. As someone who feared in business school that my passion for understanding people might take a backseat in a brand or social media role, the experience as an associate qualitative researcher has so far been an absolute delight. Having the opportunity to work with different brands and categories, collaborating with people who know their brands and products inside and out while bringing a fresh perspective to the table is a thrilling experience. It's a path that continues to affirm that I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mia Hurley is a qualitative data analyst at Brand Riffs Inc., with experience in product development and CPG research. Prior to Brand Riffs, she served as a junior associate in product development at Dremel (Robert Bosch Tool Corporation). She graduated cum laude from Loyola University Chicago's Quinlan School of Business in 2025. Find Hurley on LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/maria-hurley-blewett/

Curation, then implementation

How to mitigate AI's impacts on your marketing research

| By Alison Munsch

AI adoption in marketing research is in danger of outpacing the governance, training and methodological rigor required to use it responsibly. Drawing on practitioner data and the PAIR framework, this article shows why AI in research must be actively curated – not blindly deployed – to mitigate bias, protect data quality and strengthen, rather than distort, customer understanding.

Artificial intelligence is reshaping the business landscape at a remarkable pace. Recent "State of AI" reports from McKinsey & Company indicate that a growing majority of organizations are using AI, particularly generative AI, in at least one business function, with particularly high activity in marketing, sales, product development and customer operations (McKinsey & Company, 2024, 2025). At the same time, McKinsey estimates that generative AI could add between $2.6 and $4.4 trillion in annual economic value across 63 use cases, with a substantial portion of that potential concentrated in customer-facing and insight-driven disciplines such as marketing and related research activities (Chui et al., 2023).

Despite this rapid adoption and the enormous projected value, many organizations report that they have not yet realized significant, enterprise-level profit impact from AI (McKinsey & Company, 2025). In other words, tools are spreading faster than the capabilities, frameworks and culture needed to use them wisely (McKinsey & Company, 2024, 2025). McKinsey's work on AI risk also shows that explainability and inaccuracy are among the top concerns for adopters, while relatively few organizations have systematic programs in place to mitigate these issues, including bias in model outputs (McKinsey & Company, 2025).

This tension is especially visible in marketing research and insights, where flawed or biased outputs can directly distort customer understanding. Industry reports indicate that although a growing share of insight suppliers now embed generative AI into their deliverables, data quality and synthetic-data contamination have become key barriers to trustworthy research (Greenbook, 2025).

Other studies of marketing and research professionals similarly find that bias and fairness are among the most frequently cited concerns when using AI in advertising and market research contexts (Samaya and Singh, 2025). In response, professional bodies such as ESOMAR (with its International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics) and the Market Research Society of India have updated their codes to tighten ethical and transparency standards specifically for an AI-driven insights industry (Market Research Society of India, 2025). Together, these developments confirm that the gap between AI's promise and its responsible use is felt most acutely in domains such as market research, where the stakes of biased or low-quality evidence are immediately visible in business decisions and in how consumers are represented.

Against this backdrop, some commentators characterize traditional market research as obsolete in an AI-driven marketplace; however, such claims often conflate automation with insight generation. They overlook the discipline's methodological foundations and continued strategic value, as if algorithms were about to replace analysts outright. But the truth is more nuanced and more promising. AI is not a replacement for market research. It is a tool that, when used thoughtfully, can amplify human intelligence, accelerate insight generation and even democratize access to decision-making data. Rather than rendering research obsolete, AI is catalyzing its transformation.

This article explores the evolving relationship between AI and marketing research, drawing on recent practitioner data (n = 32; see sidebar), thematic analysis and emerging frameworks for integration and bias mitigation. It also offers a framework for moving from experimental use of AI to responsible practice.

Play a better game

A useful analogy is to compare the evolution of market research to a game of chess. According to IBM (n.d.), the 1997 victory of its Deep Blue supercomputer over world champion Garry Kasparov marked an inflection point in computing. Today, anyone with a smartphone can access a chess engine stronger than any human. But even now, the best results often come from "centaur" chess, with a team of human players using machine suggestions to drive creative, strategic decisions. The real advantage of AI is not autonomy, it is augmentation. Human intuition, contextual judgment and experience address the limitations of algorithmic systems, while AI contributes speed, scale and pattern recognition beyond human capacity.

Organizations generate the greatest value when AI is intentionally integrated into human workflows rather than deployed as a replacement for expertise (Wilson and Daugherty, 2018). The same logic applies to marketing research: The human strategist who knows what questions to ask and how to interpret messy reality is more critical than ever but they now have a powerful partner in AI. The challenge is not whether AI will "take over" but how researchers can play a better game with AI as a strategic ally.

AI Adoption is transitional, not transformational (yet)

The majority of respondents report cautious confidence or describe themselves as "still learning" how to incorporate AI into workflows. Overall confidence in using AI in workflows is moderately positive (mean rating 7.2 on a 10-point scale), but relatively few respondents place themselves at the very top of the confidence scale in their AI use. More than half of the respondents surveyed report that they are exploring (20%) or piloting AI tools (37%). This indicates that although AI adoption is underway, it remains in its nascent stages and continues developing, having not yet reached full maturity. This finding mirrors broader industry evidence that many organizations are piloting AI but have not fully embedded it into scalable, repeatable research workflows (McKinsey & Company, 2025).

Although practitioners are not highly confident in their use of AI, it is no longer a distant concept for most. On a 10-point scale, the average familiarity with AI tools is mildly positive at 6.4, indicating that respondents generally see themselves as more familiar rather than novices. At the same time, frequency-of-use data show that AI is already embedded in many day-to-day workflows: 30% of respondents report using AI tools daily, 48% use them weekly and the remaining 22% engage with AI tools at least monthly. These patterns suggest that AI has moved beyond experimentation into regular practice for most respondents, even as many still describe themselves as "learning" or only "moderately familiar." This gap between modest self-rated familiarity and frequent use reinforces the need for structured frameworks and training to ensure that regular AI use is also confident, critical and methodologically sound rather than ad hoc.

Moreover, even research and insights professionals who report moderate or high familiarity with AI are not yet fully applying AI tools in practice. The pattern echoes McKinsey's observation that many firms experiment at the edges with AI but lack the operating models and governance needed to capture full value (McKinsey & Company, 2024, 2025).

Methodology

This article draws on both secondary and primary research. First, a targeted examination of peer-reviewed journal articles and industry reports addressing AI in marketing and market research was conducted. Second, an online survey using an availability (convenience) sample of research and insights professionals across industries, regions and levels of decision-making responsibility was completed in January 2026. Of approximately 150 practitioners invited, 32 completed the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of about 21%, which is typical for online surveys of busy professionals using convenience sampling. The survey included closed-ended and open-ended questions on AI usage, concerns, perceived benefits and challenges (Munsch, 2026).

Perceived challenges and bias risks

When asked about their primary concerns regarding the use of AI in market research, respondents most frequently selected challenges related to data quality.

Concerns include:

- data quality and accuracy (81%)
- bias in AI outputs (69%)
- client trust and transparency (42%)
- lack of internal expertise (42%)
- ethical or privacy concerns (35%)
- cost or ROI uncertainty (19%)
- no major concerns (4%)

Together, these findings reflect a broader unease that AI systems may produce results that appear authoritative yet are potentially misleading if not carefully governed. Concern about client trust and transparency further underscores that stakeholders require not only reliable insights but also clarity regarding how those insights were generated and validated. Ethical and privacy considerations further complicate the landscape. Practitioners express concern that opaque, black-box systems may obscure underlying assumptions, limit accountability or inadvertently amplify existing inequities, particularly in sensitive applications such as segmentation, targeting and diversity-related analysis. Additional concerns include the risk of AI-generated hallucinations (fabricated or inaccurate outputs presented as factual) and the challenges associated with establishing consistent, standardized deployment practices across the organization.

Taken together, these findings reinforce a central argument of this article: AI must be curated rather than blindly deployed. Professionals value speed and efficiency, but not at the expense of nuance, context and fairness. The market researcher's role is increasingly to design processes and guardrails that ensure that AI augments rigor rather than undermines it.

What practitioners are saying

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses in the practitioner survey yielded the following five themes with illustrative quotes:

1. Train thoughtfully

"We need stronger time investment in training users … AI is only as smart as the person using it."

Practitioners are calling for intentional training – not just tool access – so that teams know when, where and how to use AI in research workflows.

2. Balance speed and judgment

"Dashboards and automation are great – but not at the risk of making AI more valuable than the researchers themselves."

AI is valued for efficiency but respondents emphasize that speed cannot substitute for judgment, context and empathy.

3. Bias and governance are central

"Prompting is key … AI tends to agree with generic input that leads to biased assessments."

"Proper governance is essential in marketing and marketing research."

Echoing global conversations about AI ethics, practitioners seek governance models and industry codes such as the updated International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and ESOMAR International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics guidelines, to ensure accountability in AI deployments (Market Research Society of India, 2025; Research World, 2025).

4. AI as infrastructure, not magic

"Integrations, privacy, replicable use cases – AI is a toolkit, not a genie."

Respondents repeatedly emphasized that AI creates real value only when it is embedded into existing systems and workflows, not when it is treated as a standalone novelty. In their view, AI should function like infrastructure, integrated via APIs, governed by clear privacy and security standards and tied to repeatable, documented use cases. When AI is treated as a peripheral add-on rather than embedded within core research workflows, it is often perceived as difficult to govern and prone to misuse. By contrast, when thoughtfully integrated into existing tools and processes, AI functions as a scalable performance accelerator rather than a novelty.

5. Respect the context

"AI cannot see the big picture … it doesn't know what is truly important. That's the researcher's job."

This underscores a core theme in both practice and scholarship: AI can recognize patterns but it doesn't understand stakes, culture or long-term brand implications without human interpretation.

Mitigating bias with the PAIR framework

To move from experimental use of AI to responsible practice, market researchers need more than tools; a process is recommended. The PAIR framework – problem formulation, AI tool selection, interaction and reflection, originally developed for education in the age of generative AI, offers a structured, human-centric way to integrate AI while actively mitigating bias (Acar, n.d.). Although designed for pedagogy, its core tenets of human agency, skill-building and responsibility translate directly into applied market research, where biased outputs can have immediate consequences for how consumers are understood and targeted (Bertoncini, 2025; Samaya and Singh, 2025). Each letter of acronym encourages specific considerations for marketing research and insights practice as follows:

1. Problem formulation: Making bias visible up front

In market research, poorly framed questions can encode bias before any data are collected or AI is invoked. Applying PAIR begins with explicitly defining the problem. What decisions need to be made based on objectives and the resulting research problem, which may include, but are not limited to, population characteristics and constraints, including which segments might be underrepresented or systematically misclassified? For example, teams can identify where historical data may reflect skewed sampling or discriminatory practices and plan compensating steps (e.g., oversampling underrepresented groups, flagging sensitive variables). By foregrounding these issues in the problem-formulation stage, researchers reduce the risk that AI simply amplifies historical bias in an automated manner (Acar, n.d.; Munsch, 2018).

