

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED TO “THROUGH THE BOOK”!

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Overview

This year Simmons redefined the methodology for its Study of Media & Markets to encompass two separately fielded companion components.

- A personal interview to measure readership
- A self-administered mail questionnaire to collect data on other media and product usage.

This paper shall examine the events leading up to this change in methodology, with a detailed explanation of the rationale behind it, and a look at its results.

Whatever Happened to Through the Book?

By the mid-1980's Simmons had begun to lose market share for two important reasons:

- Its methodology was more expensive
- It could not effectively measure more than “X” magazines.

While both of these were significant contributing factors, the two in combination were compelling -- particularly as the advertising recession which took hold of the US in 1988 negatively impacted the profitability of both agencies and publishers, Simmons principal constituencies.

With declining profitability in both sectors, media research staffs were reduced substantially -- leaving remaining staff overworked and unable to devote the time to prototyping which had been common in the past. The need to offer a more affordable product which would measure a greatly expanded number of titles was clear.

Indeed, intense discussions of a major methodological change began in 1992.

Recent History

In early 1994, the Magazine Publishers Association raised questions regarding the read to screen ratios in the 1993 Study, which deviated from those of earlier studies.

What led to the anomalies in the 1993 data?

- Failure to adjust quality control procedures to recognize the increased importance of screens to the perceptions of the research community.
- Increases to interviewer burden coupled with defacto incentives to circumvent appropriate screen-in procedures.
- Normal year-to-year variance.

Quality Control

Between 1991 and 1994, a sea-change in perception of the relative importance of screens occurred within the media research community, despite the fact that Dan Mallet's paper undertaken in 1992 on behalf of the MPA did not report a strong relationship between screens and reads for the through-the-book technique. The issue of screens relative to reads was still the topic of vigorous debate at the San Francisco Symposium in April 1993. We have been fortunate enough to have Dan as a consultant at Simmons throughout the launch of our new services. His report for the MPA stated that "The relationship between screen-in rates and readership levels differs for MRI and Simmons. For MRI, there is a nearly one-to-one relationship. For Simmons, there is a much weaker relationship".

In hindsight there is no question that Simmons should have responded sooner to the increased significance attached to screen data by the research community. However, since screens played no role in the calculation of audience data and were still thought of within Simmons as an interim step designed simply to reduce the number of titles for which detailed readership questions were asked, quality control continued to focus exclusively on readership measures -- as it had throughout Simmons' thirty-one year history.

Between January and August of 1993, Paul Donato, President of Syndicated Studies, and 50% of the remaining technical team left Simmons. Any organization -- be it research, advertising, or publishing -- produces products which are a function of the efforts of its people. We know the turnover of our technical management team did not enhance the quality of the 1993 Study.

Shortly following his arrival at Simmons, Gregg Lindner adjusted training procedures to focus on the importance of capturing screens. These changes were put in place for the 1994 study.

Field Work

The MPA draft quotes from the Mallet/MPA paper as follows:

"A potentially important new issue that has emerged from this study is the large variation in year-to-year screen-in rates, despite the fact that each service has used the same procedures for all years in the study. It seems likely that this variation is principally caused by variations in field execution."

What has been conclusively confirmed at Simmons in this process is the critical importance of the field. Changes in procedures in the early 1990's served to significantly increase perceived and literal interviewer burden:

- Beginning in 1991 SMRB began asking qualitative questions of screens (as opposed to readers) in order to reduce ascription. These changes were tested and the results of the tests were shared in industry papers and at the Hong Kong Readership Symposium. The changes added about 2 minutes to the interview, resulted in a slight decrease in screen-ins, and stable readership.
- In the same year, Simmons also incorporated the "Exclusive Set" into the SMM increasing the sample by 3,500 A strata households. As one would expect without differential survey treatment, these households had a negative impact on recovery rates for both the Phase I and Phase II, but impacted more heavily on Phase II recovery.

It is possible that the inclusion of these respondents and the non-response bias associated with this group contributed to the changes that Simmons saw in readership behavior between Phase I and II that began in 1991. (Phase II began to show higher audience than Phase I. This phenomenon grew in 1992 and 1993 and only somewhat decreased in 1994.)

- In 1992, 21 publications were added to the already heavy kit bag. Screen-ins and readership remained stable.
- In 1993, frequency and recency questions were added.

Over this time period, interviewer burden continued to increase, compensation was not adjusted, and interviewers continued to be paid by the "piece".

Summary Of Recent History

The inattention to screens in the quality control process coupled with ongoing increases in already significant interviewer burden would appear to have supported some interviewers in their decisions to give the screen question and/or its recording short shrift.

