

## How Do You Reach The ‘Hard To Reach’?

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With Liz putting forward the case for reviewing the use of traditional research methods to find out what customers really think, I thought I would illustrate one way in which ICD Insight successfully adapted traditional methodologies in a recent study for Audit Scotland.

This study has led to interesting discussions in the office about how we could further apply a bit of creative thinking when we conduct research with “hard to reach” customer groups!

Providers of products and services, if they acknowledge that they have groups of customers they find difficult to target, might consider this from the standpoint of access. This could relate to lifestyle: for example, nightshift, seasonal workers, or, in our Audit Scotland study, Gypsies-Travellers who are by definition never permanently in one place to live and work. However, hard to reach can also be about how customers access your services: there could be issues of language, culture or geography of remote customers or those not connected to the web. Then there are other lifestyle and demographic considerations that create challenges in conducting research—like the differences that exist between generations – baby boomers, generation X and generation Y. Just think about the differences between working women with families, mothers with young children or single parents – getting access to them and their views can be complicated.

The results of the Audit Scotland research we conducted were published in November (see [www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk) for a copy of the report - The Impact of the Race Equality Duty on Council Services). Our role was to conduct consultations across Scotland with a range of minority ethnic groups from around Scotland. Based on our experience of researching, “hard to reach” audiences, we recognised the need to adopt a very flexible methodology to ensure that we could recruit representative groups and that the different ethnic groups felt comfortable participating in the research.

One of the first decisions was that we felt it was important to “go to them”, recognising that the environment for participation is an important consideration in making people feel more comfortable and getting a more natural response. This led to us conducting consultations in Gypsies-Travellers’ caravans, taking part in lunch clubs with elderly Chinese people and consulting with a group of Lithuanians and Poles in the staff room at a fish factory! The experience confirmed for us how important it is to think creatively about how to approach people. Thinking through ‘how customers actually behave’ ensures the methodology is appropriate.

Of course, the research solution can be obvious, such as researching Gypsies-Travellers by going on to their sites. Other studies require a less direct approach - I’m currently working on a study which has shown how effective an indirect approach can be. This involves using disabled mystery shoppers to identify key issues with accessing services and facilities. We are then facilitating a meeting between the mystery shoppers and customer service staff so that staff can understand at first hand the problems experienced by disabled customers.

This brings up another issue on which ICD Insight is currently working. We’ve found that it is no longer enough to identify why customers react in a particular way, it is also important to make sure that the results translate into action where a change in behaviour/attitude is required. In other words, while research can identify, for example, how an organisation can communicate better with its “hard to reach” customers, unless staff are prepared to listen to the research and take on board the implications there will be little change. That’s a topic for the next issue of Nuggets!

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