

How to spot PR-based research

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Over recent years, PR companies have caught on to a new way to sell stories to the press – research. The result is that papers, magazines, and news programmes on television and radio are frequently sent press releases about the results of a shocking or surprising ‘new study’. Where these releases come from universities or other research organisations, then they are usually accurate; but where they are from PR companies their quality may be questionable. Some research completed for PR companies is of a high-quality and conducted by a well-qualified expert, but some is little more than an exercise in headline grabbing, as shown in the fictitious case example below.

How does PR-Based Research Work?

_____PR approach researcher X to carry out a study for their client Bloggs Biscuits. Bloggs have faced dwindling sales of late, and want to get more publicity for their brand. They talk to _____PR and together they decide on an idea they think will get them coverage in the press, which is that a Bloggs Biscuit and a cup of tea can help you solve your problems and face the world once more. Researcher X’s brief is to complete a study that proves that women who have regular teatime chats (accompanied by a Bloggs Biscuit) are happier than other women who don’t take tea breaks. The researcher can then use any method they want – although it’s usually a survey of possibly a focus group – to look at how women relax and unwind, and whether those who have a tea break seem happier.

The press release is likely to have been written prior to the research taking place, and will be sent to the researcher, who can negotiate whether to accept this predetermined outcome, or to test the idea and revise the press release (this depends on the skills, experience and ethics of the researcher). In the case of researcher X, they find (predictably) that women who have regular tea breaks are happier. _____PR send out a release saying that in their survey of 1000 women the 60% who enjoy regular tea breaks are psychologically better off than the 40% of women who don’t. (Of course no actual psychological measure has been taken, instead a survey company has asked four or five questions on general issues). Researcher X gives a number of interviews for the media where she’s told she has to mention Bloggs Biscuits twice in each interview.

The story hits the headlines, and will read something like this. *Tea breaks are good for you! It’s official, women who enjoy a chinwag and a biscuit-dunking cup of tea are 60% more likely to feel good about themselves a study has shown. The survey of 1000 women by Bloggs Biscuits proved that women who take time out feel better. Researcher X who conducted the survey said ‘it’s not an excuse for a rest, our study proves women need to have a break to feel better’.*

I’ve completed a number of PR funded studies and found the experience fascinating. I have been lucky enough to work with companies who have allowed me to direct the focus and results of the research, and by so doing we’ve produced some small scale studies that haven’t changed the world but have got people talking. In all cases I’ve been able to make the reports available to the public and have been transparent about the research. However, I know others haven’t been so lucky, and some PR companies are also equally unlucky when they’re only able to get poorly (or non) qualified people to do the ‘research’ for their client. And sometimes the ‘research’ aspect disappears completely.

The problem is that the public (and many journalists) are unable to tell the difference between academic/health research and PR research; and between good and shoddy PR studies. It is not to say all PR-funded work is bad, but given that PR companies have a far better chance of getting their research to hit the headlines it does mean we’re being overloaded with studies, and it’s hard to tell a genuine piece of research. Although it is not always easy to differentiate, this guide outlines key differences between PR-funded research and work completed in academic or other recognised research establishments.

