



**MRS Guidelines for Business-to-Business
Research**

October 2011

Updated September 2014

MRS is the world's largest association for people and organisations that provide or use market, social and opinion research, business intelligence and customer insight.



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Introduction

These Guidelines interpret the MRS Code of Conduct (revised 2014) and provide additional best practice guidance. Unless otherwise stated, Guidelines are not binding. Their aim is to promote professionalism in the conduct of research.

Research is founded upon the willing co-operation of the public and of business organisations. It relies on the confidence of those involved that it is conducted honestly, objectively, without unwelcome intrusion and without harm to participants. Its purpose is to collect and analyse information and not to create sales or to influence the opinions of anyone participating.

The general public and other interested parties are be entitled to complete assurance that every research project is carried out in accordance with the MRS Code of Conduct and that their rights and privacy are respected.

Rules from the MRS Code of Conduct applicable in each section of this document are stated in bold. These rules are binding on MRS members and MRS Company Partners and breaches may result in disciplinary action. The guidance that follows the rules provides interpretation and additional best practice. Members and Company Partners are reminded that this document is designed to complement the MRS Code of Conduct and should not be consulted in isolation.

As specified in the MRS Code, it is the responsibility of the researcher to keep abreast of any legislation which could affect research and to ensure that all those involved in a project are aware of and agree to abide by the MRS Code of Conduct.

This material is provided for information only. It is not legal advice and should not be relied upon as such. Specific legal advice should be taken in relation to specific issues.

The Principles of the MRS Code of Conduct:

1. Researchers shall ensure that participation in their activities is based on voluntary informed consent.
2. Researchers shall be straightforward and honest in all their professional and business relationships.
3. Researchers shall be transparent as to the subject and purpose of data collection.
4. Researchers shall respect the confidentiality of information collected in their professional activities.
5. Researchers shall respect the rights and well being of all individuals.
6. Researchers shall ensure that participants are not harmed or adversely affected by their professional activities.
7. Researchers shall balance the needs of individuals, clients, and their professional activities.
8. Researchers shall exercise independent professional judgement in the design, conduct and reporting of their professional activities.
9. Researchers shall ensure that their professional activities are conducted by persons with appropriate training, qualifications and experience.
10. Researchers shall protect the reputation and integrity of the profession.

Definitions

Business-to-Business Research:

Business-to-business research is defined as research that seeks to examine the behaviour of companies, business or corporate structures through interviewing one or more individuals within organisations. It can involve the use of all established research technologies and methodologies but amongst participants recruited by virtue of their role in an organisation rather than their status or category as an actual or potential consumer.

Definitions from the MRS Code of Conduct:

Anonymisation:

Anonymisation is the process of removing, obscuring, aggregating or altering identifiers to prevent the likely identification using reasonable means of the individuals to whom the data originally related.

Client:

Client includes any individual, organisation, department or division, including any belonging to the same organisation as the member, which is responsible for commissioning or applying the results from a research project.

Data Collection Process:

A data collection process is any process used to obtain information from or about participants. It includes, but is not limited to, interviews, questionnaires, discussion guides, and stimulus materials, as well as passive data collection.

Identity:

The identity of a participant includes, as well as their name and/or address, any other information which offers a reasonable likelihood that they can be identified by any person or organisation who has access to the information.

Informed consent:

Informed consent is a process by which a participant voluntarily confirms his or her willingness to take part in a particular project, after having been informed of all aspects of the project that are relevant to their decision to participate.

Member:

A Member is an individual who has been admitted to membership of MRS in one of the categories set out the MRS Articles of Association.

For the purposes of applying this Code, an organisation with MRS members that has signed the MRS Company Partner Service Quality Commitment that applies throughout the organisation shall be treated as a Member.

Monitoring

Monitoring is the supervising of activities (such as data collection) to ensure that they meet required objectives and performance targets.

Participant:

A participant is any individual or organisation from or about whom data are collected.

Research:

Research is the collection, use, or analysis of information about individuals or organisations intended to establish facts, acquire knowledge or reach conclusions.

Definitions from the Data Protection Act 1998 used in the MRS Code of Conduct

Personal Data

Data which relate to a living individual who can be identified-

(a) from those data, or

(b) from those data and other information which is in the possession of, or is likely to come into the possession of, the data controller,

and includes any expression of opinion about the individual and any indication of the intentions of the data controller or any other person in respect of the individual.

Data Subject

An individual who is the subject of personal data.

Data Controller

A person who (either alone or jointly or in common with other persons) determines the purposes for which and the manner in which any personal data are, or are to be, processed.