2. AI tool selection: Choosing systems with guardrails, not just features

The second step, AI tool selection, prompts researchers to evaluate tools not only for accuracy and convenience but also for interpretability, transparency and bias controls. For instance, researchers can require vendors to disclose training data sources, bias testing procedures and explainability features before integrating a model into their workflow (Greenbook, 2025; Market Research Society of India, 2025). In practice, this means rejecting black-box tools for high-stakes applications such as segmentation or predictive modeling of vulnerable groups and instead favoring systems that allow audits, error analysis and human override.

3. Interaction: Prompting, stress-testing and cross-checking outputs

In PAIR's interaction phase, researchers do not passively accept AI outputs, they actively probe them. In market research, this can take the form of:

- Testing how different prompts influence sentiment summaries or persona generation.
- Comparing AI-generated segment descriptions against known quantitative patterns and qualitative findings.
- Running stress tests where edge cases (e.g., niche or marginalized consumer groups) are explicitly queried to see whether the model stereotypes or erases them.

This interactive, experimental stance helps surface both overt and subtle biases, such as overindexing on majority behaviors or reinforcing gendered or racialized assumptions, before insights are presented to clients or internal stakeholders (PNAS, 2025; Samaya and Singh, 2025).

4. **Reflection: Auditing bias and documenting learning**
Finally, the reflection step encourages researchers to evaluate not only what AI contributed but also how it may have distorted the picture. Researchers can build post-project reviews that explicitly ask:

- Where did AI outputs diverge from other data sources?
- What kinds of bias or blind spots did we detect and how were they corrected?
- How did our choice of prompts, tools or training data shape the narratives we produced?

Formalizing these reflections builds an auditable knowledge base and strengthens enterprise learning, ensuring that individual lessons become embedded organizational safeguards. This aligns with the responsibility-centric aspect of PAIR, in which AI is treated as a powerful but fallible collaborator whose outputs must be critiqued, contextualized and, when necessary, corrected by human judgment (Acar, n.d.; Research World, 2025).

Taken together, PAIR supports a human-centric, skill-centric and responsibility-centric approach to AI in market research: AI is used to augment, not replace, researcher insight; teams develop transferable skills in prompt design, model critique and bias detection; and every use of AI is anchored in ethical awareness rather than blind efficiency. In this way, PAIR does more than structure AI adoption – it becomes a practical roadmap for mitigating bias while leveraging AI to amplify the reach and depth of market research.

The future is hybrid

Market research is not dead; it is being reborn. In an age when data are abundant but understanding is scarce, human insight remains essential. AI can reduce routine tasks, help you surface patterns in large datasets and expand access to insights across organizations. However, without ethical vigilance, upskilling and structured approaches such as PAIR, AI risks deepening bias and undermining trust. This concern becomes even more pressing as agentic AI systems – tools capable of initiating actions, chaining decisions and operating with greater autonomy – begin to enter research workflows.

As in chess, the advantage does not belong to humans or machines alone (IBM, n.d.) but to teams that learn to play in concert, combining human judgment with machine intelligence. As AI systems grow more capable and increasingly proactive, the research teams that lead will be those that keep human accountability at the center. In this future, AI is not a replacement for expertise but a disciplined partner; designed, governed and continually refined to mitigate bias in both machine outputs and human decision-making. Because bias does not reside in algorithms alone; it also lives in the assumptions, incentives and interpretations that shape how those algorithms are built and used. Marketing research in the age of AI is not simply about accelerating insight; it is about accelerating insight responsibly, combating bias wherever it appears and ensuring that speed never outruns human judgment.

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Are we writing surveys for ourselves?

How researcher literacy bias may be skewing your data

| By Nicky Marks and Charles Moore

abstract

Survey nonresponse bias may be less about recruitment and more about comprehension. Literacy gaps and academic phrasing can quietly skew samples, distort engagement and introduce undetectable misinterpretation, making the use of plain language not an act of simplification but a critical data quality safeguard.

When we came across the Scottish government's recent research on survey nonresponse bias,[1] something clicked – not because the findings were particularly surprising but because they were unexpectedly close to home. It raised an important question about how we engage with people and the limitations we might have as researchers.

The Scottish government's work highlighted a problem that market researchers rarely discuss: The people designing surveys may be unconsciously creating barriers for the very respondents we're trying to reach. For our team at Censuswide, this realization led us to investigate whether we were doing the same thing.

Trapped in our bubble?

The market research industry could be accused of having an intentional but deeply structural literacy bias. Virtually all market research roles require a university degree. The result is that we spend our professional lives surrounded by people with a similar level of education to us and often our personal lives follow the same pattern. It's a self-selecting ecosystem that quietly shapes how we think about language and comprehension.

The numbers suggest that we might be trapped in our bubble, whether we know it or not. For example, slightly less than half the population of England and Wales has a degree, and close to one in five people hold no qualifications at all. And yet we're trying to talk to everyone and make our research open and fair.

This illustrates a fundamental disconnect between the researchers writing surveys and the broader population responding to them, a gap that can subtly influence every choice we make about wording, phrasing and what we assume constitutes common knowledge.

The literacy landscape

The national picture reinforces these concerns in stark terms: 18% of Britons and 28% of Americans aged between 16 and 65 can only read at or below the level expected of a 10-year-old, according to a major study of literacy rates[2] across the developed world. For these respondents, encountering unfamiliar wording and phrasing in a survey creates genuine barriers to participation.

To understand the scale of the issue, we conducted our own research, testing comprehension of words commonly used in market research: academic, hypothetical, redundant. The results were revealing and when we asked respondents about their experiences with survey confusion, we discovered that 75% had felt confused by a survey question at least once.

Perhaps more striking was that 28% of respondents didn't know how many countries make up the U.K., which tells us something about the assumptions researchers make about what constitutes common knowledge.

These are accessibility concerns of course, as well as potential sources of systematic bias that can skew our data in ways we never intended.

How comprehension becomes bias

The mechanism is straightforward, even if the consequences are not. When respondents encounter language they struggle to understand, several things can happen: some drop out entirely; others click through quickly to move on while disengaging from the survey but remaining technically present in the data; and others misinterpret the question but answer anyway, confident they've understood.

For the survey results to make sense, you have to trust that people interpret the question as you expected they would. Otherwise you have a whole different set of factors coming into play that can undermine your entire study.

The dropout issue is relatively manageable and we, like most research agencies, simply exclude incomplete responses. The clicking-through problem is harder to address because these respondents are incentivized, with a financial benefit to completing the survey, which means they might stay in even when they're annoyed by it or confused.

But the most insidious issue is the silent misinterpretation that happens when respondents think they understand a question but actually don't, providing data that looks valid but isn't. Unlike speeding through or straightlining, which can be detected through quality checks, genuine misinterpretation is nearly impossible to catch.

The result is sample skew that happens when confusion drives away or disengages respondents with lower literacy levels, leaving a sample that tilts toward those who navigate academic language easily. The bias isn't in who you recruit but in who makes it through to the end with their engagement intact.

If they misinterpret and disengage, that's probably a smaller subgroup of those who have misinterpreted, but it's almost impossible data to rectify because they're giving a view they don't actually hold. Unless it contradicts something else, it would be almost impossible to pick up.

A quality issue, not a simplicity problem

We're careful about how we frame the solution, because if you take it to the lowest common denominator, you're going to have very simplistic wording that makes it difficult to analyze complicated things.

There's a point here that matters: Survey questions need to be precise and get to the point succinctly. Oversimplification can create its own problems, particularly when you're trying to capture nuanced attitudes or complex behaviors.

The answer isn't to make everything simpler but to make everything clearer, which means we need to reframe plain language as a research quality tool rather than a compromise. You want to succinctly get to the point but we are sometimes guilty of using words unnecessarily. When writing questions, that creates problems we could avoid.

Even when we recognize the issue, implementation isn't straightforward, partly because people skim online surveys in ways that challenge our best intentions. Eye-tracking research suggests respondents scan question text rather than reading it thoroughly, focusing more on answer options than on the carefully crafted question wording we've labored over.

Longer questions don't get more attention but just get more skimming, which creates pressure from both sides: We need to keep questions brief enough that people will engage but clear enough that everyone understands.

Definitions seem like an obvious solution and if a complex term is necessary, we can define it – but only if the definition itself is understandable. That seems like an elegantly simple solution but again, only if it's actually read and comprehended.

Balance is also a consideration and at Censuswide we have strict rules about balanced scales to prevent leading respondents toward particular answers. If positive options are included, there must be an equal number of negative options and five-point scales must have a midpoint and a "don't know" option.

The focus on not leading people gets much more attention than making sure people understand what's happening, partly because that's also a lot more difficult to know with any certainty.

Where education and expertise diverge

B2B surveys present a particular challenge because when you're interviewing executives or industry professionals, there's a tendency to assume high literacy levels and deep subject knowledge. Often that assumption holds, but not always, and that's where problems can creep in.

At our firm, we conduct a lot of B2B surveys, interviewing people who hold university degrees and are accomplished in their careers. Our wording can get technical because we assume these people hold deep industry knowledge but that assumption isn't always fair – even if they have a senior job title, there's always a possibility they might be newer to the industry.

An example is a health care survey we conducted for a U.S. client that highlighted the gap between researcher knowledge and respondent reality. The survey targeted a specific audience of B2B health care benefits brokers, navigating the Byzantine complexity of the American health care system in ways that required constant translation.

The way health care functions in the U.S. is so different from the U.K. that our project manager kept coming back to the client (the researcher in this example) asking for clarification: What does this mean? What are you trying to get at? The fact that he didn't have the cultural context essentially tested the client's assumptions of how easily the questions could be understood. The process made the client explain it in plain language, which led to clearly worded questions.

That back-and-forth, we would argue, should be a crucial part of the process, because research agencies aren't experts in every industry we survey. That's far from a weakness – if we embrace it, it forces a translation from specialist language to something accessible that serves the research better.

