

Bad Research Got You Down?

We asked a lot of questions of Elizabeth Weaver Engel, M.A., CAE, Spark Consulting, LLC, and Polly Karpowicz, CAE, on how to become a responsible consumer of research and got a treasure trove of information. Here's the full, unedited Q&A! Enjoy!

There's a lot of bad research out there! Throw in the fact that most of us lack formal training in research methods, and you're behind even before you get started.

In [*Caveat Emptor: Becoming a Responsible Consumer of Research*](#), co-authors **Elizabeth Weaver Engel, M.A., CAE**, [Spark Consulting, LLC](#), and **Polly Karpowicz, CAE**, set out to help association executives become better consumers and sponsors of research. The whitepaper gives us a primer on key research concepts and methods (including the flaws and fallacies) while offering solid advice on how to find the best path forward when conducting a research project. We like the connection they make with the important role association execs have in serving as a trusted source of information for their components, as well as helping their volunteers and leaders develop their own research literacy skills.

Since we're all about components (chapters), we asked Elizabeth and Polly how association execs can use the information to help their components make better data-driven decisions.

Q&A

MARINER: First, what drew you to create this whitepaper?

ELIZABETH: Association executives are tasked with using existing research and generating original research every day in pursuit of making good decisions for their organizations and the members those organizations serve. But most of us lack formal training in research methods, and there is a lot of shoddy research out there.

To quote the whitepaper: "Good research does not guarantee good decisions, but it certainly helps. And bad research, barring getting lucky and guessing right, almost inevitably leads to bad decisions."

Polli and I took on this project because we wanted to help our fellow association execs be more informed about what constitutes sound research so you can better evaluate the research you're relying on and make better decisions in service to your members and your association's mission.

Our goal was to create a concise, accessible, practical resource for association execs, volunteers, component leaders, and other stakeholders from associations of all sizes and types.

MARINER: On the list of must-have skills for volunteer leaders, where does research acumen fit in? Perhaps another way of asking is – do volunteer leaders need to have a research competency and if so what might look like?

ELIZABETH: In some ways, this gets directly to the goal Polly and I had when we set out to write this whitepaper. We're not arguing that association staff or volunteer leaders need to all become professional researchers or data analysts or the like. Rather, we're trying to encourage association

leaders – paid and volunteer – to become educated consumers, conversant in the processes and methodologies that constitute quality research, and to provide a primer on what they need to know and the skills they need to develop to do that.

MARINER: How can association execs use your paper to guide their component leaders in a) using the research the association provides, and b) conducting their own research specific to their communities?

POLLY: Let's start with the second part. Association execs should not require our components to do their own original research, given the importance of and challenges inherent in conducting research responsibly. In the paper, we outline some of the ways associations can get into trouble conducting original research, and it's complex, with significant potential for serious consequences and missed opportunities.

That said, there are significant opportunities for mutual benefit in collaborating with your component leaders in your research activities. This kind of collaboration can result in deeper insight when you leverage the core assets of the association and the component – the lead association's capacity, reach, and resources to execute reliable research and the component's direct link to people with specialized perspectives and knowledge related to the research questions.

Additionally, we absolutely should encourage component leaders to use research conducted by the association. Unfortunately, component leaders may encounter barriers related to awareness, access, or ability to use the association's research. Association execs should ask these questions and address any issues that may be discovered:

- Are component leaders aware of the association's research?
- Can they access the research? Are there any barriers to access we can reduce or eliminate?
- Do they need technical or conceptual help applying the research to the component?
- Does the research provide useful insight for component leaders?

You may need to reach out to your component leaders several times to build awareness and provide specific training on how to access and put the association's research to use in their affiliate.

Of course, association execs will need to have a working knowledge of research basics. Our whitepaper can help them brush up on their knowledge of research concepts, standard research practices, and particular concerns of associations. For those who want to learn more, we compiled a list of research training resources (free and fee-based) and an extensive bibliography of books, articles, blogs, and videos about general and specific research techniques. The paper also includes a set of reflection questions to guide your research planning and your staff conversations about it.

MARINER: National associations preach to their components to make data-driven decisions and to ask members before making decisions. Yet research is often outside the resource scope for components – what options might you offer a small component? How might they tap into informal research or passive data-gathering options?

ELIZABETH: You're exactly right. Not always, of course, but in many cases, our regional, state, or local components are run by small teams of volunteers who also, you know, *have day jobs in the profession or industry the association serves*. They lack the time to conduct original research or to even acquire the skills they would need in order to do so.

