

## Ask Dr. Ruth

### Ruth Corbin, CMRP

CorbinPartners Inc.

Dear Dr. Ruth

My small firm has been hired to test customer service for a well-known pizza chain. Instead of interviewing customers, I plan to be the customer myself, and rate different franchise outlets for this pizza chain on a list of criteria important to the chain's management. This approach would allow me to enjoy a lot of pizza and charge it back to my client. I assume there is no ethical problem there. If the results are positive, the company would then promote its high customer ratings, as evidence that it's Canada's favourite pizza chain. Since it's not really a survey, am I bound by MRIA Standards for this kind of project?

*Pepperoni Pattie*

Dear Ms. Pattie:

As a member of MRIA, you are bound by its rules of professional conduct for any public data collection project. Your project comes under the category of "Mystery Shopping." Please see ESOMAR's guidelines for mystery shopping studies at [https://www.esomar.org/uploads/public/knowledge-and-standards/codes-and-guidelines/ESOMAR\\_Codes-and-Guidelines\\_MysteryShopping.pdf](https://www.esomar.org/uploads/public/knowledge-and-standards/codes-and-guidelines/ESOMAR_Codes-and-Guidelines_MysteryShopping.pdf). Until MRIA

publishes any explicit customization for Canada, ESOMAR guidelines on mystery shopping are the reference point for MRIA. (Would readers do your columnist a favour, and check to see if you would wish for any modification to ESOMAR Mystery Shopping guidelines, for MRIA's next Standards update? Then write and let me know.)



Some of your pizza-lover ideas present a problem. If you are the only mystery-shopping customer, your results are subject to a bias akin to single-interviewer-bias in personal interview studies. You should control for possible biasing effects by having more than one mystery-pizza-shopper.

There is no ethical problem in having your client pay for your pizza indulgences, as long as appropriate disclosure is made. If the project costs are itemized in your research proposal, you should show the disbursement for

pizza. If you and your client agree on an all-in price for a well-defined deliverable, we assume the client would not object to how you allocate your budget.

Your second-last sentence is a big deal. You say the client may want to rely on your results for an advertising claim. Now the standards for "truth in advertising" kick in. The research has to be demonstrably statistically reliable and geographically representative; the service components must be validly measured. If the claim is about being Canada's "favourite pizza chain", then consider whether people will infer that the ad refers to how the pizza actually tastes. If that is the case, then just measuring "service" won't provide evidence to support the claim. And if the claim is based only on ratings of your client's own franchise outlets, you can count on receiving complaints by all those competitive pizza companies who may feel unfairly maligned.

My Pepperoni friend, please consider again all the ingredients that need to be assembled for a successful project. Who pays for the pizza is the least of your concerns.  
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*Questions for this column may be addressed to [rcorbin@corbinpartners.com](mailto:rcorbin@corbinpartners.com)*