We're experts in research, while our clients are experts in their industries. The combination of that knowledge and the humility to ask clarifying questions before a project goes into the field is what leads to good surveys. Researchers who are open to that collaborative process are likely to have a lot more success than those who just field what they think will be understood.

An industry-wide conversation

Data quality is rarely discussed openly in market research, making it somewhat a dirty secret of the industry. There's understandable nervousness about raising it with clients when it acknowledges

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that there's invalidity in the responses we collect.

At our firm, we take data quality seriously and remove respondents as standard for speeding, straightlining or inconsistent answers. We use red-herring questions and we deploy sophisticated digital fingerprinting technology along with checks to catch automated responses that might otherwise contaminate our data.

But comprehension bias is different in that it can't be caught with quality checks, doesn't show up as speeding or straightlining and could shift the composition of your final sample in ways that are nearly impossible to detect.

When comparing literacy bias to other sources of bias like social desirability or sampling error, we're candid about the challenge: it's very difficult to detect because the incentivization bias is easier to remove with data-quality checks. But if respondents are misinterpreting questions and that's leading them to disengage, that's almost impossible to pick up with our current tools.

What good looks like

So what would change if the industry took this seriously? Fundamentally, it would just be more accurate data, where the question we think we asked would be the question we actually asked. That would mean we're better at answering what the client wants and ultimately would make research better at serving its purpose.

Implementation comes down to awareness first, then incremental change. This article is not meant to be prescriptive about specific solutions, because we don't claim to have solved the problem entirely ourselves. While we can't really say what the end looks like, starting to think about it already gives you a better way to do research.

Our advice to fellow researchers is to recognize your own biases – not just wording or educational background but all the ways your personal and professional experience shapes how you interpret the world and assume others do the same.

It's a very difficult thing to do but by being aware of the problem you start to solve it. Realizing your own biases is a process we should go through as researchers if we want to improve the validity of our work.

A LIVE EXAMPLE

To test our hypothesis, we ran a survey of 2,000 people where we asked two pairs of questions with a very similar sentiment:

Q1: Have you ever concealed a misunderstanding you had about a topic?
Q3: Have you ever hidden a misunderstanding you had about a topic?

The results:

- When we changed "concealed" in Q1 to "hidden" in Q3, we found that 38% of people who had responded "I don't know" for Q1 were then able to answer in Q3.

Q2: How onerous do you find completing surveys?
Q4: How hard do you find completing surveys?

The results:

- When we replaced "onerous" in Q2 with "hard" in Q4, we found that 39% of people gave a different answer.
- But there was no clear switch from one answer to another. Rather, there were varied different answers in Q4 compared to Q2.
- We suspect the changes may be due to "onerous" and "hard" having slightly different meanings. However, the high percentage of different answers still show the impact wording can have on results – overly complex language and questionnaire design (in this case, by not including an opt-out) can exacerbate the problem.

Beyond individual question wording

This conversation extends beyond individual question wording and touches on who gets to participate meaningfully in research, whose voices are captured accurately and how unconscious assumptions shape what counts as valid data in ways we rarely examine.

This dynamic plays out in research through the potential for slight differences in how things are done, in upbringing or in education to lead to vastly different conclusions about what seems normal or what needs explanation. The challenge is bringing all those perspectives in and ensuring everyone is interpreting questions the same way, which requires us to step outside our own assumptions about what's clear.

What makes the world interesting also makes our work difficult when we're trying to capture views across such diverse experiences and backgrounds.

The solution isn't complex, even if implementation is challenging. Start with awareness, question your assumptions, test comprehension and write for clarity rather than academic convention. Treat plain language not as dumbing-down but as a quality control measure that ensures your data actually captures what you're trying to measure.

Because if respondents can't understand the question, you're not measuring their views. Instead, you're measuring who had the educational background to navigate your wording and that's not the same thing at all.

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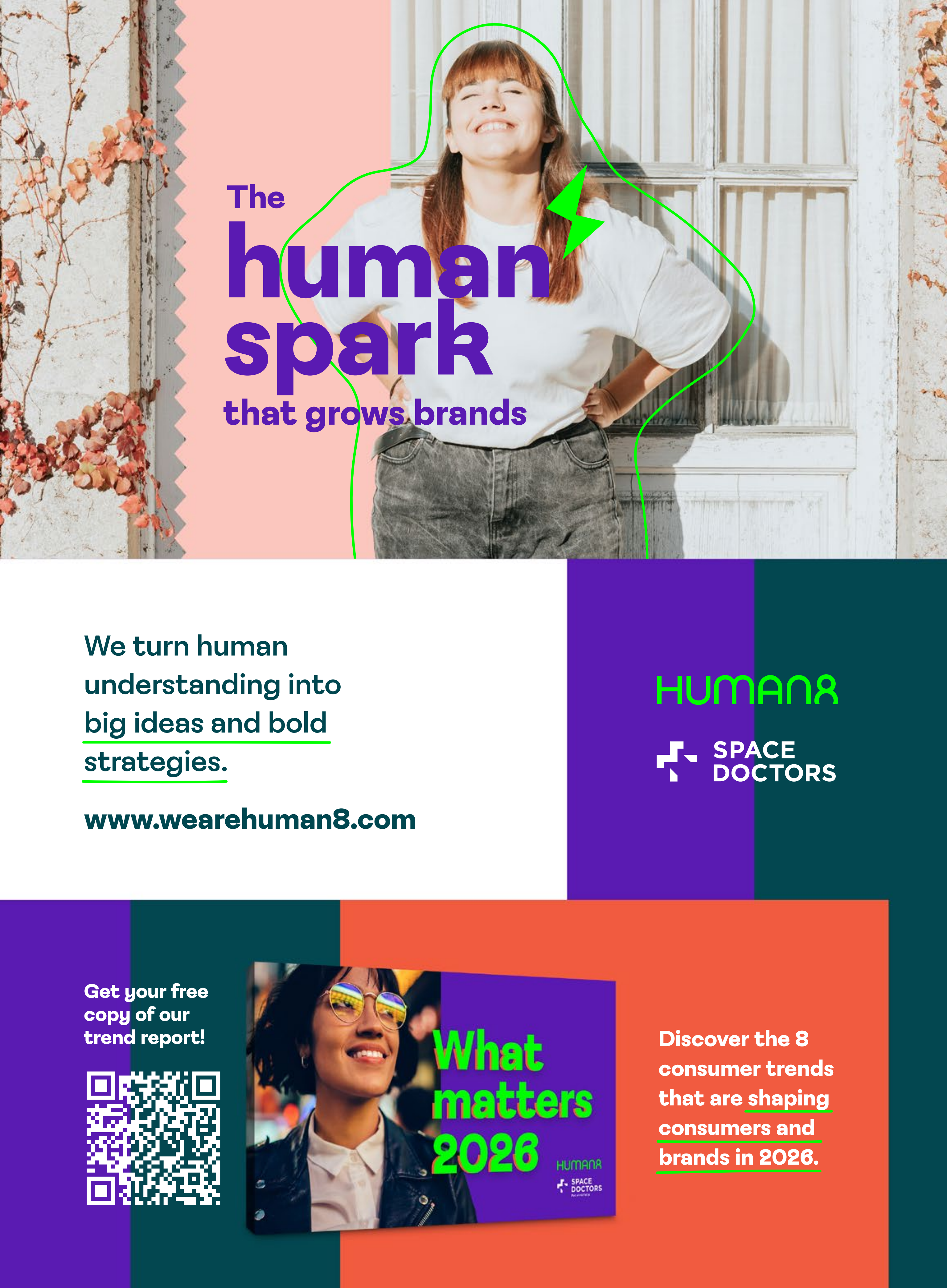
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Measured but muddled

A plea to researchers to recognize the value of making definitions before asking questions

| By Terry Grapentine

abstract

Marketing research is drunk on its own metrics. Loyalty. Satisfaction. Stickiness. Hollow words dressed as science. What passes for knowledge is numerology, accompanied by bar charts. Until researchers reclaim precision in definitions and discipline in measures, our surveys will continue to produce numbers that appear factual but are riddled with fiction.

In the shadow of the social sciences, marketing research emerged in the early 1900s, when manufacturers began tracking customer counts and testing advertisements to gauge their effectiveness. Economists modeled markets, psychologists modeled minds and sociologists modeled societies. Applied marketing research borrowed the tools of the social sciences – surveys, crosstabs, statistics – but left behind the science: theory, concepts and measurement. (Throughout this article, when I use the term marketing research, I mean applied marketing research. I use the shorter form simply for efficiency).

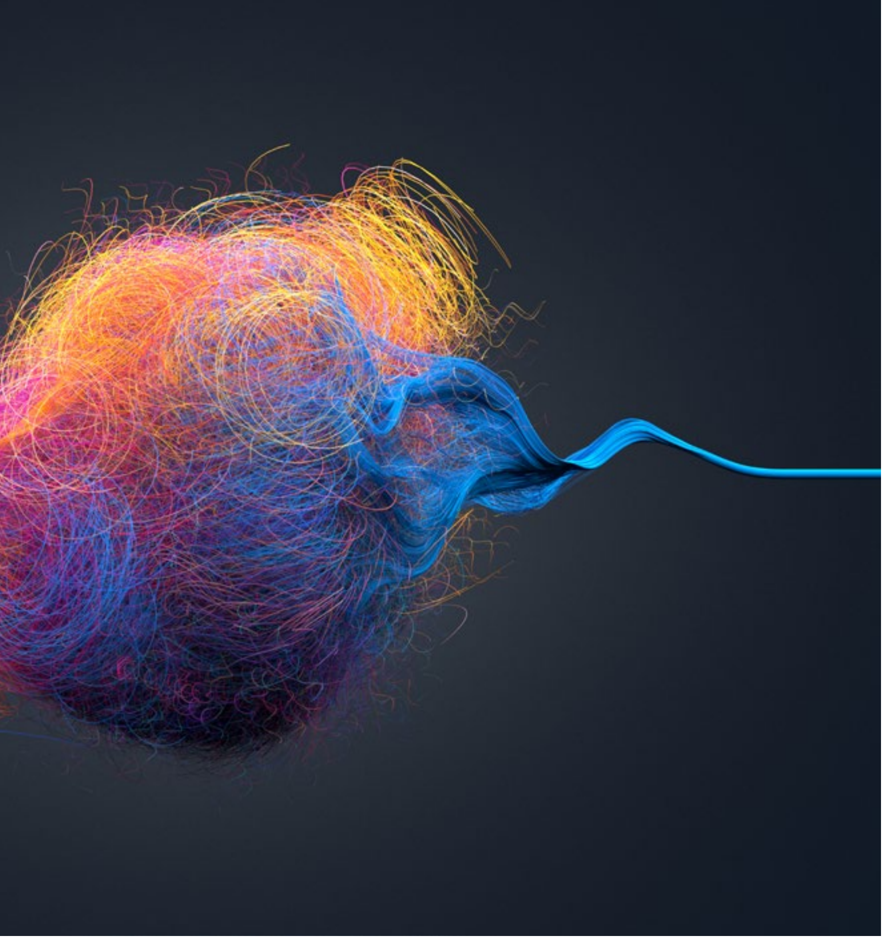
A century later, the paradox deepened. Data proliferated but foundations eroded. In my experience, ask a researcher what a theory is or what psychometrics means and you will often get hesitation. In the absence of any answers, research is like a language without grammar or a scale without calibration. Until we can define what a concept is, what a theory is and what psychometrics is, the field falters.