Data Processor

Any person (other than an employee of the data controller) who processes the data on behalf of the data controller.

Processing

Obtaining, recording or holding the information or data or carrying out any operation or set of operations on the information or data, including—

- (a) organisation, adaptation or alteration of the information or data,
- (b) retrieval, consultation or use of the information or data,
- (c) disclosure of the information or data by transmission, dissemination or otherwise making available, or
- (d) alignment, combination, blocking, erasure or destruction of the information or data.

Third party

Any person other than—

- (a) the data subject,
- (b) the data controller, or
- (c) any data processor or other person authorised to process data for the data controller or processor.

1: Research Planning & Participant Anonymity

The Rules

- 8. Members must take reasonable steps to design research to the specification and/or quality standards agreed with the client.**
- 10. Members must not disclose the identity of clients or any confidential information about clients without the client's permission, unless there is a legal obligation to do so.**
- 11. Where files of identifiable individuals are used, e.g. client databases, members must ensure that the source of the personal data is revealed at an appropriate point, if requested by participants. This overrides the right to client anonymity.**
- 26. Members must ensure that the anonymity of participants is preserved unless participants have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.**
- 27. Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that anonymisation is effective, with reference to developments in technology and to the data environment into which data are released.**

Comment: This rule applies to anonymisation undertaken by members and to anonymisation of data sets undertaken by clients prior to analysis by members. Members are referred to the ICO's Anonymisation Code of Practice.

Comment: Members should be particularly careful that they do not inadvertently identify participants. For example this may arise:

- where sample sizes are very small (such as business and employee research);***
- where data contains sufficient contextual information to permit identification (such as attributes or descriptions of participants);***
- where data can be matched with publicly available information (such as social media profiles); or***

- ***where data can be matched with other sources (such as transaction histories held by clients).***

31. Members must ensure that follow-up contact with a participant is carried out only if the participant's permission has been obtained at the previous point of data collection. The only exception to this is re-contact for quality control purposes.

Comment: Any re-contact question should be agreed at the design stage with the client to cover any planned or possible consequential projects.

43. There are some situations where observers could adversely affect participants' interests and/or wellbeing, and in such instances, members must

- a. ensure that participants are told at an appropriate stage the identity of any observer who might be present during the exercise.**
- b. where observers may know participants, ensure that participants are informed before the start of the data collection that they are to be observed, with a warning that the observers may include clients who already know them.**
- c. where observers know, or are likely to know, participants, ensure that observers are introduced before the data collection begins and participants given a chance to withdraw.**

Comment: The issue of anonymity and recognition is a particular problem in business-to-business and employee research and as such greater care should be taken for such projects.

Guidance

1. The client should be made aware before the project has started what participant information will be detailed in the report. It is permissible to reveal the list of participants by either organisation name or job title or job function unless to do so would risk identifying the participants.
2. When the range of participants to be interviewed is limited by job title such that by identifying an organisation to a client the identity of the participant is disclosed or potentially disclosed, to ensure adherence to B8 such information must not be revealed. For example if only Finance Directors have been interviewed, revealing the organisation name would identify the participant because there is probably only one Finance Director

in the named organisation, but if "Board Members" or unspecified "Directors" were interviewed then revealing the organisation name would not (of itself) automatically identify the actual participant within the organisation. Wherever there is a conflict of interest between a researcher's duty and obligation to participants and/or to clients, the duty and obligation to participants is paramount.

3. At the planning stage it is critical to establish client requirements in certain areas which include:
 - whether the client wishes to have certain responses attributed
 - whether the client wishes to re-contact the participant at a later date
 - when and if the client's identity is to be revealed
4. Due to the smaller size of the business to business population there is a higher possibility that participants will be contacted on a regular basis. Therefore, questionnaires should be clear, relevant and logical to avoid participant fatigue. All questionnaires should be piloted prior to use.

2: Participant Consent

The Rules

- 6. Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that participants are not harmed or adversely affected by the member's professional activities.**
- 9. Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that the rights and responsibilities of themselves, clients, and sub-contractors are governed by a written contract and/or internal commissioning document.**

Comment: The Data Protection Act 1998 requires contracts for the processing of personal data to be in writing.

