ILLUME

If, When, and How to Conduct Research in a Time of Crisis

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The novel coronavirus has, in a matter of weeks, radically changed American lives. More than any crisis in recent history, the fast-moving virus has shaken our sense of safety, security, and well-being. The pandemic has redefined the way we move through space and who we engage every day, and has collapsed the lines between work and home. At ILLUME, our mission is to support and foster the well-being of our communities by elevating their voices and their perspectives through research, not to create or add stress to the lives of those we are collectively trying to serve. The central question we are asking ourselves in this moment is: If, when, and how should we engage the public in research during this crisis? We know that many of you are trying to answer the same question. We hope this piece provides you with guidance to answer this question and many others.

Should we conduct research at this time?

How can we understand customer sentiment without contacting them?

What should I do if my research was already scoped to be in-home/in-person?

What should I be thinking about when planning research?

How should we recruit participants at this time?

How will our research outcomes and findings be impacted?

Should we conduct research at this time?

We are confident that ILLUME (and others in research) can adapt our work to ensure that we are still learning in these unprecedented times. However, *how* we learn from customers and constituents in these unprecedented times should necessarily consider the current health, social, and political conditions of the communities we seek to engage. The necessary, but difficult, question to answer is this:

Will direct-to-consumer research create an undue burden on the participants?

To answer this, we offer a number of questions to help you arrive at an answer. No matter the answer, yes or no, we can still listen and learn from the public through this pandemic. And we should, as this moment like no other in recent history, provides a glimpse into what will be required of our industry in moments of crisis.

Questions to consider, both objective and subjective:

1. Are the number of infections in our communities significantly greater than the national average?
2. Are hospitalizations surging or are hospitals overcrowded in our communities?
3. Do I, as a member of my community, know people in my own social network who are or have been infected with COVID-19?

If you answered "yes" to most of these questions, we recommend that you find ways to listen to your communities that do not require direct participation. If you answered "no" to these questions, then you can likely proceed with your research, however delicately.

No matter how you choose to move forward, this moment requires adapting our overall approaches, our instruments, and how we interpret the findings we gain from any research conducted in 2020. If we move forward with intention and great care, this moment also presents an opportunity to create additional learning. Understanding the concerns of people as they navigate a crisis, and thoughtfully building resiliency plans for a multiplicity of crises, will be of critical importance for the foreseeable future.

How can we understand customer sentiment without contacting them?

Many states, utilities, and program administrators have halted all research and communication with customers unrelated to COVID-19. While we anticipate that outreach, communication, and surveys will begin again in the near future, there are other ways to listen to customers and communities without directly surveying or interviewing them. Consider:

- **Social media scanning**: A Twitter analysis or other social media scan can provide a glimpse of customer sentiment without contacting customers.

- **Call center feedback**: Call centers and customer service representatives are often the first line of contact at utilities, government agencies, and programs. Use data or feedback from call center staff around the concerns customers are calling in about, the questions they are asking, as well as other observations based on the changes in customer behavior that call center staff are seeing. Look at trends in inbound calls and topics to understand when/how to talk about energy programs and services again.

- **C&I Account Managers (Key/Strategic Accounts)**: Key Account Managers (KAMs) are actively speaking with business customers. How can energy program and services teams effectively learn from what they are hearing?

- **Embedded feedback tools:** You have many untapped touchpoints, such as your website and all outgoing communications. These offer simple ways to create two-way communication, such as simple embedded survey questions in emails.

- **Trade ally platforms:** Consider identifying opportunities/platforms to listen to trade allies. Are they contacting program staff? Is there a way to create a platform for discussion to keep trade allies engaged?

We recommend integrating these approaches even if you are engaged in business as usual. Social listening strategies, like those we described above, are important assets to align communications, programs, and services with the needs of the public.

What should I do if my research was already scoped to be in-home/in-person?

The ILLUME team has already begun work to adapt our in-person methods to maximize learnings while observing public health mandates. We have **deep** experience conducting virtual ethnographic and qualitative research and can lend insight here. Depending on the research questions, we may recommend transitioning to an online format, or restructuring the research approach to allow for a new way of getting at the research topics.

As ethnographers and qualitative researchers, we value the contextual information that in-person research can provide and the depth and richness of in-person interactions. However, in this moment, virtual research is required. In addition to adhering to public health mandates, conducting virtual research:

- Cost-effectively reaches respondents where regional or customer diversity is important

- Allows for more expedient results

- Provides opportunities for quick-hit research and feedback

Our online/virtual research approaches include:

- Telephone in-depth interviews

- Online/video in-depth interviews

- Online focus groups

- Online concept and message testing

- Online usability testing

- Mobile/video diaries

> "Social listening now will help programs and utilities not only adjust in the short term, but also be prepared for other situations of uncertainty."

