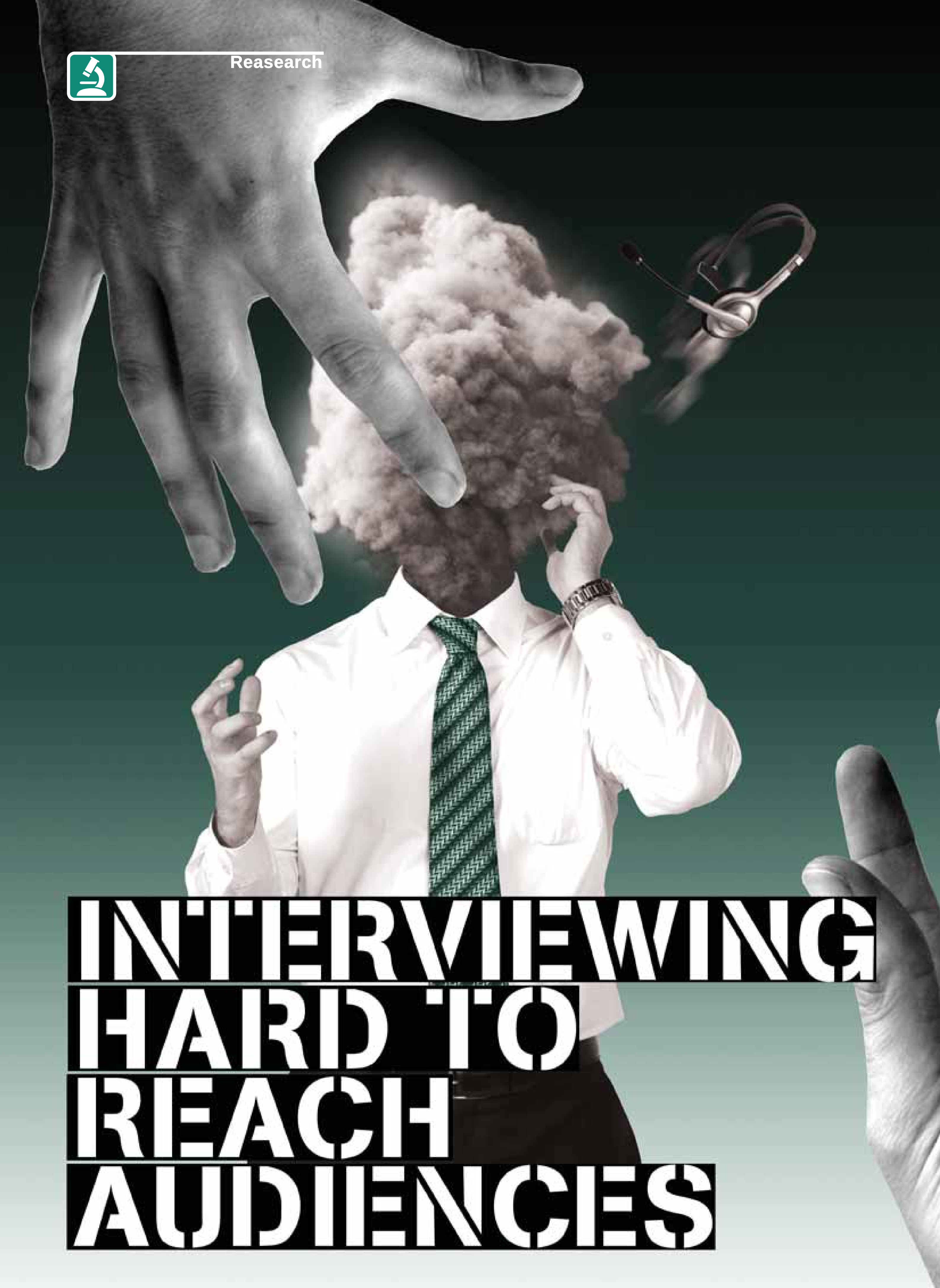

INTERVIEWING HARD TO REACH AUDIENCES

ONE OF THE MAIN ASPECTS OF B2B RESEARCH THAT DISTINGUISHES IT FROM B2C IS THE GREATER DIFFICULTY OF SECURING A RESPONSE, WHETHER THE SURVEY IS SELF-COMPLETION OR INTERVIEWS. THE MOST CHALLENGING TASK FOR RESEARCHERS, HOWEVER, IS TO INTERVIEW CERTAIN HARD TO REACH B2B AUDIENCES ON THE TELEPHONE. THIS IS THE MAIN REASON WHY B2B SURVEYS COST MORE THAN B2C, BUT OFTEN RESEARCH BUDGETS STILL DON'T ALLOW FOR THE MANY HUNDREDS OF MAN-HOURS THAT IT CAN TAKE EVEN TO IDENTIFY THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO INTERVIEW LET ALONE ACTUALLY PERSUADING THEM TO TAKE PART.

We can therefore define 2 types of hard to reach audiences:

- The hard to identify
- The hard to interview
  This can be anyone where a first line of defence needs to be breached, such as doctors behind surgery receptionists, CEOs behind PAs, IT Managers behind 'company policy'.