- 18. Members must ensure that participants are provided with sufficient information to allow informed consent to be given. This includes:**
 - a. the name of the organisation or individual responsible for data collection;**
 - b. the general subject of the data collection;**
 - c. the purpose of the data collection;**
 - d. whether the data collection is to be recorded and/or observed;**
 - e. who is likely to have access to live or recorded information;**
 - f. the likely length in minutes of the data collection, if asked;**
 - g. any costs likely to be incurred by the participant; and**
 - h. an assurance that the activity is being conducted in accordance with the MRS Code of Conduct.**

Comment: the organisation or individual responsible for data collection is the data controller as defined under the Data Protection Act 1998.

- 28. If participants have given consent for data to be passed on in a form which allows them to be personally identified, members must:**
 - a. demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps to ensure that the data will only be used for the purpose for which the data were collected**
 - b. and inform participants as to what will be revealed, to whom and for what purpose.**

35. Members must ensure that participants are not misled when being asked to take part in a project.

36. Members must ensure that a participant's right to withdraw from a project at any stage is respected.

37. Members must ensure that participants are able to check without difficulty the identity and bona fides of any individual and/or their employer conducting a project (including any sub-contractors).

38. Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that the following activities do not take place before 9am Monday to Saturday, 10am Sunday or after 9pm any day, unless by prior agreement:

a. In person visits to private homes

b. Calls to household landline telephone numbers

c. Calls to mobile telephone numbers

d. Messages via SMS or other direct message facilities to mobile telephones

Comment: The only exception to this is where local rules and customs differ from UK practice.

39. Members must ensure that participants (including employees in employee research) are not required or pressured to participate.

Guidance

1. To meet the requirements of 28, when obtaining permission or consent for identification details or attributed answers to be passed to a client, participants must be fully informed about what will be revealed and to whom. Participants should also be reassured that it will only be used for research purposes before the start of the interview. However under the following circumstances it may be appropriate to obtain consent at the end of the interview:

- In instances where the participant would need to consider all the questions and their responses before deciding whether the comments were suitable to be attributed
- In cases where prior consent could affect the responses given

- In some instances where the client does not want to be identified until the end of the interview
2. On some occasions, for example during customer satisfaction research, participants may want requests or additional comments passed back to a client e.g. requests for the client to contact the participant directly regarding separate issues. In accordance with B10, the relevant comments must be agreed by the interviewer and participant and not linked back to any other data unless agreed.
 3. A fax, letter or email explaining the nature of the research should be available for participants who request it.
 4. In accordance with 6, where use of the information might have an adverse affect directly on a participant's organisation (e.g. when interviewing a competitor or a potential competitor), the nature and/or sponsor of the research must be revealed before the relevant information is collected. In accordance with B18, the participant must be given the opportunity to withdraw.
 5. In accordance with rule 38, there is no restriction on the time at which a business landline telephone number may be called to for the purpose of an interview. Calls to any mobile telephone number however are restricted to the hours set out in the rule, unless by prior appointment.

3: Conducting the Interview

The Rules

- 3. Members must act honestly in their professional activities.**

- 6. Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that participants are not harmed or adversely affected by the member's professional activities.**

- 18. Members must ensure that participants are provided with sufficient information to allow informed consent to be given. This includes:**
 - a. the name of the organisation or individual responsible for data collection;**
 - b. the general subject of the data collection;**
 - c. the purpose of the data collection;**
 - d. whether the data collection is to be recorded and/or observed;**
 - e. who is likely to have access to live or recorded information;**
 - f. the likely length in minutes of the data collection, if asked;**
 - g. any costs likely to be incurred by the participant; and**
 - h. an assurance that the activity is being conducted in accordance with the MRS Code of Conduct.**

Comment: the organisation or individual responsible for data collection is the data controller as defined under the Data Protection Act 1998.

- 26. Members must ensure that the anonymity of participants is preserved unless participants have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.**

- 30. Members must ensure that participant details are not passed on to a third party for research or any other purposes without the prior consent of the participant.**

Guidance

- 1. Researchers should ensure that minimal costs are incurred by participants whilst taking part in a research project and in accordance with 18 any costs that will or may be incurred must be communicated to the participant.**

2. Researchers should take a 'business-like' manner when conducting the interview. In accordance with 3 and 18 researchers must be honest about the length and content of the interview.
3. In addition, researchers should:
 - Be courteous during the interview
 - Be properly informed of all the details surrounding the research with a full briefing and briefing notes, and any other information such as the sample source and technical definitions
 - Be careful to keep appointments and cancel them if not required
 - Not make any comments on the participant's answers (other than as specified in any instructions for probing)
 - Not offer any comments or opinions of his or her own
 - Not comment on the wording or design of the questionnaire
4. In accordance with 30, researchers must not reveal any of the detailed responses or identities of other business-to-business participants. This is of particular importance in business-to-business research where confidentiality and commercial sensitivity may be of particular concern for participants.
5. In some projects, the contact details of potential participants are obtained from other participants (e.g. participants are asked to suggest colleagues or peers who would be suitable for the given project). In such cases, the participant must be fully informed that the fact they provided the potential participant's details will be disclosed to that person when they are contacted.

