

The Do's and Don'ts of Data Collection

by Jeanette Treiber

Data collectors have power. How so? Because what they record counts on a big scale. This is especially true for large data collection efforts like the Retail Campaign store observation survey. When statewide data are collected, every single survey has implications for the whole state. It is important that all data collectors know that they have a big role to play in ensuring data quality. The quality of statewide data is only as good as the data each individual collects.



Evaluation associates at TCEC have been involved in many data collection efforts — in California and abroad. As a result, they've witnessed (and yes, even committed!) some mistakes that ended up creating messy datasets. For example, during a survey of women in small villages of Guinea, West Africa, one data local collector was added to the team at the last minute. Instead of the three-day data collection training, he received a three-hour crash



course. Even though he was a fast learner and grasped all the question concepts clearly, he still made a number of crucial mistakes by thinking he could use his own wording for certain questions. For instance, instead of asking “How many people eat at least one meal with you every day?” as he was instructed, he asked “How many people are in your family?” In his mind the two questions meant the same thing. However, they did not. The questions were carefully

crafted to get at specific pieces of information about household size and polygamous relationships common in that region. Since household size was a central variable in the survey and much of the other information was calculated against household size, all the surveys done by this data collector became basically useless. What a shame!

Bottom line – follow the survey protocol exactly as directed. Don't be tempted to improvise or use your own interpretations.

And what about situations when collectors are not quite sure what the answer should be and find themselves guessing? Would it be better to have potentially wrong data OR missing data? The answer is that it's better to have **no** data than wrong data! Wrong data distort your conclusions, whereas missing data can actually be useful because they indicate that for some reason the data were difficult to obtain.

So, when it's just too hard to figure out if a product is indeed what you think it is, the answer you should record is exactly that – not sure. (Then describe this on your field notes form.)

Another mistake data collectors (or team leaders) can make is underestimating the amount of time it will take to do a certain number of surveys. Granted, you might not have to worry about the intense rainstorms, axle-deep mud, fallen trees and washed out bridges that we encountered in Africa, but traffic jams, blistering heat, slippery roads and getting lost can make a data collection route take longer than planned.



So, allowing for plenty of time is a must. And if you cannot complete your assigned store route in the amount of time allotted, just let your POC know so s/he can decide how that should be handled.



Avoid suspicious people like these!

Last but not least, put safety first! Although everyone loves a hero, (and despite the fact that the brave feats of data collectors have not exactly made it into Hollywood movies yet) no need to make front page news as a crime statistic just to get that all important store observation in a dangerous situation or neighborhood. Some of you will be courageously going where no data collector has gone before (and you have our full admiration and support). But as you do so, **the simple rule is: If it doesn't feel safe, the team should leave immediately.** No other reason or explanation is needed (just note it on your field notes form). Your LLA wants complete data, but not so badly that data collectors are endangered. So be careful out there and keep your team contact sheet on you at all times.

There are many more data collection tips on the Retail Campaign resources page of the [Partners website](http://partners.ucdavis.edu). Please have a look and make the documents available to your data collection team. Best of luck and have some fun!