Realms of meaning[1]

Before we can answer those three questions, we need to ask where the meaning of our terms and concepts comes from. Philosophers of science refer to these sources as the realms of meaning. There are four such realms (Table 1): the realm of thought, the linguistic realm, the conceptual realm and the physical realm. Together, they provide the scaffolding that connects science, language, theory and evidence.

Realm of thought: The domain in which concepts, ideas and theories exist as abstract entities. It is not the physical world of objects but the mental space where meanings are formed and refined.

Linguistic realm: The domain of terms, symbols and nominal definitions. In marketing research, this includes English words and Hindu-Arabic numerals (0-9). A nominal definition is a stipulated definition: it specifies how a term will be used in a particular study (e.g., perceived brand quality). A dictionary records general usage; a nominal definition specifies technical usage within a specific field of research.



Conceptual realm: A subset of the realm of thought with a more precise role. The basic unit here is the concept, defined by its properties. The theoretical content of a science – its interrelated concepts and theories – resides in this realm. For example, the concept of perceived brand quality may be defined by factors such as durability, reliability, safety and performance.

Physical realm: The physical realm is the world of observable objects, events and states, including self-reports of consumer mental states such as perceptions of quality or value. Observable indicators of product quality might include the number of reported defects, the lifespan of a durable good, the frequency of service visits, repair costs, safety incidents or consumers' survey ratings of perceived durability, reliability and performance. Mental states are physically instantiated in the brain and can be studied empirically, often indirectly, through questionnaires, behavioral observation or neuroscientific methods.

What is a concept?

In its simplest form, a concept is an idea, such as perceived brand loyalty or perceived product quality, that researchers use to understand and explain consumer behavior. In marketing

Table 1: Realms of meaning: Brand and service quality examples

Realm of Meaning	Marketing Research Example (Brand Quality)	What Goes Wrong if Confused
Realm of thought	Researchers observing consumers in a focus group notice that participants use different words to describe the same underlying notion of perceived brand quality.	Without shared definitions, impressions diverge: one researcher hears "quality" as reliability, while another hears it as prestige. Raw impressions become inconsistent concepts.
Linguistic realm	The word "quality" in a survey.	Mistaking the word for the concept: assuming all respondents interpret "quality" the same way.
Conceptual realm	Perceived service quality is often defined by properties such as speed of service, getting it right the first time and offering to provide additional help.	Upon closer examination, these properties are not all of one kind. They can be categorized into two fundamental dimensions: proactive service (anticipating needs and offering assistance) and reactive service (quickly and accurately resolving problems). Confusing the surface properties with the underlying dimensions obscures the actual structure of the concept.
Physical realm	Real-world cases: product defects, longevity, customer service experiences.	Confusing perceptions with reality: A Chevrolet and a Cadillac owner each wait the same amount of time for an oil change. The Chevrolet owner rates the wait 9/10, while the Cadillac owner rates it 6/10, expecting faster service for a premium brand. These ratings don't measure minutes; they measure perceptions layered on top of them. The risk is mistaking subjective fairness judgments for objective performance.

research, concepts emerge from the realm of thought: they arise as we observe the marketplace, listen to consumers and experts and absorb what the literature has to say. Concepts gain clarity when defined carefully and they gain power when placed within theories, where they help us explain why consumers think, feel and act as they do.

The intension of a concept refers to the defining properties that make it what it is. Formally, "the intension of a concept is a list of properties possessed by the concept."[2] This list is also referred to as the concept's domain.[3] For instance, consider the concept of perceived in-bank teller service. Its defining properties might include the teller calling the customer by name, remaining undistracted and thanking the customer for her business. Such lists can become lengthy and in practice, it is rarely feasible to include every property in a survey.

The solution is to select a representative sample of properties that captures the essence of the concept. Gilbert A. Churchill Jr.'s seminal article, "A paradigm for developing better measures of marketing constructs," provides a fuller account of how to do this.[4] It remains one of the foundational guides for developing valid measures.

A concept's extension

"The extension of a concept is the set of all objects in the physical realm to which the concept applies."[5] Put differently, it is the set of real-world instances that embody its intensional properties.

For example, the concept of perceived product quality must extend across actual consumers and brands. But where should researchers draw the boundaries of that extension? Which customers count, which brands qualify and under what conditions? These questions make extension specification difficult in practice:

Respondents: For brand customers, do all buyers count or only repeat buyers? How frequently must purchases be before a customer is considered loyal?

Brands: In a study of cola drinkers, does "cola" include hybrids like Pepsi Wild Cherry or Coke Orange Vanilla or only classic formulations?

Data: If both purchase frequency and psychological commitment define brand loyalty, what thresholds define "frequent" or "committed"? Must both conditions be met or is one sufficient?

Additionally, I depart slightly from classical definitions by stipulating that consumer mental states are also part of a concept's extension. Perceptions, attitudes and judgments, physically instantiated in the brain, are not just reflections of the idea. They are real-world instances in which the intension manifests. For perceived product quality, the extension includes not only products and brands but also the neural states that embody consumers' evaluations.

Table 2: Concepts – intension, extension and pitfalls

Name of Concept	Example Intensional Properties	Example Extensional Properties/Pitfalls
Brand loyalty	• Frequency of purchase • Psychological commitment to the brand	• Weekly purchasers of Brand X • Consumers who consider Brand X first • Long-term repeat buyers *Pitfalls:* • "Customers who like the brand" (too vague) • "High purchase frequency" without a specified threshold
Product quality	• Durability • Safety • Performance	• Products lasting five-plus years • Cars with fewer than two repairs in the first three years *Pitfalls:* • "Good quality" (ambiguous) • "High performance" without objective criteria
Customer satisfaction	• Meeting expectations • Positive emotional response • Willingness to repurchase	• Respondents rated 9-10 on a satisfaction scale • Customers who return for repeat purchase *Pitfalls:* • "Met expectations" without clarifying whether expectations mean forecasts or deserved outcomes • Arbitrary thresholds (e.g., 9-10 vs. 7-10)

This matters for questionnaire design because researchers are not merely sampling products or brands; they are sampling the mental states through which consumers experience and interpret those products. Each survey question and response relating to a concept serves as evidence of how the intention of that concept is instantiated in a consumer's brain. Treating mental states as part of the extension requires researchers to confront boundary questions not only about which brands or which customers count but also about:

Which perceptions matter: Do they help the researcher understand the consumer behavior under study and are they predictive of behavior or outcomes?

How they are elicited: The way an interview is conducted may influence validity. For example, respondents may be less candid in a focus group than in an online survey or more open in a one-on-one interview where rapport is established.

How reliably they indicate the underlying concept: Recall the Chevrolet vs. Cadillac service example, where feelings of deservedness, not actual wait time, shaped ratings.

See Table 2 for a summary description of concepts, intension and extension.

THEORY

A theory is, at its heart, a way of asking and answering the oldest of questions: Why? Why do many smokers fall ill with lung cancer? Why do the skies darken and the winds roar into a derecho? Why does a shopper reach for the bright box of brand-name cereal instead of the plain one, which is half the price, stacked just below?

But theories are not only presented as diagrams on a classroom chalkboard. They are frameworks: the bare beams of knowledge on which we build floors and walls. They allow us to climb from the rubble of experience to the architecture of explanation, from fragments of fact to a story about how the world works. Without them, data are just shards, as meaningless as numbers without a tale to tell.

In marketing research, theories rarely introduce themselves as such. Instead, they dress for the occasion. They arrive in the tailored suits of multiple regression equations, the jackets of structural equation path diagrams (see Figure 1), the starched collars of discrete choice models. In these costumes, arguments transform into independent and dependent variables. Feed them into the machine, press return and the computer delivers a verdict: Raise a brand's image score by one point and consideration goes up by a half point. The X segment is weak. To reach them, do A, B and C. Improve quality and 5%, 10%, maybe 20% will shift their allegiance.

It appears to be science and sometimes it is. But it is also theater: mathematics posing as theory, probability masquerading as truth. Beneath the costumes lies an old confusion, between describing and explaining, between the numbers we print and the meanings we make of them.

In science, a theory is not a hunch. It is "an explanation of some aspect of the natural world, substantiated through repeated experiments or testing."[6]

Most applied research, however, is not theory-testing at all. The information shown in Figure 1 by itself is not a theory. It is hypothesis-testing; a patchwork of provisional guesses dressed up as rigor. That is why our so-called "theoretical models" so often collapse under inspection: they are scaffolds without foundations. This is not an excuse. It is a formal accusation. If we call what we do "science," then we owe it more than borrowed equations and borrowed confidence. We owe it to ourselves to ask what lies beneath a theory and whether we are standing on bedrock or sand.

