

ETHICS AND INFLUENCE IN CLIENT-DRIVEN MARKETING RESEARCH

Shubhashree S. Iyer, James Newswanger, and Ritu Gupta wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In June 2020, Eleanor Carrington, an ambitious and talented new college graduate, had recently started her career at the marketing research firm Trend Bridge Market Research Inc. (Trend Bridge). Known for her analytical mindset and dedication to excellence, Carrington quickly gained the trust of her supervisor and was assigned a key responsibility: drafting survey questions for a telephone survey assessing customer perceptions of local grocery store chains. Thrilled to prove herself, she diligently crafted well-balanced and unbiased questions, confident in her ability to contribute meaningfully to the project.

Carrington's supervisor commended her work, assuring her that only minor edits were required, and she eagerly anticipated seeing the survey results in action. However, her enthusiasm was challenged during a meeting with the grocery store client to present the findings. Carrington noticed that her original survey questions had been significantly altered, creating what she perceived as a slant designed to elicit overwhelmingly positive feedback about the client's stores. Troubled by this apparent bias, Carrington raised her concerns with her supervisor. To her dismay, the response was dismissive. "In the real world," her supervisor argued, "pleasing the client takes precedence over maintaining strict objectivity."

Faced with her first professional ethical dilemma, Carrington must decide whether to conform to her supervisor's approach, stay silent, or advocate for ethical practices at the risk of jeopardizing her standing in the firm.

COMPANY AND INDUSTRY BACKGROUND

Trend Bridge operated within the increasingly competitive and client-driven marketing research industry, where firms were under constant pressure to deliver insights that both informed decision-making and validated clients' strategic positions. As the industry evolved from pure data analysis towards insight-driven storytelling, many research firms found themselves teetering between methodological rigor and commercial alignment. In this environment, success was often defined less by the objectivity of findings and more by how well those findings supported client narratives.

Trend Bridge built its brand on responsiveness and agility. It primarily served mid-sized consumer-facing businesses, including regional retail chains and service providers that relied heavily on positive public perception. The company's value proposition emphasized rapid turnaround times, bespoke methodologies, and client-specific deliverables. Internally, the firm had a flat structure and fast-paced culture where junior researchers were expected to contribute quickly, often with limited oversight on final reporting and presentation stages.

Despite formally promoting research ethics and objectivity during onboarding and internal training, Trend Bridge's operational norms leaned heavily towards client appeasement. This emphasis was subtle but persistent. Client satisfaction ratings played a significant role in employee evaluations, and successful project outcomes were often defined by positive client reactions rather than research validity. While overt data manipulation was discouraged, there was a tacit acceptance of practices such as favourable question framing and selective reporting to maintain client relationships.

In this environment, early career professionals like Carrington faced a complex reality: while academic training emphasized objectivity and ethics, workplace expectations encouraged results that sustained business. This misalignment created the perfect storm for ethical tension—especially for junior researchers navigating ambiguity in real time.

CARRINGTON'S ENTRY INTO THE ORGANIZATION

Carrington joined Trend Bridge eager to translate her academic training into meaningful professional work. She arrived with a sense of optimism and determination, excited to apply the principles of rigorous research she had studied to real-world projects.

As she settled into the firm's fast-paced environment, Carrington immersed herself in learning the organization's systems, tools, and expectations. She quickly adapted to the collaborative atmosphere, where junior researchers were encouraged to take initiative and contribute ideas early in their tenure.

Through her attention to detail and strong analytical mindset, she began to build rapport with her colleagues and earn the trust of her supervisor. Carrington appreciated the dynamic nature of the work, which challenged her to balance precision with efficiency. She found the company's flat structure energizing, providing opportunities to observe how experienced researchers managed projects and engaged with clients.

Eager to make a meaningful impact, Carrington embraced the chance to take on responsibilities beyond her initial role. Within weeks of joining the company, she was entrusted with her first high-profile assignment: a client project aimed at assessing customer perceptions of local grocery stores. This opportunity felt like a significant milestone—one that promised to launch her professional journey on a strong footing.

ETHICAL DILEMMA

During the client presentation, Carrington carefully followed along as her team reviewed the findings of the recent telephone survey. However, as the results were presented, she quickly realized that the survey questions used to generate the data were not the same as the ones she had originally developed. The revised questions had been reworded in subtle but significant ways—with phrasing that emphasized positive aspects of the client's grocery stores and avoided language that might lead to more critical or neutral responses (see Exhibit 1). To Carrington, the changes appeared to compromise the objectivity of the research. While the adjustments did not involve false data, they had altered the framing of the questions enough to influence the tone of customer feedback. The end result painted an overwhelmingly favourable picture—one that, in her view, might not accurately reflect the actual customer experience.