This is a perfect example of a service the national office should provide for your components, both offering on-demand data analytics (where you can also easily help them benchmark against themselves, against other chapters, and/or against your national averages) and incorporating their perspectives in your national-level research projects.

To do the first effectively, you'll need to align your data systems. They need to be easy for your affiliate leaders to use, so the data gets in there in the first place (no desk-drawer Excel spreadsheet "databases!"), and also integrated, so both the chapter and national staff have access to all the information they need to make good decisions.

I also want to highlight that last bit – incorporating their perspectives into your research projects – as it is critical and often overlooked. Your chapter leaders are closer to your members than your national staff is. They also have a unique perspective, being both staff-adjacent and "end users" of the association's programs, products, and services themselves. If you work with them upfront, you will start from a place of deeper knowledge and as a result, will ask better questions that will provide more insight into what's really going on with your members and other stakeholders.

MARINER: What would you say is the number one aspect (positive or negative) of data collection that readers should consider when in the planning stages of a research project?

POLLY: The most important thing you should consider is bias that can slip into your research. Whether intentional or unintentional, bias can come from anyone involved in the research and creep in at any point in the research cycle. The problem with bias is that lowers our confidence in the validity and reliability of our research, making it difficult (or impossible) for any clear or valid conclusions to be drawn from the results. No one wants this!

You should become familiar with the kinds of bias that can happen and the techniques and practices that researchers use to minimize research bias *before you start* any data collection (note: it's impossible to avoid bias entirely) and understand the extent and effect of any bias that may have inevitably slipped into your research. In the whitepaper, we review the various kinds of bias, where it crops up, and what you can do about it.

MARINER: You talk about active data and passive data gathering. In particular, you state that passive behavioral data often acts as a "reality check" on other data methods. Can you expand on that?

ELIZABETH: In the whitepaper, two of the biases we mention that are built into research are the Hawthorne effect and social desirability bias. They both stem from the same root: the desire to "look good" in front of other people (either peers or the people conducting the research), which can lead subjects to answer research questions less than truthfully.

A simple example: Say you ask me what good films I've watched recently, or what I've been reading. If I want to impress you, I might mention working my way through this year's Oscar nominees for best documentary or best international film or that I'm reading *A Brief History of Time* and *Capital in the 21st Century*. But if you look at my actual behavior via my Netflix queue or my Libby public library app, you'll see that they're filled with rom-coms and spy thrillers (not that there's anything wrong with rom-coms and spy thrillers).

Behavior doesn't lie.

MARINER: You note the importance of recognizing credible research data from secondary sources. How might an association help its volunteers, members and components make a judgement of what is credible or not?

ELIZABETH: This is such a good question, and, I think, one of the most useful functions an association can fill for members and other stakeholders. In an earlier whitepaper, *Cut Through the Clutter: Content Curation, Associations' Secret Weapon Against Information Overload*, Hilary Marsh and I observe that we're all inundated by information these days, to the point that it can be difficult to determine what's valid and useful, and what's not. Associations have a real opportunity to step in, recruit for and develop 21st-century information literacy skills among our staff and volunteer leaders, and position ourselves as a trusted source that makes our members' lives easier, helping direct their limited attention to what really matters, and providing the context necessary to help them make sense of their increasingly complex and challenging professional worlds.

POLLY: We wanted readers to understand that basic research literacy and research communication skills are important for all association executives. In our interview with Dr. Joyce Russell, Dean of the Business School at Villanova (and my former MBA professor at Maryland), she noted that employers are actively seeking job candidates who can discern quality research and explain research results in clear and accessible language.

Speaking of associations serving as trusted sources of information, we have data on how important this role is! I worked with ASAE, as part of the Westat research team, on its *ASAE Impact Every Day* national study about what association members from a wide range of associations expect from their associations now and in the future. The majority of respondents (more than 80%) rated the roles associations play as "trusted sources of information," gathering and providing access to current information, and relevant research about the fields they represent as "very/extremely important" activities now and in the future.

Though this study was completed before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and released during the first year of the pandemic, I believe association stakeholders' perceptions would be as strong today, if not stronger, than associations should gather and share critical insight with them.

MARINER: What 3 tips would you give to association execs when designing a research project around component or volunteer strategy?