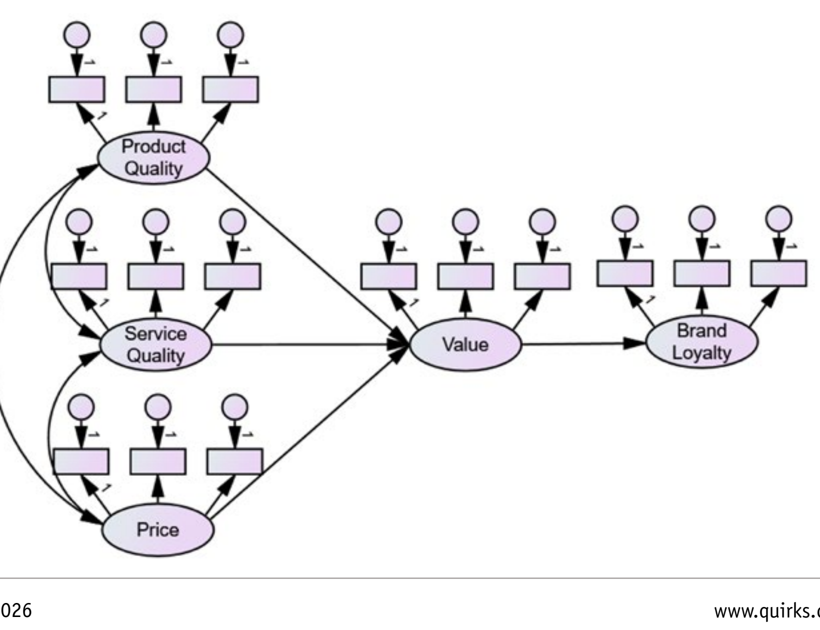
PSYCHOMETRICS

Psychometrics is the science of measurement. It asks how we know what we think we know, whether we are charting the tilt of the Earth against the sun on a winter's day in Iowa or gauging the restless moods of consumers. Its aim is always the same: to test the validity of what we measure and to refine how we measure it.

Yet how many marketing researchers have studied psychometrics in earnest, or opened a textbook past the first few pages? Few, I suspect. And the absence leaves a mark. Consider but one example: the endlessly invoked concept of "importance," that slippery, ambiguous, overworked word. It ought to be banished from serious marketing research.

Consider: Sometimes, importance is stated. A respondent ranks or rates features in order of what they consider most important. However, social norms, politeness or strategic

Figure 1: Structural equation path models by themselves are not theories



misdirection can also influence the situation: people report what they think they should value. Other times, importance is derived statistically, pulled from regression weights or correlation coefficients. But then the word changes clothes. Importance becomes not what customers declare but what predicts variance in a dependent variable.

Between these two uses – stated and derived – lies a chasm. One reflects perception, the other prediction. Yet in practice, marketing research often conflates them, presenting "importance" as if it were a single, transparent truth. It is anything but. To say a feature is important begs the question: important in what sense, to whom and for what outcome?

Psychometrics provides tools that enable researchers to assess the reliability of their measures. Two examples are:

Coefficient alpha: a statistic that estimates the internal consistency of a multi-item scale. In other words, it tells you how reliably a set of survey items measures the same underlying concept.

Confirmatory factor analysis: a statistical technique used to test whether survey items group together as expected, according to a researcher's theoretical model of a concept. It assesses whether the data fit the hypothesized structure of the construct.

Table 3: Project kickoff checklist

Rule of thumb: No questionnaire items until concepts, theory and measurement are nailed down.

Define Concepts		
☐ Write a nominal definition (what the term means in words).	☐ Specify concepts' intensions (essential properties).	☐ Specify the extension (real-world cases it covers).
☐ Check for ambiguity or vagueness in terms.	☐ Compare with existing literature for consistency.	
Connect to Theory		
☐ Place the concept in a theoretical framework.	☐ Identify relationships with other concepts.	☐ State hypotheses or research questions.
☐ Confirm the concept adds value beyond existing constructs.		
Plan Measurement		
☐ List objective indicators (facts, behaviors, performance).	☐ List subjective indicators (perceptions, attitudes, ratings).	☐ Align indicators with the extension (population, brands, events).
☐ Select data sources (survey, observation, neuroscience, etc.).		
Check Psychometrics		
☐ Reliability: Plan checks (e.g., coefficient alpha, confirmatory factor analysis).	☐ Validity: Content (covers the whole intension).	☐ Validity: Construct (fits with theory).
☐ Validity: Criterion (predicts outcomes).	☐ Dimensionality: Consider exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis.	
Design Sampling		
☐ Define the sampling unit (who/what counts).	☐ Set inclusion/exclusion rules.	☐ Confirm the sample represents the concept's extension.
Anticipate Interpretation		
☐ Plan how results map back to theory.	☐ Separate perceptions from objective performance.	☐ Ensure measures guide actionable decisions. Link the anticipated survey findings to management decisions.

The article offers the reader several psychometric resources to consult.

A PRESCRIPTION

This article has highlighted the cracks in the foundations of marketing research. How those foundations are shored up is not a matter of a single fix but of a lifetime's work. It is part of the long, uneven journey of anyone who makes a career in the field. And it all begins with gaining a deeper understanding of how theories and concepts in science contribute to the creation of knowledge.

But I don't want to point out the problems without offering some ways to address them. Therefore, I recommend the learning guides shown in the accompanying sidebar, keeping in mind that numerous YouTube videos are available on these topics.[7]

If you take only one lesson from this article, let it be this: Before you write a single survey question, write your definitions. Define your key concepts twice. First in their intension (the properties that make them what they are), then in their extension (the cases they cover). Put it down on paper. Then ask: Do my questionnaire measures match both? That small act of discipline, definitions before questions, will save you from more errors than any algorithm dressed up as science. Do it faithfully and your research will stop wobbling like a rickety scale and start holding steady across time, across studies and across boardrooms.

This article does not ask you to write like an academic. It asks you to think like one. To skip the work of defining concepts is to build your study on sand: a survey full of words that look solid but shift beneath your feet, findings that crumble under the slightest weight.

And if you forget all this tomorrow? Keep Table 3. It's the checklist that will remind you what to settle before you set loose your questionnaire.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Grapentine, principal of the Grapentine Company, has spent 48 years in marketing research. He has authored three books on critical thinking and scientific reasoning for marketers and published more than 60 articles across academic and industry outlets.

••• qualitative research

Emotionally illiterate

Why brands keep misreading what people feel – and how qualitative strategy can fix it

| By Kirsty Bennett

abstract

Most research on consumer emotions measures the words people use – not the emotions they actually experience – creating a costly gap between vocabulary and lived truth. Kirsty Bennett challenges insight teams to move beyond labels and toward disciplined qualitative mastery, uncovering the layered, constructed emotional realities that drive behavior and brand meaning.

Brands talk endlessly about emotional connection. We map emotional journeys. We track emotional sentiment. We test emotional resonance in messaging. But most of what we call "emotion" in research is not emotion at all. It's language.

We are not measuring what people feel – we are measuring the words they can access to describe how they feel. And those are not the same thing. This gap matters. Because language is only the shadow of the emotion – and shadows distort. If we mistake emotional vocabulary for emotional experience, we risk designing strategies, communications and brand experiences around the wrong need.

The emotional vocabulary gap

Mental health author and lecturer Brené Brown has noted that most people, even highly articulate ones, can reliably name only a handful of emotions. Not because they don't feel deeply but because they were never taught to identify and describe their emotional landscape. Neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett has demonstrated that emotions are not fixed, universal signals. They are constructed from bodily sensations, past experience, social context and, crucially, the language we have available to make meaning. If a person doesn't have the word for an emotional experience, they will reach for whatever is nearest, easiest or socially permissible. And this is where nuance collapses.

As shown in Table 1, the same label can mask multiple emotional realities. These distinctions change strategy. If we treat all "anxiety" as the same emotional state, we risk creating solutions that soothe the wrong tension. If we code "loneliness" as lack of social interaction, but the emotional truth is loss of identity, we solve for the wrong outcome.

Emotions are layered, not linear

People rarely experience a clean, singular emotion. A parent at graduation may feel pride, grief, awe, disorientation or relief – all at the same time. A job promotion may bring excitement, fear of exposure, imposter anxiety or satisfaction.

Emotions also vary in: intensity (sharp vs. warm vs. dull); duration (fleeting vs. persistent); after-effect (what lingers once the moment is over). If we capture only the label, we lose the architecture of the experience. And when we lose the architecture, we misinterpret the meaning – and therefore the behavior.

The science has advanced. Our methods must catch up. Take the field of affective neuroscience, for example, which has undergone a profound shift in just the last decade. Researchers like Barrett, Kristen Lindquist and Batja Mesquita have shown:

- Emotions are not universal "codes" to crack.
- They are shaped by culture, memory, language and social meaning.
- Emotional expression varies dramatically across contexts.

This is active, frontier research, propelled by advances in imaging technology and interdisciplinary study. As science becomes more nuanced, so must our insights practice.

Why does this matter for brands? Well, when emotional nuance is lost, brand strategy suffers. We misread consumer needs. We design messages that don't resonate. We solve for symptoms instead of causes. We mistake emotional politeness for emotional truth.

But when we get it right – when we correctly identify the felt emotional state – we unlock strategy that: builds authentic intimacy; drives creative leaps; produces loyalty rooted in recognition; and makes the consumer feel, "Yes – that's me." This is how brands become meaningful. Not through personalization; through precision of understanding.

A simple example: the weglow

It happens in small, fleeting moments. A stranger flashes headlights to warn you of a police speed trap ahead. You quietly do the same for the next driver. It isn't gratitude. It isn't joy. It isn't politeness.

It is the warmth of being seen, even briefly, by another human. A flicker of we.

I call it weglow – and it deliciously combines: recognition; solidarity; micro-belonging; a tiny lift of moral elevation and human decency; and the impulse to pass it forward.

Table 1

What They Say	What's Actually Being Felt	What They May Need
"Overwhelmed"	Overloaded or powerless	Support, containment, pacing, reassurance
"Grateful"	Warm appreciation or unwanted obligation	Permission to receive without reciprocity
"Lonely"	Isolation or a loss of meaning/place	Connection that restores belonging
"Anxious"	Dread or anticipation on the edge of something meaningful	Orientation, grounding, context, validation

These moments are real. They are emotionally consequential. And they never show up in brand trackers. Yet they are the foundation of trust.

Emotional truth

Master-level qualitative work is not simply "moderating." It is the disciplined pursuit of emotional truth. A master qualitative strategist does not enter the room to extract answers but to create the conditions in which people can discover themselves.

We are not collecting opinions. We are witnessing meaning in the moment it forms. This requires: curiosity without intrusion; empathy without projection; structure without constraint; intuition without assumption. And then, the work of forensic interpretation – tracing emotional signals across tone, language, gesture, metaphor and silence to understand not just what is said but what is meant.

It is closer to facilitated insight than interrogation. The participant leaves the conversation clearer than they entered – which is what makes the insight real and valuable. In other words, we do not find insights; we

> **[C]onsumers are not trained to analyze their emotional lives. They are not hiding the truth – they simply don't have the language for it. We are the ones who must help them find it. When we can name what people feel, we can design for what they truly need.**

help them reveal themselves. And this is where mastery matters.

The techniques above are only entry points. To uncover the emotional truths that shift understanding – the ones that make someone say "Yes … that's me. I've never had the words for that, but that is exactly how it feels." – requires a level of qualitative mastery that is not commoditized, scripted or easily replicated.