The hard to identify

The needle in the haystack, is relatively easy to deal with; start by looking in the right place! For example, when we recently had to research ethnic minorities with high disposable income on behalf of the Islamic Bank of Britain, looking in the right place was essential. To this end, purchasing the right database is critical and gives you the head start that'll really pay off in the long run. For example, if you need to speak to organisations that use certain vehicles in their fleets then there's no point just opening the phone directory. Narrow down your search by selecting relevant sectors, then companies that are likely to have sufficient employees to warrant a fleet. You can also profile some databases on job titles so whilst you won't be able to find out what cars they use without speaking to them, you will be able to call and ask for Mr Smith the company's Fleet Manager! For some job roles you'll find databases to identify suitable organisations, but not individual managers. In this situation it always pays to call the company first to identify the correct individual. Asking for the relevant person, by name (and knowing their proper job title) is a huge step towards getting the interview. The chances are, some of these people won't be inundated with requests to take part in interviews because they're so hard to identify in the first place.

The hard to interview

With these people you often know the right person but you just can't get to them. This is where the skills and techniques of an experienced researcher can be the deciding factor between failure or success. Step 1, often the hardest part, is to get past the gatekeepers. As a Market Research Society fully accredited interviewer trainer, Teamsearch executive interviewers have over 5 years B2B interviewing experience as well as having gone through 2 years of training on many topics such as persuasion techniques and how to build a successful rapport with the respondent. This experience became paramount when we recently had to speak to FTSE 250 CEOs based in the capital - a project we completed exactly to brief and ahead of the 3-week schedule. All of it was down to the experience and techniques of the researchers to ensure the PAs had specifically set time aside in the CEOs' diaries. No mean feat by any standards. Build this in with a thorough project briefing and you've got a researcher who knows in detail about the topic they're calling about as well as the words and techniques that are likely to secure them the holy grail of a direct line!

Warming up the audience

The way the survey is introduced to customers will make the biggest single difference to how they perceive the exercise, improving both the response rate and the quality of response. It is really helpful therefore if all customers in the sample receive prior notification of the survey in the form of an introductory letter or email. The notification works much better if it is prior to, rather than simultaneous with the survey. If the introductory letter is read out when customers are telephoned for an interview, it will be much less costly, but also less effective. To fully

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appreciate this, think about people's typical decision making process when invited to take part in a survey. It's usually instantaneous and based on whether the individual is busy and whether it's convenient at the time. Often people will decline to take part purely on grounds of inconvenience with very little thought about the nature of the survey. People are far more likely to respond if they are interested in the aims and outcomes of the research and see it as useful. They are far less likely to take part if they perceive the exercise as a general information gathering exercise of no benefit to themselves, and especially if they associate it with selling. This is why an introductory letter is more effective as a stand alone mailing or email before the customer is telephoned. People will open a personalised letter and read it, especially if it is from an organisation they deal with. This enables a supplier to make customers think about the purpose and benefits of the survey at a time when they are not being asked to take part. Moreover, most people think it is very positive when an organisation asks for feedback on its performance. Consequently, if they receive the introductory letter beforehand, with more time to think about the purpose of the survey, they are much more likely to take part when the questionnaire arrives or they are contacted by telephone.

The introductory letter

For companies in business markets with a small customer base it may be productive to explain the process personally to each one through well briefed customer contact staff. For most organisations a personalised introductory letter is the most cost-effective option.

The letter should start by explaining the purpose of the survey, and it's worth emphasising the high priority the company places on customers' views. Next, respondents clearly need to know brief details about the interview itself, emphasising that the time commitment will not be burdensome – ten to fifteen minutes to complete the interview. (If the interview will take longer, this will depress the participation rate but don't be tempted to fib about the duration as this will backfire, with quite a few respondents pulling out before the end of the interview when you've broken your promise!) Assuming the organisation is adhering to the good practice of not asking any individual to take part in a survey more than once a year, the letter can emphasise that customers are only being asked for 10-15 minutes per annum to provide feedback. Evidence shows that promising feedback is the single most effective element of the introductory letter for increasing response rates. You must therefore inform customers that they will receive feedback on the results and on the key issues that have been identified by the survey. It should also promise that, if relevant, the organisation will share with customers the actions that it plans to take to address any issues. This helps enormously in convincing customers that taking part in the survey will be a worthwhile exercise.

Securing the interview

If there are gatekeepers, the introductory letter will be a big help in breaching this defence. Once past the gatekeeper you've really got to capitalise on all that effort by making sure you don't lose the fish now it's on the hook! This is where the rapport building comes into play and also having a detailed knowledge of the topic being discussed. Added benefits of incentives can also play a part, but you have to be careful that it doesn't become all about the cash. Often in B2B markets respondents will have a genuine interest in the industry report or summary results. This can also increase the quality of response dramatically and reduce the number of 'don't know' answers.

As more and more companies are employing company policies not to conduct research of any kind, especially where the audience is over researched such as IT Managers, having an experienced and skilful researcher becomes paramount and in the end this all amounts to achieving the required number of interviews in the least amount of time to deliver good value research.

The company policy rule was a constant obstacle when we spoke to Senior IT decision makers on behalf of BT last month. All needed to have responsibility for a £5million IT budget, which further added to the challenge, but the option of summary results and the experience of an executive researcher proved vital to finishing the project on time.

When it comes to 'hard to reach' audiences I have one rule. If they exist they can be reached. The one difference is that with the help of an experienced researcher you'll also know whether you can reach enough of them, within the required deadlines and at the right cost. S

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