

Ask Dr. Ruth

Ruth Corbin, CMRP

CorbinPartners Inc.

Dear Dr. Ruth:

My firm has been working for a Community Council in Ontario that opposes bike lanes on one of our main thoroughfares. (We are in no way related to Rob Ford's re-election campaign.) The Cycle for Cities advocacy group has conducted a survey claiming overwhelming support for bike lanes among taxpayers in the community. We told the Community Council that we believe that survey to be junk science. Besides writing an editorial about it in the city newspaper, we also intend to submit a formal complaint about its poor quality to MRIA. Can we expect MRIA to take up our cause, and sanction the MRIA member company who did the survey for Cycle for Cities?

No-Spin City

Dear No-Spin:

You're in luck. MRIA has just upgraded its complaint resolution procedure to answer all your concerns. MRIA's new complaint resolution procedure is overseen by an independent arbitrator. A complaint against a member company can only be made in reference to MRIA's published Code of standards and guidelines – the Code forms the outer limits of the scope of what complaints can be heard by MRIA. Your phrase "junk science" does not appear in MRIA's Code, so you would have to translate your concerns into Code-related issues of reliability, validity, or integrity of the research process.

Please note the following important feature: In submitting a complaint, you must first agree to a confidentiality and non-disclosure arrangement. That means you can't discuss the complaint in public or convey that a complaint is being made. So you will have to choose between your newspaper editorial plans and your complaint plans.

The arbitrator will first encourage the parties to resolve the complaint through mediation. If mediation is unsuccessful, a hearing will take place in which both parties may submit evidence and arguments. The process is governed by an orderly schedule. It's not a legal process, but it is a formalized objective process befitting a self-regulatory organization like MRIA. There's even an appeal stage possible if either party thinks there has been a compromise to objectivity or due process.

If your complaint is found to have merit, then the consequences for the MRIA member (whose work has been found to contradict the Code) may become public. That is, the confidentiality provision for taking part in the process is only in force until a decision is made that the complaint has "succeeded."

Whatever the outcome, you won't find MRIA taking up your "cause" as a political matter. MRIA's interest throughout the process is strictly about scientific and professional integrity. Want to know more? Call CEO Kara Mitchelmore at 416-642-9793 ext. 8724.
d.r.

Dear Dr. Ruth:

I used to think correlation implied causation. Then I took an MRIA statistics course, and now I don't. The course helped, right?

Outliar

Dear Outliar,

You're just messing with us, right?
d.r.

Please send your questions for Dr. Ruth to rcorbin@corbinpartners.com.