It demands:

- emotional co-regulation (helping participants feel safe enough to feel deeply);
- somatic inquiry (reading breath, tempo, tension, release, micro-hesitation);
- cognitive plus affective inference (hearing what is implied, not only what is spoken);
- pattern recognition across narratives and contexts; and
- the ability to sit inside uncertainty, without rushing to closure or simplification.

This is not simply asking questions. This is facilitated self-discovery. A master qualitative strategist is part scientist, part ethnographer, part psychologist, part storyteller – but, most importantly, a decoder of the human psyche. This work allows participants to recognize emotions they have felt but could never previously articulate.

And once an emotion is named with precision, it becomes: thinkable, shareable, influenceable and strategically actionable. That is where transformational insight is born. That is where brands gain the opportunity to connect with people in ways that make them feel genuinely seen, understood and valued.

The call to the industry

If brands want to build real emotional connection, they must invest in: emotional literacy; qualitative mastery; and time, space and skill to help consumers uncover what they cannot yet articulate.

Because consumers are not trained to analyze their emotional lives. They are not hiding the truth – they simply don't have the language for it. We are the ones who must help them find it. When we can name what people feel, we can design for what they truly need. And we can finally teach our data systems and AI models to track emotion correctly – instead of scaling emotional misunderstanding at speed.

Because the future of brand strategy will be built on whatever emotional truths we choose to recognize – or ignore – right now. Q

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Kirsty Bennett is founder of Sixth Sense Studio and co-founder of Parkel Navigation. With three decades in global brand strategy and human insight leadership, she pioneered Qualitative Strategy, a disciplined exploratory approach for decoding hidden emotional and psychological drivers that shape behavior and enable transformative brand strategy. Find Bennett on LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/kirsty-bennett-afshar/

••• telephone research

Pick up the phone

Why telephone surveys are emerging as a reliable tool in a digital-first world

| By Kevin M. Kelly

abstract

As wireless-only households become the norm, research access must follow. Integrating text-to-web outreach with live telephone follow-up enhances verification, reduces panel bias and captures underrepresented voices, offering a scalable path to more inclusive, high-integrity insights.

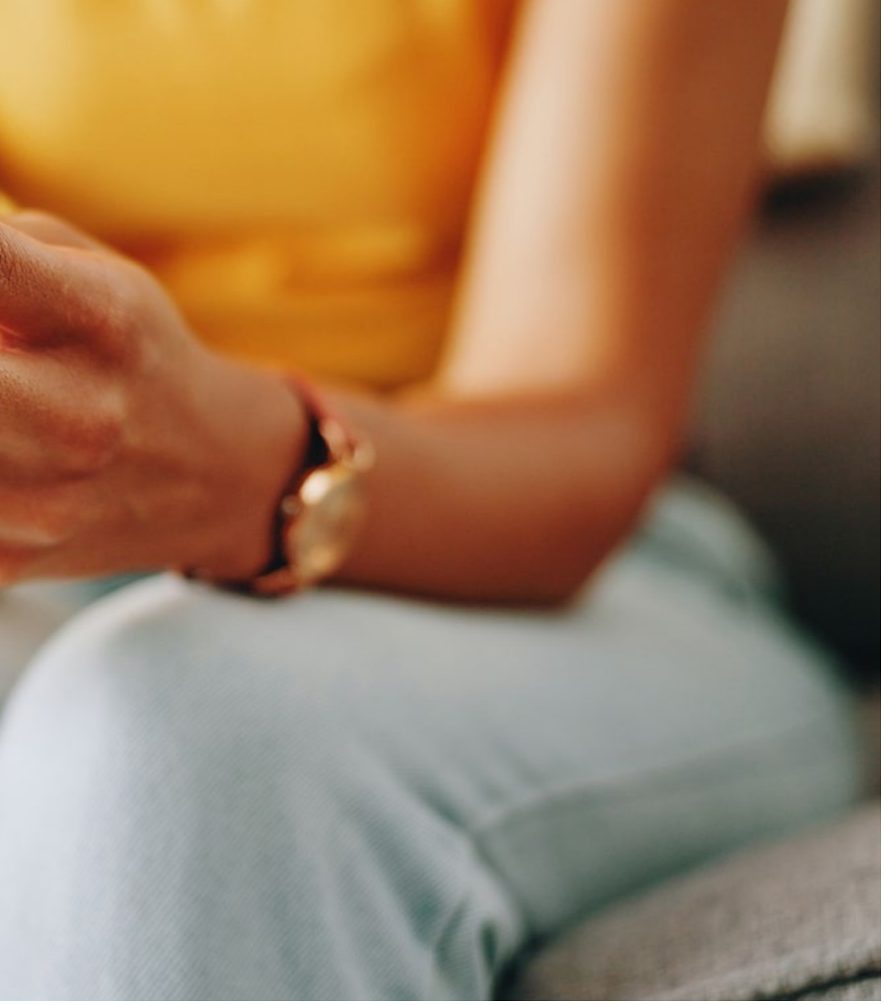
As market research methodologies have multiplied in the digital era, few tools remain as polarizing and as persistently undervalued as the telephone survey. While online platforms boast efficiency and reach, they have increasingly become havens for fraud, response bias and disengagement. In contrast, telephone methodologies, especially when enhanced by complementary digital strategies, offer a powerful counterbalance rooted in real-time human interaction, respondent verification and adaptive flexibility.

This article explores best practices and emerging trends for leveraging telephone surveys in the current research landscape. It advocates for a hybrid, mobile-first approach that blends human interaction with technological advances. This approach enhances both data quality and participant diversity. At a time when researchers face mounting pressure to deliver representative, high-integrity insights quickly and cost-effectively, telephone surveys are an excellent option.

The wireless-only majority

The foundation of any effective research strategy is access. In 2026, access means mobile. According to the CDC's latest National Health Interview Survey data, 76.4% of U.S. adults now live in wireless-only households. Among children, that number rises to 87.2%. This marks a dramatic shift from just two decades ago, when fewer than 5% of households had cut the cord.

This trend is not evenly distributed. Younger adults, renters and those living in poverty are significantly more likely to live in wireless-only homes. These same groups are often underrepresented in traditional research panels. That makes mobile-first strategies not just a convenience but a necessity for representative sampling.



The implications are clear. Landline-only methodologies are no longer viable for reaching the general population. Researchers who fail to adapt risk systematically excluding large swaths of the public. This exclusion introduces bias and undermines the validity of their findings.

Panels come with limitations

Online research panels have long been favored for their convenience, speed and scalability. Yet for all their advantages, they also come with serious limitations that affect data quality, representativeness and, ultimately, the validity of research findings.

First, panels are often made up of professional respondents who participate frequently in surveys. While their familiarity may increase completion rates, it also introduces fatigue and response bias. Over time, repeated exposure to similar questions can train respondents to anticipate the "desired" answers, reducing the authenticity of their responses.

Second, the issue of self-selection cannot be ignored. Individuals who choose to join panels do so voluntarily and often with the expectation of receiving incentives. This creates a sample that is not necessarily representative of the broader population. Many groups, including younger adults, working-class individuals and certain ethnic minorities, are underrepresented in panels. As a result, critical perspectives may be left out of the data narrative.

Another concern is the growing presence of fraudulent activity within online panels. Bots, VPN-masked identities and duplicate accounts have become common in today's panel ecosystems. While many platforms implement safeguards, these systems are not foolproof. Fraudulent responses inflate sample sizes but undermine insight validity.

Panel conditioning further skews the data. Long-term panelists may become conditioned to survey logic, leading them to speed through questionnaires or guess at answers to fit expected patterns. This behavior reduces the richness of open-ended responses and increases the likelihood of satisficing, where respondents choose answers that are satisfactory rather than accurate.

Finally, limited accountability is a systemic issue. Researchers have little insight into the true identity, environment or state of mind of panel participants. The inability to verify respondents' characteristics or responses limits both the confidence and depth of conclusions drawn from panel-derived data.

Taken together, these drawbacks create significant challenges for research that relies solely on panels. That is why blending digital reach with human engagement, such as through live telephone follow-ups, can restore confidence in the data.

A mobile-first, multimode future. One of the most transformative developments in telephone research is its integration with digital outreach. In particular, text-to-web (T2W) recruitment has emerged as a strategic enabler. This approach initiates contact through personalized SMS invitations that direct participants to secure, mobile-friendly web surveys. It helps researchers reach mobile-only households and younger demographics that are typically underrepresented in traditional panels.

Unlike opt-in online panels that often attract professional survey takers or individuals motivated purely by incentives, T2W recruitment targets respondents in the real world. These individuals are not preconditioned by frequent survey participation. Their responses are often more reflective of genuine sentiment. Also, the absence of preregistration removes one of the most common avenues for identity misrepresentation and fraud.

The true power of this approach comes from pairing digital entry points with live telephone follow-up. By combining scalable outreach with human-led verification, researchers can both broaden and deepen their reach. The goal is to obtain insights that are more trustworthy, nuanced and representative.

Human interaction as a quality safeguard. Live telephone interviews remain an effective tool for fraud prevention and response validation. They allow researchers to confirm respondent identity in real time. Interviewers can detect inconsistent or illogical answers that bots or inattentive participants may produce. They can also engage in adaptive probing, uncovering insights that go beyond predefined questionnaire structures.

Well-trained interviewers do more than collect data. They interpret tone, build rapport and encourage thoughtful engagement. These human interactions often separate surface-level responses from truly meaningful insights.

Modernizing the call. The critique of telephone research often centers around its perceived cost and complexity. However, advances in computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) systems are reshaping what is possible. Features like automated dialing, response tracking and standardized scripting reduce manual inefficiencies and improve consistency.

AI-enhanced speech analytics now support real-time sentiment assessment and can flag inconsistencies during interviews. With these tools, interviewers are empowered to focus on engaging respondents rather than managing processes.

Building the right sample. A scientifically valid telephone survey begins with a strong sampling frame. Best practices for inclusion include layered sampling, where respondents sourced through SMS or randomized lists receive follow-up phone verification. Stratified sample designs further ensure proportional representation across demographic or geographic segments.

Responsive recruitment adjustments help close early gaps in sample composition. These strategies are critical for reaching groups that often go unseen in traditional panels. Examples include mobile-only households, low-income respondents and those with limited digital access.

Boosting response rates. Getting people to answer and stay on the phone requires thoughtful strategy. Several methods consistently improve engagement. These include optimizing call schedules based on local routines and training interviewers in empathy-based refusal conversion techniques.