Following the meeting, Carrington raised her concerns privately with her supervisor (see Exhibit 2). She referenced specific examples of how the revised language might have led respondents towards particular answers and expressed concern about the implications for the credibility of the findings. Her supervisor acknowledged the changes but dismissed the concerns, explaining that the revisions were made to ensure the client would be satisfied with the outcome. "This isn't a research lab," the supervisor said. "Our job is to deliver results that align with the client's expectations."

The response left Carrington unsettled. As a recent graduate trained in research methodology and ethics, she viewed objectivity as a fundamental principle of marketing research (see Exhibit 3). The experience challenged that assumption and left her questioning how decisions were made in the firm—and how she was expected to uphold or challenge those decisions. As she reflected on the situation, Carrington recognized that she faced a complex professional dilemma. Speaking up again might risk her being seen as insubordinate or out of touch with the firm's business priorities. At the same time, remaining silent could suggest that she accepted a version of research practice that conflicted with her values. The issue was no longer limited to a single project; it raised broader questions about how she would navigate ethical challenges throughout her career.

COMPETING PRESSURES

In the days following the presentation, Carrington had another brief exchange with her supervisor, a seasoned researcher with over a decade of experience at Trend Bridge. During their conversation, he acknowledged her concerns more openly than he had before. "Look, Eleanor," he said, "I get where you're coming from. I really do. But we've lost clients before when they didn't like the numbers—when the data didn't align with what they were hoping to see."

His tone was not defensive; it was pragmatic. He recounted a past project where a hospitality client had pulled their contract after receiving unfavourable guest feedback about service quality—despite the data being accurate and methodologically sound. "They said the insights weren't actionable," he explained. "But what they meant was that the truth made them uncomfortable."

In another case, a regional retail chain had demanded revisions after customers ranked their pricing poorly. "We told the story straight, and they disappeared the next quarter," he said, shaking his head. "Sometimes it's not about what the numbers say—it's about how you say it. There's a difference between presenting findings and burning bridges."

He went on to explain that in a client-facing business, balancing honesty with diplomacy was part of the job. "It's not about lying," he added. "It's about framing. Clients want insight, but they also want reassurance. They want to feel like they're in control of the narrative, even when the data tells a harder story."

For Carrington, this conversation complicated the ethical picture. Her supervisor was not dismissing research integrity—he was managing the competing demands of truth and relationship building, of objectivity and retention. His choices were shaped not just by personal judgment, but by an ecosystem that rewarded smooth client interactions over difficult truths. This was not the kind of trade-off she had discussed in her research ethics class.

Still, Carrington could not help but wonder—what happened when clients acted on a version of the truth that had been softened to maintain a relationship? If decisions were being made based on overly optimistic data, the risks extended far beyond the research process. A flawed pricing strategy, a misguided marketing campaign, or a misplaced investment in brand repositioning could damage the business in the long run. Worse, if the public's experience did not align with the narrative presented in the data, it could spark reputational backlash and erode consumer trust. The ethical stakes were not just personal—they were systemic. She thought of industry failures she had studied, where ignoring uncomfortable data had been downplayed—leading to misguided decisions and reputational fallout. Her concerns echoed real-world examples, such as the Coca-Cola Company New Coke controversy, where selective interpretation of market feedback led to a major public backlash (see Exhibit 4). And beyond how the data was framed, Carrington also started noticing what had been excluded altogether.

SILENCED VOICES

As Carrington revisited the final version of the survey, one detail increasingly troubled her: none of the open-ended questions she had originally proposed had been included. In her draft, these free-response items were intended to give respondents space to share their unfiltered experiences—insights that might not be captured through fixed-choice questions. They were designed to surface nuance, contradictions, and new angles that the structured prompts could not anticipate. Their absence felt intentional and, to Carrington, deeply telling.

When she casually asked a colleague about it, the response was brief but revealing: “We stopped including open-ended questions a while ago—too time consuming to code, and clients never like reading complaints they didn’t expect.” Another team member explained that lengthy, qualitative feedback often opened the door to more scrutiny from clients, especially if any responses were critical or did not align with the overall tone of the report. “It just complicates things,” someone added. “You end up spending hours justifying why one person said something negative.”

Her colleagues believed that focusing on closed-ended questions allowed the team to deliver results that were easier for clients to interpret and act on. They felt that lengthy qualitative responses could distract from the main findings by introducing anecdotes that might not represent overall trends or spark debates over isolated complaints. Moreover, they saw streamlined surveys as a way to maintain a smooth client relationship by highlighting clear, actionable insights rather than raising potentially contentious issues that could derail discussions or prolong project timelines.

It became clear that the omission was not an oversight, it was a strategic choice. Carrington had not been consulted about the change, and no one had addressed it during the internal review process (see Exhibit 1). The final survey prioritized tidy metrics and digestible visuals—elements that presented well in executive summaries and PowerPoint slides (see Exhibits 5 and 6). But without the open-ended responses, something vital had been lost.

