

Is Now a Time for Market Research?

With the current pandemic requiring adjustments in everything from working arrangements to supply sources to product offerings, organizations are seeking insight on how to best adapt to survive – and thrive – in this new normal. As a strategic consulting firm specializing in using data to shape business strategies, Global Prairie has been designing, activating, and distilling market research since we opened our doors in 2008. In this guide on fielding market research during COVID-19 we'll explore the questions research can help us answer, as well as the ways research must adapt to the new circumstances we're facing. For more help developing a research methodology to guide your organization through this time, contact us at info@globalprairie.com.

Why Research? Why Now?

→ **Use evidence to guide your decision-making.**

During moments of upheaval and uncertainty, staying connected to audiences and understanding market conditions becomes even more critical. While we know the effects of the pandemic are likely to endure for some time, it remains unclear which consumer attitudes and behavior shifts are here to last. This is where thoughtfully designed market research can help identify and measure developments in real-time — providing valuable insights about if and when changes are likely to resolve, and how you may need to adapt for the long term.

→ **Learn about how you can better serve your audiences' evolving needs.**

With current studies suggesting that three quarters of consumers expect brands to demonstrate how products and services can help them cope with pandemic-related life challenges, it's clear that organizations must explore how they can support customers and stakeholders through this time. To do this with authenticity and credibility, organizations should have a strong understanding of their audiences' practical and emotional needs. For those who are struggling to keep up with these changes, market research can provide insight into how your initiatives can add real value for the communities and customers you serve. The organizations who step up to meet these new needs will ultimately build deeper relationships and equity with their audiences as we emerge from this crisis.



→ **Gather insights to plan for the long term.**

For organizations with planned initiatives that have been put on hold, or who were in the early stages of new projects, now may be a good time to use research to refine your strategies. Many research projects focused on non-COVID-19 topics can continue uninterrupted, provided they're thoroughly evaluated for appropriateness and are conducted with sensitivity. Insights generated during what might otherwise have been a pause may ultimately help position your projects and organization for a stronger launch.

Designing & Interpreting Research in This New Environment

→ **Demonstrate sensitivity and empathy through your research.**

As you consider your research objectives, one of the most important considerations must be ensuring that your pursuit of information doesn't damage your relationship with audiences. Given the heightened anxiety and sensitivities during this time, it's critical to avoid tone-deaf questions. For example, research fielded now that relates to leisure travel or in-person events will likely appear out of touch. Worse, questions about luxury items asked to groups who may be facing economic hardships may feel insensitive or even offensive. In short, your research must demonstrate your awareness of people's challenges and your empathy with their struggles. Fortunately, questions that express genuine concern for audiences' needs can actually help to affirm your organization's eagerness to provide value and create goodwill for your brand. The sensitivity and care you display can, in fact, provide a new way to connect and strengthen relationships.

→ **Online research platforms offer advanced tools and scalability.**

While of course in-person qualitative studies are off the table for the foreseeable future, a vast array of online platforms are already available for market research. Web-enabled focus groups and interview services allow participants to respond via chat, audio or video-recordings, and to interact with stimuli using online tools. Proponents of online research appreciate the affordable scalability and increased geographic reach these platforms offer—what might be run as an 8-10 participant in-person focus group can be increased to a 30-40 participant AI-enabled session. Some of these tools even offer the ability to run polls and review data as participants respond in real-time. For ongoing and insights, artificial intelligence and social listening platforms can help organizations quickly process massive amounts of data to understand what people are talking about in the moment, and then track how these audience conversations change over time. This data can be invaluable as you seek to shape strategies and messages that will resonate throughout all of the phases of the pandemic response and recovery.

→ **Participation in research is on the rise, but be mindful of possible barriers.**

While some researchers initially worried about whether studies would be possible during the mass shutdowns, as it turns out, many research panels and platforms are reporting increased participation across demographics. People who are staying at home are seeking out connection and engagement through participating in online research studies. While this is great news for market researchers, of course there continue to be accessibility barriers for many groups, including those who lack internet connection and those who may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with technology. As always, efforts need to be made to ensure insights are inclusive and representative of intended audiences.

→ **Interpret findings within the unusual context we're living in.**

As always, care needs to be taken to avoid making long-term plans using short-term insights. Research fielded during this time will be affected by the temporarily increased sense of stress and fear, and decreased sense of control that nearly everyone is experiencing. Audience input will be particularly biased on the topics of health, well-being, finances, work, and travel. Respondents may also struggle with research questions that ask about the future, as they face unprecedented uncertainty. Provided that research is interpreted within the context of the current circumstances, gathering this data now can provide organizations with unique insight into how their audiences' behavior and attitudes have already evolved, and will continue to shift during this pandemic.