

## The Nonanonymous Survey

*Topic:* Marketing Research (unethical uses of research data; violating privacy of respondents)

*Characters:* Sharon, assistant project manager at a market research firm  
Randy, project manager and Sharon's supervisor

Sharon Roberts has worked for Market Info, a medium-sized market research firm, for three years. She has just been promoted from questionnaire design to assistant project manager. As assistant project manager, Sharon is responsible for helping the project manager, Randy Larson, plan and implement full marketing research studies. Sharon is really enthusiastic about her promotion. It will allow her to get an overview of the whole marketing research process, rather than being confined to one area such as designing the questionnaire or selecting the sample.

Sharon's first project in her new position is a consumer satisfaction survey for a community organization which includes a fitness center. This is a public service project; Market Info is receiving no fees for this work. Randy tells Sharon that, among her other duties, she must devise a coding system to surreptitiously identify each respondent. Sharon is surprised; she learned in her marketing research class in college that surveys should be anonymous. She approaches Randy and comments that she is surprised the survey will not be anonymous. Randy replies that, because they are not promising anonymity in their cover letter that this procedure is perfectly legal. Sharon says no more but she feels unsure about the situation.

One week later, Randy invites Sharon for lunch with a new client, Donald Quellan, who will be opening a sporting goods store in the same neighborhood as the community organization. During the course of the conversation, Sharon concludes that Randy is planning to sell some of the information obtained from the community organization's survey. This information will include the names, addresses, income levels, and fitness habits of people in the neighborhood. Donald can then use this information in deciding what inventory to buy and in developing a direct mail advertising campaign. When Sharon later questions Randy about her suspicions, Randy says that because the community organization is not paying for the survey, the results are not their exclusive property. Furthermore, Randy argues, sounding annoyed, Market Info is not a nonprofit organization. By selling some of the information collected from the community organization's survey, Market Info can recover costs. This allows the company to do more community service projects in the future. It is apparent, however, that the community organization is not being told of the manner of data collection or the selling of the data.

Sharon feels uncomfortable about the situation. She is unsure how to proceed.

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