Incentive models also play a role. Non-monetary rewards or charitable contributions can increase participation without distorting respondent motivations. These practices respect respondents as people and acknowledge the value of their time and perspectives.

Clarity over complexity. Effective telephone surveys require clear, concise design. Survey language should use plain words and short sentences, since participants do not have access to visual aids or the ability to reread questions. A neutral tone helps reduce bias, while logical sequencing of questions eases cognitive load.

Interviewers benefit from built-in prompts and fallback questions that support probing without departing from standardized frameworks. Pretesting the survey with a small sample ensures clarity and flow before full-scale deployment.

Quality control as an ongoing process. Data integrity demands continuous oversight. Quality control begins with live call monitoring and recorded audit reviews. These steps ensure interviewer adherence to scripts and ethical guidelines.

Backend verification processes flag anomalies, such as inconsistent patterns or repeat responses. Data cleaning and normalization follow, standardizing inputs before analysis. These safeguards support actionable insights that leadership teams can trust.

Supporting, not replacing, human expertise. AI plays a growing role in telephone research. However, it is most effective when used as a support system rather than a substitute for human judgment. Machine learning algorithms can detect potential fraud by analyzing hundreds of variables. Real-time sentiment analysis helps identify disengaged participants. Automated flagging directs supervisors to high-priority interactions. When applied ethically, these tools elevate the quality and reliability of data while preserving the value of human interaction.

Blending channels for maximum impact. The future of market research lies in hybrid approaches. Researchers increasingly combine telephone outreach with online channels to balance efficiency, accuracy and reach.

Telephone interviews can validate online survey results, while SMS reminders boost response rates across both modes. Qualitative interviews conducted by phone may be complemented by digital diaries or follow-up tasks, adding layers of insight.

This flexibility allows researchers to tailor their approach based on study goals, respondent preferences and real-world accessibility.

Why telephone research still matters

Far from obsolete, the modern telephone survey offers a blueprint for high-integrity, inclusive research. In a time when fast, low-cost digital surveys often compromise quality, the telephone interview reintroduces the human element. It can enable deeper engagement, more rigorous verification and greater inclusivity across populations.

Researchers who want reliable, actionable insights must move beyond the binary of digital versus analog. A hybrid approach that embraces mobile-first strategies, layered methodologies and human intelligence offers a useful path forward.

The future of market research depends not just on what we ask but how we listen. And for that, the telephone remains indispensable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Kelly is CEO at American Directions Research Group in Washington, D.C., with more than 20 years of experience in executive leadership in the market research industry. He holds an M.S. from The George Washington University School of Business.

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14 TOP CONSUMER RESEARCH COMPANIES

Consumer research plays a crucial role in helping businesses understand the people they serve. Whether a company is refining an existing product, exploring new opportunities or evaluating customer experiences, reliable insights into consumer behavior and preferences are essential for making informed decisions. Without accurate data, even well-intentioned strategies can miss the mark.

Organizations that specialize in consumer research are equipped to gather meaningful insights from a wide range of audiences. Using proven methodologies, advanced technology and carefully designed studies, they capture the attitudes, motivations and behaviors that shape purchasing decisions. These approaches help ensure that the data collected is both credible and actionable.

From everyday shoppers to highly specific demographic groups, consumer research firms offer the expertise and tools needed to reach the right people and uncover valuable perspectives. By turning consumer feedback into clear insights, they help businesses strengthen products, refine messaging and make confident decisions in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Bellomy

Founded 1976 | 80+ employees
John Sessions, CEO

> **"Bellomy's expertise in research is unparalleled. They are an extension of our team, not just a vendor."** ~Bellomy Client

Why risk guessing what consumers think when you can get answers from the source? Bellomy's consumer research provides the clarity Fortune 1000 leaders need to make confident decisions. Bellomy delivers depth through qualitative methods, from focus groups to shop-alongs to AI-moderated interviews. We provide breadth and reach via tracking surveys, online panels and foundational research, powered by proprietary insights technology and enhanced with AI tools and synthetic respondents. We uncover predictive insights from advanced analytics, with recommendations that move the needle on brand perception, purchase intent and satisfaction. Ready to stop guessing and turn insights into strategic advantage? Contact Bellomy.

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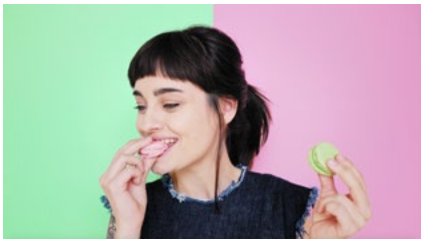
Curion

Founded 2017 | 300 employees
Keren Novack, President



Curion specializes in delivering impactful insights to the world's top CPG companies, helping them develop winning, repeatedly purchased products. Curion's deep data-driven product insights, sensory expertise and state-of-the-art consumer centers enable them to uncover responses to critical client objectives. With over five decades of experience in the product testing industry, Curion is dedicated to guiding clients with their proprietary XP Xperience Performance platform, connecting brands to consumers at every step. An innovator in the industry, Curion recently developed a groundbreaking benchmarking product testing method, the Curion Score™, which has become a trusted and sought-after tool within the industry. As one of the largest product and consumer insights companies in the U.S., Curion has built a reputation for excellence and trust among the world's leading consumer brands. Curion's commitment to innovation and expertise, coupled with a passion for delivering actionable insights, makes Curion a valuable partner for companies looking to develop and launch successful products.

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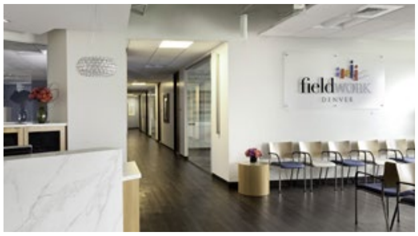
Phone: 1-224-632-1919
www.curioninsights.com

Fieldwork

Founded 1980 / Insights 1960 | 350 employees
Nikki Darre, President



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Harmon Research

Founded 2009 | 125 employees
Stephanie Vincent, Executive Vice President

Harmon Research specializes in delivering high-quality qualitative and quantitative insights through online research across 43 countries. We help brands understand their customers through consumer-focused research including customer experience, brand perception, usage and attitudes and shopper behavior studies. DataDefense, our quality-assurance program, checks data before, during and after collection to ensure every result meets the highest standards. To keep surveys safe and accurate, we use specialized online tools. NoBot uses simple puzzles to make sure only real people (not bots) enter a survey. It also adds extra protection using Microsoft-powered backend smart firewall-style technology to block suspicious IPs, filter out bad actors and stop automated attacks. Smart Probing, our AI tool, asks intelligent follow-up questions during surveys to capture richer, more thoughtful responses from real consumers. Together, these technologies and strict quality controls allow Harmon Research to deliver reliable, trustworthy insights worldwide, whether for large-scale consumer studies or in-depth qualitative research.

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www.harmonresearch.com

Ironwood Insights Group LLC

Founded 2017 | 300 employees
Brian Cash, VP Research Services

As consumer attitudes and behaviors evolve, so do the ways we reach and research them. Ironwood Insights Group delivers expert consultation and execution across the full spectrum of quantitative and qualitative research. We operate one of the industry's largest, most technologically advanced data-collection networks to reach people where and how they prefer to engage: online, mobile, text, telephone and, most importantly, integrated mixed-mode approaches. These capabilities power creative research designs and analytics that surface the contextual, situational "moments that matter" in the consumer journey. This clear-eyed, 360-degree view of consumer decision-making yields distinctive, forward-looking insights that drive product innovation, sharpen brand positioning and elevate the customer experience. Contact us to learn more about how the synergy of Ironwood's capabilities provides clients with actionable, durable business insights that create a lasting advantage.

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www.ironwoodinsights.com

Just The Facts Inc.

Founded 1994
Bruce Tincknell, Managing Director

Just The Facts Inc. has 30 years of strategic consumer products qual and quant experience (using extensive online capabilities). JTF Research works closely with clients to develop the optimal methodology to achieve desired client results (e.g., its objectives, what's driving the need to conduct it, outcomes sought, how findings will guide decisions and much more). If your current research supplier doesn't understand the critical nuances of your needs, then their low-price research is strategically costly. Conducting quality consumer research means having a strategic partner to effectively navigate, guide and manage your important assignments; this means creating an effective plan for researching consumer attitudes, behaviors and usage, as well as concepts, prototypes, new products, brand extensions, packaging, advertising and more. All conducted with in-depth analysis and insightful reporting. Contact JTF for high-quality consumer research. Let's discuss your specific needs and ensure your products and services are ready for market from the consumers' perspective.

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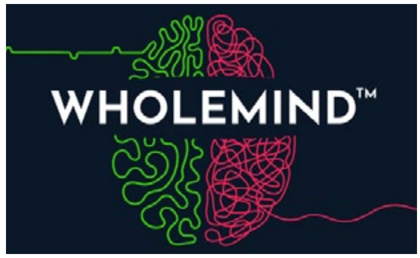
MDRG/Market Dynamics Research, Inc.

Founded 1994
Sondra Brown, President and Founder



Want to understand the "why" behind your consumers' behavior? MDRG designs custom market research that uncovers both the logic and emotion behind consumer choice. From brand experience to product innovation to communications strategy, we tailor each study to your unique business questions – delivering the clarity that moves your organization forward. Our proprietary WHOLE MIND™ research methodology goes beyond surface-level findings to reveal the motivations that shape preference and loyalty. With more than three decades of experience in health care, CPG, finance and media and communications, MDRG partners with organizations ready to turn insights into action. Connect with us on LinkedIn to learn more about our work.

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Murray Hill National

Founded 2013 | 35 employees
Susan Owens, COO

Clients trust Murray Hill National with thousands of studies per year as their research partner. In return, we deliver valuable solutions, high-quality recruitment and data collection for all your research needs, specializing in health care and B2B market research! All methodologies and all audiences, we can host and deliver your results across the U.S. What makes us different than most is we put data quality at the top of the list. For the last 30 years, the executives at Murray Hill National LLP have worked diligently and advanced to one of the leading data collection and recruitment companies in the U.S. Our teams are committed to meeting your research needs. We provide high-quality recruitment with access to 5 million consumers, 650,000+ B2B executives/professionals and 750,000 physicians/nurses. We also organize 150+ patient panels for any audience, any methodology specializing in B2B and health care. Our qualitative services extend far beyond the traditional focus group. Our services include online, digital, remote, home use tests and any other methodology needing to find an audience with feedback or expert knowledge. Call us today for your next project, your "national" recruiting experts!