4: Observation

The Rules

- 18. Members must ensure that participants are provided with sufficient information to allow informed consent to be given. This includes:**
- a. the name of the organisation or individual responsible for data collection;**
 - b. the general subject of the data collection;**
 - c. the purpose of the data collection;**
 - d. whether the data collection is to be recorded and/or observed;**
 - e. who is likely to have access to live or recorded information;**
 - f. the likely length in minutes of the data collection, if asked;**
 - g. any costs likely to be incurred by the participant; and**
 - h. an assurance that the activity is being conducted in accordance with the MRS Code of Conduct.**

Comment: the organisation or individual responsible for data collection is the data controller as defined under the Data Protection Act 1998.

- 29. If participants have given consent for data to be passed on in a form which allows them to be personally identified, members must:**
- a. demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps to ensure that the data will only be used for the purpose for which the data were collected**
 - b. and inform participants as to what will be revealed, to whom and for what purpose.**
- 34. Members must ensure that participants are informed about any recording, monitoring or observation at recruitment and at the beginning of a data collection process.**

Comment: This does not include monitoring (listening to but not recording) telephone interviews for the purpose of quality control where interviewers have been informed that such monitoring takes place.

- 41. If Members have agreed with clients that observers are to be present, members must inform all observers about their legal and ethical responsibilities.**

42. Members must make clear to participants the capacity in which observers are present; clients must be presented as such, even if they are also researchers and/or members of MRS.

43. There are some situations where observers could adversely affect participants' interests and/or wellbeing, and in such instances, members must

- a. ensure that participants are told at an appropriate stage the identity of any observer who might be present during the exercise.**
- b. where observers may know participants, ensure that participants are informed before the start of the data collection that they are to be observed, with a warning that the observers may include clients who already know them.**
- c. where observers know, or are likely to know, participants, ensure that observers are introduced before the data collection begins and participants given a chance to withdraw.**

Comment: The issue of anonymity and recognition is a particular problem in business-to-business and employee research and as such greater care should be taken for such projects.

Guidance

1. In accordance with 43, where there is a conflict between a client's wish to observe/monitor and a participant's right to anonymity, researchers must respect the participant's wishes.
2. In accordance with 28 and 34, any recordings must not be released by a researcher unless explicit permission has previously been obtained from all the participants involved. Where such permission is to be obtained, the researcher must ensure that participants are given as much relevant information as possible about the future use of the data, in particular:
 - To whom they are to be given
 - To whom they are likely to be shown
 - For what purposes they are likely to be used

5: Incentives

The Rules

12. Members must ensure that research purposes are clearly distinguished from direct marketing.

Comment: Client materials, advertisements, products and services may legitimately be the subject matter of a research project. The following practices however fall within the scope of direct marketing:

- a. The offering of client goods or services, or vouchers to purchase client goods or services as an incentive, reward or expression of thanks;***
- b. The use of promotional language in describing clients in invitations or introductions to projects;***
- c. The offering of materials to participants which promote clients or their products and services at the conclusion of a project.***
- d. Members may provide information about a client's products or services where it is necessary to avoid adversely affecting a participant. For example, where a sensitive subject has been discussed, members may provide information on relevant help lines operated by a client.***

13. Members must ensure that client goods or services, or vouchers to purchase client goods or services, are not used as incentives in a research project.

14. Where incentives are offered, Members must ensure that Participants are clearly informed:

- a. who will administer the incentive;**
- b. what the incentive will be;**
- c. when the participant will receive the incentive; and**
- d. whether any conditions are attached e.g. completion of a specific task or passing of quality control checks.**

Comment: For further information, members should consult the separate MRS Regulations Administering Incentives and Free Prize Draws.

Guidance

1. Incentives are an expression of gratitude to participants for their participation in research. There are some circumstances e.g. interviewing doctors, attendance at groups, where the use of incentives is expected and necessary to help secure co-operation. Monetary incentives, when used, should be kept to a reasonable level and should be appropriate for the nature of the research project and the type of participant.
2. In accordance with 14 where incentives are offered, the distribution must be administered by the researcher or a sub-contractor, unless the participant has agreed for their details to be passed to the client for the administration of the incentive.



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