

# USE OF THE INTERNET FOR CONDUCTING OPINION AND MARKETING RESEARCH ETHICAL GUIDELINES



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RESEARCH  
ORGANIZATION

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## Basic Principles

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Opinion and marketing research conducted over the Internet must conform to the same standard rules and ethical principles outlined in Marketing Research Association's (MRA) *Code of Marketing Research Standards*.

This document is intended to focus on those areas of Internet research where technologies have impacted on data capture and data collection techniques, disclosure issues, responsible business behavior, and consumer protection and rights to privacy.

It is now and always has been the intent of the MRA and its membership to respect and protect respondents during data collection in all of its legitimate forms. MRA understands that the research process must be acceptable to the general public and that all efforts must be made to self-regulate the research industry in such a way that consumers and research users will have confidence in the process and the results.

In an age of globalization at many levels of business, it is the goal of MRA to assure that only legitimate opinion and marketing research is conducted on the Internet with full disclosure, respectful recruiting techniques, and consumer protection in accordance with MRA's *Code of Marketing Research Standards*.

## Introduction

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The rapid growth of Internet Research has opened dramatic new opportunities for collecting and disseminating research information worldwide. At the same time it raises a number of ethical and technical issues which must be addressed if the Internet is to be used effectively and responsibly for opinion and marketing research purposes.

The fact that the Internet is inexpensive to use and difficult to regulate means that it can be open to misuse by less experienced or less scrupulous organizations, often based outside the research industry. Any Internet surveys that fall below the high standards promoted by the MRA under the *Code of Marketing Research Standards* and *Recommended Best Business Practices* will make it more difficult for legitimate researchers to use the Internet for research. Misuse of Internet opinion and marketing research could seriously damage the credibility of legitimate opinion and marketing research and is an abuse of the goodwill of Internet respondents and users in general.

MRA has issued these *Ethical Guidelines* to protect the interests both of Internet respondents and of the users of Internet research findings. Because information technology and the Internet evolve and change so rapidly, it is not practical to discuss in detail all the technical features of Internet research in such a guideline. This, therefore, concentrates on the main principles that must be followed in carrying out research on (or about) the Internet and in reporting the findings of such research.

These *Ethical Guidelines* include:

- Respondent Cooperation Should Be Voluntary

- Researcher's Identity Should Be Disclosed to Respondents
- Respondents' Rights to Anonymity Should Be Safeguarded
- Privacy Policy Statements Should Be Posted Online
- Data Security Should Be Maintained
- Reliability and Validity of Findings Should Be Disclosed to the Public
- Researchers Interviewing Minors Should Adhere to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act
- Unsolicited Email Should Not Be Sent to Those Requesting Not to Receive Any Further Email

## **I. Respondent Cooperation Should Be Voluntary**

Opinion and marketing researchers and their companies should avoid intruding unnecessarily on the privacy of Internet respondents. Survey respondents' cooperation should at all times be voluntary. No personal information unnecessary to the project, which is additional to that already available from other sources, should be sought from or about respondents without their prior knowledge and consent.

In obtaining the necessary agreement from respondents, the opinion and marketing researcher must not mislead them about the nature of the research or the uses that will be made of the findings. In order to prevent biased responses there may be occasions, however, when the purpose of the research cannot be fully disclosed to respondents at the beginning of the interview. The researcher should avoid deceptive statements that would be harmful or create a nuisance to the respondent; for example, the respondent should be told the likely length of the interview or about the possibilities of being re-interviewed on a later occasion. Respondents should also be told in advance if they may incur costs (e.g., as online time) if they cooperate in the survey. Respondents may request at any time during or after the interview that part or all of the record of their responses be destroyed or deleted and the opinion and marketing researcher must conform to any such request where reasonable.

*(Refer to Council for Marketing and Opinion Research: Respondent Bill of Rights at [www.cmor.org](http://www.cmor.org))*

## **II. Researcher's Identity Should Be Disclosed to Respondents**

The company conducting Internet research should identify itself to all potential respondents and provide appropriate contact information (email address, physical address, phone number, etc.). This is so respondents can easily verify the validity of a research project or make inquiries prior to deciding to participate in the study or survey.

## **III. Respondents' Rights to Anonymity Should Be Safeguarded**

Unless respondents give their verifiable informed consent to allow themselves to be identified with the information they are providing, opinion and marketing research companies should ensure that the respondents' anonymity is safeguarded. Opinion and

marketing research companies should further ensure that the information provided by respondents is used only for the research study in which each respondent consented to participate. Information provided by respondents in an opinion and marketing research study cannot be used for unrelated, non-research purposes such as direct marketing, non-consent list generation, credit rating, push polling, fund-raising or other intrusive marketing or political activities.