To Carrington, the absence of these questions effectively closed the door to customer authenticity. The most direct opportunity for respondents to express frustration, highlight inconsistencies, or suggest improvements had been removed. It also meant that subtle concerns—issues not easily captured by scaled responses, remained unspoken. In her view, this sanitized approach might have made the report easier to deliver but weakened the integrity of the research. It painted a more polished picture, but at the cost of presenting the whole story.

For a young researcher trained to value curiosity and voice, this decision to eliminate qualitative context was more than a methodological shortcut—it felt like erasure.

THE DELIVERY

The client was enthusiastic about the outcome of the survey. In the meetings, they praised the clarity of the insights, the structure of the presentation, and the overwhelmingly positive feedback highlighted in the report. Senior stakeholders on the client side commented that the findings confirmed many of their internal assumptions and provided a strong foundation for upcoming brand campaigns. They expressed interest in commissioning additional research projects, signalling what Trend Bridge viewed as a growing strategic partnership. Internally, the project was held up as a success—delivering results that not only satisfied the client but also reinforced the firm’s reputation for client-centred, results-driven research. For Carrington, however, the external validation only deepened the tension between what had been delivered and what she believed the data from the survey had originally been meant to uncover.

CONFLICT AND RISING TENSION

In the days that followed, Carrington continued to reflect on the discrepancies between the survey questions she had drafted and the final version presented to the client. Although the project had been deemed a success, earning positive feedback from both the client and the internal team, she remained unsettled by what had transpired. The revised language in the survey, combined with the omission of open-ended questions, had steered responses in a way that, in her view, compromised the integrity of the data.

What troubled her even more was that the process behind these changes was largely opaque. There had been no formal discussion, no collaborative review—just a quiet shift in direction that aligned results with client expectations. Carrington was not naive about the realities of client work, but she had expected a clearer line between adapting research for clarity and reshaping it for appeasement.

As a new employee, she was acutely aware of her position. Her supervisor had already signalled that satisfying clients was the priority, even if it meant compromising methodological rigor. Raising the issue again might strain internal relationships or cast her as someone who did not understand the business. But staying silent had its risks, too. It could suggest that she accepted practices she found ethically questionable, or worse, that she was complicit in them (see Exhibit 7).

Carrington began to consider the long-term implications (see Exhibit 8). She wondered whether speaking up could affect her promotion path, especially in a firm where client satisfaction appeared central to advancement. She had reviewed the firm's internal milestones and noted how performance evaluations were often tied to client outcomes, not research standards (see Exhibit 9). And she remembered the all-hands meeting where senior leaders said, "Client satisfaction is our ultimate key performance indicator." Was voicing dissent worth the potential cost to her career trajectory?

With new projects already in motion, the window to revisit the issue was closing. Carrington knew she could not ignore the discomfort any longer, but deciding when and how to respond was proving just as complex as the dilemma itself.

CONCLUSION

Despite the apparent success of the project, marked by positive client feedback, Carrington found herself reflecting deeply on the ethical complexities it unveiled. The altered survey questions, the removal of open-ended feedback, and the rationale offered by her supervisor had revealed more than a single instance of questionable judgment—they had exposed a set of unspoken norms shaping how research was conducted, packaged, and delivered.

She now saw the trade-offs more clearly: how the pursuit of client satisfaction could quietly edge out research integrity, and how subtle compromises—framed as practical adjustments—could steer entire projects towards more favourable but less accurate outcomes. What troubled her was not only the decisions made in this project, but the realization that these choices seemed systemic, accepted, and perhaps even incentivized.

Carrington began to consider her own position more critically. She wondered whether pushing back might affect her long-term prospects—especially in a firm where advancement was closely tied to client retention and polished delivery. Would speaking up mark her as difficult or as someone who did not understand the business? Yet staying silent had its costs too. It meant contributing to a version of research that fell short of the standards she believed in.

Beyond the personal risks, Carrington could not ignore the wider consequences. If clients were basing strategic decisions on overly optimistic data, they might misallocate resources, misunderstand their customers, or damage their brand reputation (see Exhibit 10). The implications extended beyond her own values—they touched the public, the marketplace, and the credibility of the research profession itself.

With a new client project starting the following week, Carrington knew she would soon face similar decisions—only this time with greater awareness of what was at stake. She had not yet decided exactly how she would respond. But one thing was certain: the next time, she would be ready to choose not only what to do, but what kind of researcher she wanted to become. Was it better to shape the narrative or protect the truth? And what would it cost her, either way?