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NORS Surveys Inc

Founded 1991 | 150 employees
Luis F. Montenegro, Jr., DBA, President

NORS Surveys Inc. aims to exceed your expectations for our services. We provide high-quality telephone, text-to-web and online data collection services, survey programming, data processing, coding and translations. Our full-time staff are seasoned professionals, each with over 25 years of experience in all facets of marketing research. Our team's experience allows us to seamlessly provide you with the field service experience that you expect and deserve for your data collection needs. We use the latest technology in the data collection phase to provide you with valid and reliable data that will meet your research objectives. Our knowledge and vast array of experience in the field of project management allows us to provide you with a full range of value-added services, providing you with "white-glove treatment" each and every time.

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P&K Research

Founded 1957 | 200 employees
Patti Wojnicz, EVP

For more than 65 years, P&K has played a defining role in advancing modern sensory science. Our founders developed the rigorous research methodologies that established the foundation for contemporary consumer taste testing, shaping industry standards that continue to guide product evaluation and innovation worldwide. Today, leading food and beverage companies rely on our expertise to inform critical business decisions – from new product launches and competitive assessments to formulation optimization and cost efficiencies. Our capabilities encompass the full range of sensory and consumer research, conducted in our company-owned facilities in Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles and New York, and supported by field alliances across the United States, Europe, Asia, Latin America and Australia. Our category expertise spans beverages, snacks, bakery, frozen foods, confectionery and alcohol – transforming sensory insight into measurable market impact.

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www.pk-research.com

Prodege

Founded 2005 | 600 employees
Joe Picciano, President

Prodege (pro-dé-gée) is a consumer marketing and insights platform fueled by leading loyalty programs that propel brand growth. Prodege empowers marketers to understand, reach and grow their customer base through market research and performance marketing campaigns that provide valuable customer feedback and engagement. Brands can reach customers in a rewarding environment through positive interactions in one of Prodege's many loyalty programs, which cater to their most loyal customers with brand-safe offers and surveys that create greater engagement and enriching brand experiences. Visit www.prodege.com to learn more about our solutions.

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www.prodege.com

Pureprofile

Founded 2000 | 262 employees
Martin Filz, CEO

Pureprofile has been delivering high-quality consumer data and insights for over 25 years. As a trusted global research partner, we empower leading brands and organizations across multiple sectors to be able to make confident decisions across product launches, brand tracking, innovation, customer experience and strategic planning. We have delivered research solutions to over 850 clients worldwide. With extensive profiling across our proprietary panels and access to niche and mainstream audiences in global markets, Pureprofile enables clients to better understand consumer attitudes and behaviors and uncover meaningful insights fast. Our rigorous vetting and verification processes underpin a long-standing commitment to data quality. We operate in line with the ESOMAR Code and are active members of MRS, the Insights Association and ADIA, reinforcing our dedication to ethical, transparent research practices.

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Why guess when you can know?

ReadingMinds.ai

Founded 2025 | 12 employees
Stu Sjouwerman, CEO

Hear what your customers really feel. ReadingMinds.ai runs voice interviews with Emma, an emotionally intelligent AI interviewer that listens for tone, hesitation and intent that surveys miss. Launch a study in minutes, let Emma interview customers 24/7 and get sentiment scores, themes and insights in hours. When someone says "satisfied" but sounds worried, you'll catch it. See results as interviews happen instantly, with tone signals that reveal why. Built for churn prevention, messaging and concept testing. Every insight is traceable to customer quotes, so product, marketing and sales align fast. Swap surveys and six-week qualitative projects for affordable voice research at scale. Participants enjoy the conversation; teams see 90%+ completion rates. Sharpen messaging, spot churn early and target with confidence.

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Symmetric, A Decision Analyst Company

Founded 2016 | 25+ employees
Jason Thomas, CEO
Arianne Larimer, President

Symmetric owns and operates American Consumer Opinion®, a worldwide online panel that reaches millions of consumers spanning North America, Latin America, Europe and Asia. Consumers can sign up in one of 11 languages and complete demographic profiles are maintained for each household. Symmetric places a high value on representative samples, scientific sampling methods and advanced fraud-detection systems. Our triple opt-in panel is carefully balanced, continually refreshed and systematically cleaned for non-responders, speedsters and cheaters. Our panelists average a tenure of four years and a removal rate of less than 3%. Symmetric supports quantitative and qualitative research for online and offline projects. Our panelists have an 80%+ show rate for all qualitative projects. In addition, we have schedulers who can provide reminder phone calls and emails. Additional services include programming, hosting, online communities, tabulation, coding, IHUT mailing and API integrations.

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www.symmetricsampling.com/panels

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

••• can't-miss activities

CMO Alliance will host the CMO Summit Silicon Valley on **April 14**. Visit events.cmoalliance.com/location/siliconvalley.

Quirk's Media will host the Quirk's Event – Chicago on **April 15-16**. Visit www.thequirksevent.com.

Insights Association will host Ignite: Data Quality on **April 21**. Visit www.insightsassociation.org/Events/Event-Info/sessionaltcd/2026IgniteDataQualit.

Insights Association will host Ignite: B2B 2026 on **April 22.** Visit www.insightsassociation.org/Events/Event-Info/sessionaltcd/2026IGNITEB2B.

ASA will host the Symposium on Data Science and Statistics on **April 28-May 1**. Visit ww2.amstat.org/meetings/sdss/2026.

Insights Association will host Ignite: CPG on **May 5**. Visit www.insightsassociation.org/Events/Event-Info/sessionaltcd/2026IgniteCPG.

Quirk's Media will host the Quirk's Event – London on **May 6-7**. Visit www.thequirksevent.com.

PAA will host its Annual Meeting on **May 6-9** in **St. Louis**. Visit www.populationassociation.org/events-publications/future-past-meetings.

Generis Group will host the American Packaging Summit on **May 14-15** in **Chicago**. Visit uspacksummit.com. **AAPOR** will host its Annual Conference on **May 13-15** in **Los Angeles**. Visit aapor.org/aapor-81st-annual-conference.

AMA will host the AMA Marketing and Public Policy Conference on **May 16-18**. Visit www.ama.org/events/academic/2026-ama-marketing-and-public-policy-conference.

MSPA will host the EA Conference on **May 19-21**. Visit mspa-ea.org/events/eventitem/39-mspa-ea-conference-agm-19-21-may-2026-alicante-spain.html.

Connect Media will host Retail Leader on **May 20-21** in **Melbourne**. Visit retailleaders.com.au.

GIA Global Group will host the World Data Summit on **May 20-22** in **Malta**. Visit worlddatasummit.com/europe.

ESOMAR will host ESOMAR Asia Pacific | Tokyo on **May 27-29**. Visit esomar.org/events/asia-pacific-2026-tokyo.

IQPC will host the CX BFSI USA Exchange on **June 1-2** in **Phoenix**. Visit www.cxnetwork.com/events-customer-experience-exchange-bfsi-usa.

IQPC will host CX Healthcare West USA Exchange on **June 3-4** in **Phoenix**. Visit www.cxnetwork.com/events-cx-healthcare-exchange-west.

CMO Alliance will host the PMM Leaders Summit New York on **June 4**. Visit world.productmarketingalliance.com/location/leadersnyc.

Forrester Research will host the CX Summit EMEA on **June 8-10** in **Amsterdam**. Visit www.forrester.com/event/cx-emea.

Insights Association will host Ignite: Healthcare Research on **June 10** in **Philadelphia**.Visit www.insightsassociation.org/Events/Event-Info/sessionaltcd/2026IgniteHealthcare.

Quirk's Media will host Quirk's Virtual – Ensuring Data Quality, Security and Ethics on **June 11**. Visit www.quirks.com/events?q=QuirksVirtual.

Quirk's Media will host the Quirk's Event – New York on **July 29-30**. Visit www.thequirksevent.com.

Quirk's Media will host Quirk's Virtual – DIY Research on **September 24**. Visit www.quirks.com/events?q=QuirksVirtual.

Event details as of February 16, 2026. Please see websites for more details.

To submit information on your upcoming conference or event for possible inclusion in our print and online calendar, email info@quirks.com. For a more complete list of upcoming events visit www.quirks.com/events.

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10 minutes with...

Christian Kurz

SVP, Global Streaming Research and Insights, Paramount

"In many ways, insights teams will become the guardians of truth, rigor and consumer authenticity."

Scan to read the full article at www.Quirks.com.

What inspires you as a researcher?

As a researcher, the biggest inspiration is simply people, and my never-ending curiosity about them. What motivates them, how they adapt and why they make the choices they do. Consumers are endlessly fascinating, and being able to spend my career trying to understand them truly feels like a privilege.

Working in such a dynamic industry as media – streaming in particular – only amplifies that sense of excitement. This is a sector where the world genuinely is constantly shifting – technology evolves, behaviors transform and expectations rise – and consumers adapt their habits almost in real time. Keeping our finger on the pulse of those changes is not just intellectually stimulating – it's essential.

I love diving into how people view the world, what they need from their entertainment, how they perceive the products and services we offer and how they respond to our shows, movies, marketing and the product experience itself. Having spent years exploring audiences across age groups, life stages and generations, I'm continually energized by how quickly things evolve. The fact that I get to observe these changes, interpret them and help translate them into strategic decisions, offering thought leadership that shapes how we anticipate and respond to consumer shifts, is incredibly rewarding. Ultimately, helping colleagues see the world through the consumer's eyes, ensuring their perspectives shape the direction of the business, feels like meaningful work. It's a dream job because it's both analytical and deeply human.

When looking ahead to the next five years, what will be the insight industry's biggest challenge?

I believe the greatest challenge ahead for the insights industry to be how we maintain our credibility, reliability and influence in an environment where data quality is becoming increasingly fragile. We're already grappling with significant fraud in research data, and that challenge will grow. Add the rise of synthetic data and AI-generated responses, which can both be valuable tools in certain contexts but are definitely not substitutes for real human insight, and the landscape becomes even more complex.

AI can provide an answer instantly, but speed does not guarantee accuracy, context or nuance. Not every answer is a good answer, and not all data is meaningful data. As researchers, we must safeguard the difference. Our role will increasingly involve ensuring that what we call "insight" is grounded in authentic human input, thoughtful analysis and sound methodology. We need to harness AI to enhance insights, not dilute them. That means defining what quality looks like, building better safeguards and educating stakeholders when directional guidance is enough and when it absolutely is not. In many ways, insights teams will become the guardians of truth, rigor and consumer authenticity.