Academic/Scientific Research	PR-Funded Research
Researcher/academic/scientist thinks of the research idea, designs the study and applies for funding.	The client and the PR company provide the funding and the study idea.
The researcher/academic/scientist may predict how they think their study will turn out, but should remain open to it having one of many outcomes.	The client and the PR company usually tell the researcher the results they want to get.
The lead researcher (grant holder) usually does not receive payment for managing the research. They gain status for bringing in the grant, but their department pays their wages separately.	The researcher is paid by the PR company for doing the work.
Studies take time to plan, complete, and publish. This can range from several months to many years.	The research usually takes between three and five working days – this includes planning the work, carrying it out, and the researcher writing up the results and doing interviews with the media.
Approval is required from an ethics committee (either from the researcher's university, or from a local research ethics committee for health research). Without this research should not proceed, and it cannot be published.	Ethical approval is rarely (if ever) sought. Many of the studies conducted via PR and polling companies would not get approval if presented to an ethics committee.
The number of participants recruited to the research depends on the study approach (qualitative research is more in-depth and therefore uses fewer people), and the amount of funding and time available to conduct the study. In particularly sensitive topic areas, fewer people tend to participate.	The most commonly used approach is a survey, and usually 1000 people are stated as being surveyed. However, frequently only 500 are approached and the results are manipulated so results from double that amount can be presented.
The way participants used in the research are recruited or sampled is clearly outlined.	Participants generally recruited via polling or survey companies, or are friends of staff working for the PR company (or company staff themselves). However, this is frequently not clearly outlined.
If participants refuse to take part in a study, or are unsuitable, their details are noted to ensure transparency of research. So we're told the number of participants and the number of people who could have taken part, but didn't.	Details of participants who refused to take part or who were unsuitable are not recorded.
The researcher (usually) determines the direction the research will take. The funding body is supposed to be aware of this, but not tell the researcher what to find out.	The client tells the PR company what direction the researcher can take.
The ideas or questions behind the research have a basis in existing theories or studies.	The ideas and questions are aimed to sell a product/a client's name, and may have no link to existing theories or studies.
The study is tested and piloted before the main research takes place to ensure it's valid, reliable and feasible.	The research is completed in a very short time and questions or research designs are rarely (if ever) piloted.
'Data' (results) from the research should be available to all so their validity, accuracy and honesty can be checked.	Data (results) are not made publicly available.
The researcher or statistician checks the quality of the data, analyses it, and then interprets and presents the results (this is equally true for qualitative research).	The researcher or 'expert' is commonly given a summary of results by the polling or survey company who assisted in the research.
The aim of the research is to add to knowledge, to answer a problem or question, or to find a cure or solution for something.	The aim of the research is to get the client's name mentioned in as many media outlets as possible.
The researcher seeks to make a lasting impact within their discipline with their research.	The PR company's aim is to make a momentary, but big, impact in the media.

The research needs to be based on evidence and add to knowledge.	The research is rarely based on evidence and rarely adds to knowledge.
The study results are more important than the researcher who completed the research, or the funding body.	The client (who funds the research) is the most important part of the study, followed by the researcher – whose name and title gives weight and credence to the work. The results are secondary to these two.
End result is a paper or study that is designed to be cited and used by other academics/scientists.	End result is a paper, report or press release that is rarely used or cited by other academics/scientists.
Not made public until has been peer reviewed and published in a journal or presented at a conference.	Is never subject to peer review.
Press release is sent out if research is robust, interesting, and has been published.	Press release sent out regardless of the quality of the research.
Press release organised through university or organisation's press office, and sent to key newspapers and some television/radio stations.	Press release sent out by PR staff who then follow it up with several telephone calls to all papers/news stations.
The researcher and press office compose the press release after the study has been completed and published. Alternatively the journal who is publishing the study may write the press release (with the approval of the researcher).	The PR company writes the press release before the research begins. The researcher is shown this, often with pre-written quotes about the study the PR company wishes the researcher to put their name to.
Unless at the very start of their research career, the researcher/academic/scientist should have a proven track record in the area of their study. This means they've completed previous studies in this area, or are educators or therapists in the area they're writing about.	Anyone will do. Sometimes companies get lucky and an experienced researcher will do the work for them, but frequently the researchers are not well qualified nor respected by their peers.
The majority of the research budget is spent on the research process (on staff, equipment etc)	The majority of the research process is spent on getting the story into the media.

Why should we worry about PR-Based Research?

Since many of these studies are presented as 'light-hearted', then surely they're nothing to worry about? In the cases where a good researcher with a proven track record has managed to carry out a study that's been carefully put together (albeit in a short space of time) then it's not so much of a problem. The reason we need to be concerned is frequently this isn't the case, so the 'experts' seen endorsing the studies are neither known nor respected in that area of research, and nor are they often researchers – meaning they didn't design or complete the study, they are just a mouthpiece for it.

As the table above shows, much of PR based research isn't rigorous or ethical. However, since high numbers of participants appear to have been used, PR based research is often seen as 'better' than other academic studies. Journalists frequently dismiss studies of less than 1000 participants, without realising that certain methods or approaches do not require this many respondents. And 1000 interviews conducted by a telephone survey company over a weekend, can never compare with 30 rigorous and ethical interviews completed over several months. Yet it's the 'quick and dirty' work that gets the attention.

Also, in order to grab a headline, many of the 'findings' from the research don't link to existing evidence, in fact they may completely contradict it. However, those outside the academic/scientific communities won't know this, and could believe something completely erroneous. For more light-hearted topics this isn't a problem, but since many of these studies are based around health, sex or relationships, they can give very misleading ideas which could harm, rather than entertain the public. And as already mentioned, if the media is being swamped with 'research' that is really thinly disguised PR, genuine research that has been painstaking and ethically conducted over time is being completely ignored.

We need to ensure that for every PR story in the papers, we are getting good-quality, accurate research that's based on real findings, not a predetermined headline-grabbing idea.