These methods can be supplemented by virtual white boarding using an online platform (such as Mural) and polling, to name a few.

What should I be thinking about when planning research?

The research community is navigating these new times as are other industries and we do not yet know what the impact of the pandemic will be on response rates or participation. Reaching hard-to-reach communities and ensuring that the research we conduct is equitable is central to ILLUME's mission. Although we do not yet know the impacts of the novel coronavirus on communities throughout the nation, we can anticipate that for communities who are already vulnerable and precarious, the impacts will be substantial and far-reaching. For this reason, among many, it is important that our work represents historically marginalized populations.

We have several considerations relevant to all research and outreach that may take place at this time. We call out below where these are particularly relevant to hard-to-reach communities:

- **Each project is unique:** As with all research, the research questions and demographics of desired respondents should continue to define the research method and administration mode (web, phone, mail)

- **The situation is dynamic and changing:** There has been no empirical evidence published to date about the effectiveness of each mode, or sensitivity to surveys, in this time. Things are simply moving too quickly. However, the research community knows that we need to be respectful of people's time and in-the-moment concerns. With that, more passive approaches (online and mail) may be ideal in the near-term, although researchers can always integrate and explore the efficacy of telephone with client approval.

- **Remain flexible:** Uncertainty will preside. We do not yet know what the impacts on responsiveness to research will be. When scoping research, we need to keep a close eye on responsiveness and customers' reactions and be flexible and adjust accordingly.

- **Response rates should be watched carefully:** Survey responsiveness challenges may persist through the pandemic, although there is speculation that people being home, and the value of an incentive, may improve participation.

- **Monitor representation from hard-to-reach customers:** Ensuring representation from hard-to-reach customers (e.g., those in vulnerable populations) may be especially important in upcoming research. As is best practice, and as noted above, ensure research design accounts for the need to reach these groups. Online and mail surveys are particularly effective for doing so, especially when paired with incentives.

- **Elderly populations should be treated with extra care:** This virus is hitting the older/elderly population hardest, and the trajectory in this moment is expected to increase exponentially. Any research completed in the next six months should consider that, both in sampling and analysis.

Maintain high levels of sensitivity: Acknowledge and be sensitive to other concerns and priorities, and align with Corporate Communications guidelines around communicating during a pandemic.

- **Provide resources through your research efforts:** Research teams should be prepared with resources that customers may inquire about related to utility services outside of energy programs and services. When speaking with hard-to-reach communities this may be of even greater importance, and care should be taken to ensure that research staff are able to provide customers with the resources they need.

How should we recruit participants at this time?

If your organization has decided to move forward with customer recruitment, we recommend a number of approaches to ensure recruitment is conducted sensitively and with great care.

- **Recruitment Outreach:**
  - Use Corporate Communications-approved language at the beginning of all recruitment emails and phone scripts to acknowledge that these are strange times and that people may have other, more pressing concerns that will take priority.
    - For example: *We are very sensitive to your changing needs in light of COVID-19; please know that responding to this survey, while appreciated, is completely voluntary.*
  - Ensure that all digital recruitment outreach and materials have links and resources for billing and payment questions.
  - Ensure call center staff have Notice of Customer Contact and that all recruitment materials contain contact information for a project sponsor. This is standard practice and should not require changes in approach. However, we anticipate that customers may have heightened concerns about scams, making these steps increasingly important.

- **Incentives**:
  - Given the financial peril that many individuals and families are facing, we know that incentive dollars have the potential to make a big difference in someone's life—provided they can access them and use them as best meets their needs. We recommend:
    - Offering Visa gift cards rather than store gift cards so that people are able to allocate the money to the areas where they need it most.
    - Ensuring incentive delivery happens promptly after a research encounter.

How will our research outcomes and findings be impacted?

We anticipate that research results will be impacted by this period. Here, we present a few of our hypotheses for your consideration.

ALL SECTORS

- Financial precarity impacts upgrade considerations: If participants are nervous about their financial stability (whether because of precarity of a job/paycheck, the security of their business, and so on), that will likely color and shape how they are thinking and talking about the choices they have made or would consider making.

RESIDENTIAL

- High bills in short-term: Within the next few months, many customers will be hit with higher-than-average bills from higher occupancy levels, compounding their anxiety about bill payment and motivating them to seek answers online and by phone.

- Attitude toward home: Customers are more likely to be home, perhaps increasing willingness to participate in research. Customers' attitudes towards home may shift as well.

- Fears of disconnection: These fears may result in lower response based on concerns about engaging the utility; alternatively, market research and evaluation outreach may provide a way to provide feedback.

COMMERCIAL

- Tread carefully with commercial research: Commercial research needs to be very carefully considered recognizing that businesses are closed and, when they reopen, will be working hard to ramp up.

- Response rates may increase: However, many are working from home, and harder-to-reach business owners and executives may be much more available and interested in sharing opinions.