An internal review of procedures was begun by Gregg Lindner and Joe Agresti shortly after Gregg's arrival at Simmons. As a result of this process a number of changes in procedures were instituted in the fall of 1993:

- Enhanced validation procedures were put in place.
 - 100% mail validation on Phase I with increased validation of Phase II.
 - Phone validation from a central location in clusters where mail validation indicated possible problems.
- Quality control measures were expanded to encompass both screens and reads. Interviewers generating unusual patterns of reads and screens were identified and given increased validation.
- Six interviewers were terminated and we discontinued the use of multiple field agencies.
- Retraining of dedicated field personnel began in October of 1993.

Subsequent to the MPA questions on screen levels, we also reviewed our editing procedures and discovered that editing procedures related to screens changed for unexplained reasons in 1993. For that year only, the screen was deleted in cases where there was no other information for the publication. At most, we believe this would have accounted for a 1 - 2 percentage point decrease in the screen index. As a result, screening has been re-emphasized in questionnaire coding. Coders were fully re-trained.

Recent Reading Redefined

In September, Simmons announced its new methodology. By separating the components of the study into two separate tasks, its new methodology was designed to:

- Allow for the measurement of more titles
- Reduce respondent burden, to obtain:
 - More representative sample bases
 - More attentive respondents
- Dramatically reduce ascription
- Increase in-tab samples for more stable product and broadcast data.

The Survey of American Readership uses a brief personal interview to measure readership of over 230 magazines, newspapers, yellow pages, and on-line services, as well as basic demographic information. Its purpose is to establish audience levels and audience demography. It involves a nationally representative sample of approximately 20,000 adults.

The Study of Media & Markets uses a self-administered mail questionnaire to collect information on frequency of reading for publications. Extensive data on exposure to other media is also collected, as is usage and purchase information on more than 800 product and service categories. It involves a separate nationally representative sample of approximately 20,000.

A process that we call **benchmarking** is used to ensure conformity of publication audience levels and demographic profiles between the two studies. Using a similar concept to one used for over a decade by Nielsen, as well as by BMRB in the UK, probabilities or weights are established for those SMM respondents - based on demographic characteristics and frequency of reading - who report any reading of a given publication so that overall audience levels and demography are the same for both studies. This resulting SMM database couples the sensitivity of measurement of the SAR, with the range and breadth of information collected by the SMM.

More Publications

The new methodology enables Simmons to measure over 230 magazines, about 100 more than could be accommodated with Simmons previous methodology. As before, exposure to other media is measured as well, but the personal interview of the SAR only measures print media and on-line, with extensive measurement of broadcast occurring in the context of the SMM.

Reduced Burden

The reduction in burden results in the improved participation of respondents in the more upscale demographic groups, who are not only disproportionately more likely to read magazines than other groups, but are also disproportionate consumers of many product categories.

Of equal importance, the reduction in burden substantially impacts the quality of response, so that in the case of the readership measurement, proportionately more time and attention are focused on readership than has been the case with other methodologies, and, in the case of the product information booklet, books are filled out more thoroughly than in the past.

Ascription - Less and Better

More traditional methodologies have relied on the ascription of complete product data to about half of the respondent base. By collecting information on usage of every product category from all respondents, while collecting brand level information on a rotating 75% of the categories, Simmons new methodology eliminates ascribed relationships between magazine readership and product usage. The ascription which remains is at the brand level and is based on known product category usage.

Larger Sample

Additionally, the separate fielding of the two studies enables us to substantially expand the sample base for the product and broadcast data from 11,000 in 1994, to 15,000 in 1995 and 20,000 by 1996. This will have a substantial impact on the stability of the data over time.

Results

The new methodology generated audiences higher than those previously reported by either Simmons or MRI. This was a function of:

- More representative sample
- Shorter interview

Because we dramatically reduced the amount of "ascription" (i.e., where data is projected to non-respondents), our data reflect more logical relationships between readership and product usage than more traditional methodologies.

Readers of:	Who	From	To
Conde Nast Traveler	Have Valid Passport	35.0%	51.3%
Cosmopolitan	Use Contraceptives	28.8%	37.9%
Family Circle	Use Cake Mix	66.7%	79.6%
Forbes	Own Securities	38.6%	47.7%
Glamour	Use Lipstick or Gloss	75.6%	81.7%
Golf	Play Golf	45.7%	61.9%
PC Magazine	Own a PC	N.A.	72.2%

This coupled with a substantially larger respondent count will give Simmons a substantial advantage in the quality and stability of its product data.

The fact that the Study of Media & Markets was implemented separately from the Survey of American Readership resulted in a less burdensome process. As a result, respondents took much greater care in filling out the product information booklets than they had in the past. This is reflected in a dramatic decrease in the proportion of respondents not answering almost any individual question, and positively impacted usage levels for most product categories.

As of this writing, over 160 agencies and advertisers have signed up for our 1995 Survey of American Readership and Study of Media and Markets. This list includes many of the largest agencies and manufacturers in the country. And approximately half of our clients are Simmons exclusives.

Lastly, we are pursuing accreditation by the Electronic Media Ratings Council, a highly respected organization which undertakes a thorough, complete and independent audit of our methods and procedures as part of the accreditation process.