#### **IV. Privacy Policy Statements Should Be Posted Online**

Researchers should post their privacy policy statement on their online site. When such privacy policy statements exist, they should be easy to find, easy to use and comprehensible.

- Notice – Disclose their information practices before collection of personal information from individuals.
- Choice – Give an individual options with respect to whether and how personal information collected about them may be used for purposes beyond those for which the information was provided.
- Access – Individuals should be able to view and contest the accuracy and completeness of data collected about them. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has acknowledged that the access requirement will vary from site to site, business to business, taking into account various types of businesses.
- Security – Take reasonable steps to assure that information collected from individuals is accurate and secure from unauthorized use.
- Enforcement – The use of a reliable mechanism to impose sanctions for noncompliance with these fair information practices.

#### **V. Data Security Should Be Maintained**

Companies conducting Internet opinion and marketing research should be able to provide adequate security for both respondents and clients in the transmission and storage of information and data. All reasonable precautions should be taken to secure and protect computer servers and databases from unauthorized access to proprietary files and information.

#### **VI. Reliability and Validity of Findings Should Be Disclosed to the Public**

Clients and other users of opinion and marketing research and the general public should not be in any way misled about the reliability and validity of any Internet research findings. Researchers should:

- Follow scientifically sound sampling methods consistent with the purpose of the research;

- Publish a clear statement of the sample universe definition used in a given survey, the research approach adopted, the response rate achieved and the method of calculation;
- Publish any reservations about the possible lack of projectability or other limitations of the research findings, for instance resulting from non-response and other factors.

It is equally important that any research about the Internet (e.g., to measure penetration, usership, etc.) that employs other data collection methods, such as telephone or mail, also clearly refers to any sampling or other limitations on the data collected.

## **VII. Researchers Interviewing Minors Should Adhere to the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act**

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Opinion and marketing research companies conducting surveys or studies with minors should adhere to the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) set by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The Act applies to the online collection of personal information from children under 13 years old.

COPPA applies to individually identifiable information about a child that is collected online, such as full name, home address, email address, telephone number or any other information that would allow someone to identify or contact the child. The Act also covers other types of information - for example, hobbies, interests and information collected through “cookies” (an attachable unique identifier to a person’s preferences on a Web site) or other types of tracking mechanisms - when they are tied to individually identifiable information.

Before collecting, using or disclosing personal information from a child, the researcher must obtain verifiable parental consent from the child's parent. This means an operator must make reasonable efforts (taking into consideration on available technology) to ensure that before personal information is collected from a child, a parent of the child receives notice of the operator’s information practices and consents to those practices.

The researcher must post a link to the privacy policy on the home page of its Web site and in each area where opinion and marketing researchers collect personal information from children. The link to the privacy notice must be clear and prominent. (For more information refer to section IV in this *Ethical Guideline* about privacy policies). You can visit the FTC Web site at [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov) for the full text of COPPA.

The notice must be clearly written and comprehensible. It should not include any unrelated or confusing materials.

It must provide the following information:

- The name and contact information (address, telephone number and email address) of all researchers collecting or maintaining children's personal information through the Web site or online service. If more than one researcher is collecting information at the site, the site may select and provide contact information for only one researcher

who will respond to all inquiries from parents about the site's privacy policies. Still, the names of *all* the researchers must be listed in the notice.

- The kinds of personal information being collected from children (e.g., name, address, email address, hobbies, etc.) and how the information is collected - directly from the child or passively, say, through “cookies.”

If the researcher discloses information collected from children to third parties, then the researcher also must disclose:

- The kinds of businesses in which the third parties are engaged;
- The general purposes for which the information is used;
- Whether the third parties have agreed to maintain the confidentiality and security of the information;
- That the parent has the option to agree to the collection and use of the child's information without consenting to the disclosure of the information to third parties.

The researcher may not require a child to disclose more information than is reasonably necessary to participate in an activity as a condition of participation. The parent can review the child's personal information, ask to have it deleted, and refuse to allow any further collection or use of the child's information. The notice also must state the procedures for the parent to follow. *(Refer to the FTC Web site at [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov) for more information)*

## **VIII. Unsolicited Email Should Not Be Sent to Those Requesting Not to Receive Any Further Email**

Overall respondents’ rights to privacy should be acknowledged by researchers by:

- Specifically offering the potential respondent the opportunity to “opt-out” or be removed from an email list;
- Not sending unsolicited messages online to respondents who have indicated they do not wish to receive such messages relating to a research project or any follow-up research resulting directly from it;
- Not collecting email addresses under the guise of some other activity or by some means that does not allow the respondent to be aware of this.

All email messages to respondents will carry the researcher's valid reply-to address and will clearly state the purpose of the message in the email subject heading. Research companies will honor the respondents’ rights to request that they receive no further email contact.

*Our thanks to the MRA Internet Ethics Guidelines Task Force who worked diligently to organize these guidelines.*

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