POLLY: The three tips I suggest relate to getting your research project off to a good start:

1. Define research objectives clearly and collaboratively.
2. Align research approach to the research objective and nature of insight needed.
3. Define roles and responsibilities (set expectations).

While this sounds simple, each will require time, discipline, and significant effort to execute – as well as strong skills in listening, flexibility, negotiation, and open-mindedness – and should be done before data collection starts.

Clearly define WHY this research needs to be done and what you want to get out of it, with the input of the component leaders or volunteers. With this clarity, you and your research team will be much better positioned to select the research approach best suited to capture timely and relevant insight needed from (and by) your community. As often happens, you may find that the research project you initially envisioned needs to evolve into multiple data collections or even several entirely separate research projects. The key is to align the research design with the best way to answer your questions from the people who can answer them.

Be cautious of overloading! Shoehorning too many questions into one data collection effort (e.g., like a mega survey that is too long or an interview that requires too much time) may cause lower participation, fewer or flawed responses, and ultimately less reliable and less valuable insight for everyone.

Define roles and responsibilities of all involved, including any third-party researchers, and make sure they understand and use the research objectives as a guide throughout the project. While the association researchers will do most of the heavy lifting, consider ways component leaders and volunteers may be helpful, such as encouraging participation among members of their communities or helping researchers understand findings.

Our case study with AAMC (Association of American Medical Colleges) offers a great example of engaging volunteers in designing your study, soliciting feedback from people who use the research results to find out if it's meeting their needs, and identifying ways to improve.

MARINER: You've done a number of webinars about this paper, is there one (or more) that are archived that you would recommend our readers check out?

ELIZABETH: Yes! If you're looking for something more formal – an actual presentation with slides that features two of our case studies – you can check out [the session](#) we presented for UST Education this past fall.

If you're looking for something a little less formal, Shelly Alcorn recently invited us to join her Phoenix Cast broadcast for a [conversation about the whitepaper](#).

We also just recorded an episode of the Leading Learning podcast with Jeff Cobb from Tagoras, that should be available at <https://www.leadinglearning.com/podcast/> shortly.

MARINER: What do you want readers to gain most from the information you provide?

ELIZABETH: I'm going to quote the conclusion of the whitepaper here, because I think we did sum up my goal for readers well: "Ultimately, your goal is to become a learning organization, where your entire team develops a deep curiosity about what drives your members, about their worlds and operating environments...Over time, you'll create a virtuous cycle of ongoing studies that ask increasingly insightful questions, working with the entire community your association serves to keep advancing your research program," and, ultimately, the mission of your association.

MARINER: Any final advice you'd like to share?

ELIZABETH: You mean, other than: [Download the whitepaper](#) (it's free!)?

Be skeptical. Seek out opportunities to improve your information literacy skills. Read the methods section. Ask questions like:

- What are the study's authors claiming to know? With what degree of certainty? What support do they have to back that up?
- Who's been included in this research? Who's been excluded? Why?
- What questions did the study's authors choose to ask? What questions didn't they ask? Are those questions phrased and presented in an unbiased way?
- What answer options were subjects given?
- What methods did the study's authors choose to use? Are those methods appropriate for the questions they were trying to answer?
- What steps did the study's authors take to reduce bias in defining their questions, choosing their methods, designing the instrument, collecting the data, and analyzing and reporting results?

If you have the opportunity, ask these types of questions directly of the study's authors. Researchers, including outside vendors your association might choose to work with, who are doing quality work will be happy to answer them and will be honest with you about the limits of their program or project design.

POLLY: Know the basics and be aware of specific concerns for associations. Take a look at our interviews with Jeff Tenenbaum on avoiding antitrust liability in association research projects and with Dr. Sharon Moss on responsible conduct of association research. We have TONS of resources in the whitepaper for you to take your knowledge further.

Following on Elizabeth's last tip, when you ask for clarity, be persistent if your question about research findings isn't answered the first time. Get help from the research experts in your organization and in the association sector. Find out what research sources your members, stakeholders, and component leaders use. Where do they go for answers to their research questions?

[Download the paper today!](#)

***Check out these additional resources:**

- [Caveat Emptor: Becoming a Responsible Consumer of Research](#): UST Education Fall 2022 Presentation:
- [Phoenix Interview \(podcast\) – Caveat Emptor: Becoming a Responsible Consumer of Research](#)
- [ASAE Impact Every Day](#) – a national study about what association members expect from their associations now and in the future. *And yes, being a trusted source of information is top of mind!*