

## **Self-Regulation in Market Research by Erich Wiegand**

Self-regulation of the market and opinion research industry has existed since 1948 when ESOMAR published the first international code of practice. This code was followed by a number of similar codes prepared by national associations of market and opinion research and by other bodies such as the ICC. In 1976 ESOMAR and the ICC decided that it would be preferable to have a single international code rather than two differing ones, and the joint "International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice" was therefore agreed and published.

Changes in the economic, political and social environment, new developments in market and opinion research methods and techniques and an increase in international activities of all kinds, including legislation, led to the publication of several revised versions of the International Code – most recently in 1995. Currently the International Code is applied by more than 100 national associations worldwide.

The International Code sets out as concisely as possible the basic ethical and professional principles which govern the practice of market and opinion research. It specifies the rules which are to be followed in dealing with respondents, the general public and the business community, including clients and other members of the profession. Researchers must follow not just the letter but also the spirit of these rules. They are supplemented by a set of regularly revised guidelines which specify how these rules are to be interpreted and applied as good practice with regard to certain fields, methods and techniques of research.

In 2000 disciplinary procedures were put in place by ESOMAR to provide a structure for enforcing the rules of the International Code. Under these procedures a complaint is to be referred to ESOMAR if there is no national association competent to handle it or if more than one country is involved, as with international research projects. When a complaint is lodged action will be taken to establish the facts of the matter by the ESOMAR Professional Standards Committee, and all parties will be entitled to have their viewpoints taken into account. If the facts might justify disciplinary action the case will then be referred to the separate ESOMAR Disciplinary Committee, which is chaired by an independent lawyer. The Disciplinary Committee is then entitled to impose a warning or reprimand, the latter possibly combined with an expulsion.

Market and opinion research as such is not a form of commercial activity but applied scientific research. Therefore it would be inconsistent to put it into the same category as advertising, direct marketing and sales promotion. The distinction between market and opinion research and these non-research activities always has to be considered.

Market and opinion research is essentially concerned with a one-way channel of communication, from respondents to the client via the confidential filter of the researcher. It does not under any circumstances provide a facility for any form of commercial or similar communication in the opposite direction, from client to individual respondent, nor does it seek to influence the respondent's views or behaviour as a result of cooperation in the research process.

Market and opinion research is primarily concerned with analysing and reporting on aggregated groupings on those interviewed. The information collected shall be used only for research purposes. It does not report information which can be linked to identifiable individuals, and it must never be used to initiate other types of activity directed at individual respondents.

The growth of the Internet has opened new opportunities for collecting and disseminating research information worldwide. At the same time it raises a number of ethical, professional and technical issues which must be addressed if the medium is to be used effectively and responsibly for market and opinion research purposes.

The fact that the Internet is inexpensive to use and difficult to regulate means that it can be open to misuse by less experienced or less scrupulous organisations, often based outside the research industry. Any Internet surveys which fall below the professional standards promoted by ESOMAR and other associations will make it more difficult to use the medium for scientific research and could damage the credibility of such research, as well as being an abuse of the goodwill of Internet users generally.