EXHIBIT 1: COMPARISON OF SURVEY QUESTIONS

Topic	Original question (Carrington)	Final question (used in survey)
Store cleanliness	"How would you rate the cleanliness of the store?"	"How satisfied are you with the store's clean and welcoming environment?"
Pricing	"Are the prices competitive compared to other local stores?"	"Do you feel the store offers good value for money?"
Staff behaviour	"Have you had any negative experiences with store staff?"	"How helpful have staff members been during your visits?"
Product range	"Do you find the range of products meets your needs?"	"How would you describe your satisfaction with our broad product selection?"
Checkout process	"How would you evaluate the efficiency of the checkout process?"	"How easy and seamless is the checkout experience at our stores?"
Store layout	"Do you ever find it difficult to navigate the store layout?"	"How convenient is the store layout during your shopping experience?"
Promotions	"Do store promotions influence your shopping decisions?"	"How appealing do you find the store's promotional offers?"
Store comparison	"How does this store compare to other grocery stores you visit?"	[Omitted in final version]
Suggestions	"What improvements would you like to see in the store?"	[Omitted in final version]

Note: Revised questions emphasized positive framing and assumed satisfaction rather than inquiring neutrally.

Source: Created by the authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 2: TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Event
Week 1	Carrington assigned to draft survey questions
Week 2	Survey questions submitted and praised by supervisor
Week 3	Survey fielded (Carrington not involved in this phase)
Week 5	Client presentation: Carrington discovers changes
Week 5 (later)	Carrington raises concerns; supervisor dismisses issue

Source: Created by the authors based on case material.

EXHIBIT 3: ETHICAL RESEARCH GUIDELINES

1. American Marketing Association (AMA) Code of Ethics

"Researchers must not engage in conduct that could lead to the misrepresentation of research findings and must take reasonable steps to ensure data is collected and reported objectively and transparently."

2. American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Code

"Good professional practice avoids the use of leading questions and ensures that wording and sequencing are balanced, neutral, and unbiased."

Source: "Code of Ethics," American Marketing Association, May 26, 2023, <https://www.ama.org/codes-of-conduct>; "AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practices, Section III," American Association for Public Opinion Research, April 2021, <https://www.aapor.org/standards-and-ethics>.

EXHIBIT 4: INDUSTRY BENCHMARK—COMPARABLE CASE

Case	Summary	Ethical issue	Outcome
Coca-Cola “New Coke” (1985)	Market testing suggested a formula change based on selective framing of feedback	Biased sampling and framing in research	Public backlash, return to original product

Source: Thomas Oliver, *The Real Coke, The Real Story* (New York: Random House, 1986).

EXHIBIT 5: SURVEY RESULTS SUMMARY (BASED ON FINAL QUESTIONS USED)

Final survey question	Response scale	% Positive responses	Interpretation/considerations
“How satisfied are you with the store’s clean and welcoming environment?”	Very Dissatisfied → Very Satisfied	92%	Suggests high satisfaction, though framed positively
“Do you feel the store offers good value for money?”	Strongly Disagree → Strongly Agree	85%	High agreement, lacks comparison with competitor pricing
“How helpful have staff members been during your visits?”	Not Helpful → Very Helpful	88%	High helpfulness, no prompt for negative experiences
“How would you describe your satisfaction with our broad product selection?”	Very Dissatisfied → Very Satisfied	90%	Positively framed; may not reflect selection gaps
“How easy and seamless is the checkout experience at our stores?”	Not at All Easy → Extremely Easy	87%	Implies efficiency; no neutral option in phrasing
“How convenient is the store layout during your shopping experience?”	Not Convenient → Very Convenient	89%	Presumes convenience; lacks prompt for layout issues
“How appealing do you find the store’s promotional offers?”	Not Appealing → Very Appealing	83%	High positive score; omits whether they influenced purchase
(Open-ended questions omitted in final survey)	N/A	N/A	No qualitative feedback captured

Source: Created by the authors based on company documents.

**EXHIBIT 6: SUMMARY OF REPORTED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION BY SURVEY CATEGORY
(BASED ON FINAL SURVEY QUESTIONS)**



Source: Created by the authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 7: LIST OF DILEMMAS (WHY ETHICS ARE QUESTIONABLE)

Ethical concern	Description
Biased survey design	Final questions were leading and framed to elicit favourable responses.
Lack of transparency	Changes to the survey were not disclosed to the client as material edits.
Misrepresentation of data	Findings may not accurately reflect consumer sentiment.
Organizational pressure	Internal culture prioritized client satisfaction over research integrity.
Professional risk for speaking up	Carrington faced potential backlash or marginalization for raising ethical concerns.

Source: Created by the authors based on ethical analysis of the case scenario.

EXHIBIT 8: STAKEHOLDER MAP

Stakeholder	Interests/priorities	Potential impact
Carrington	Ethical integrity, career development	Reputation, job satisfaction
Supervisor	Client satisfaction, team performance	Relationship with Carrington, firm credibility
Trend Bridge	Revenue, client retention, industry reputation	Long-term trust, risk of misrepresentation
Client (grocery chain)	Positive public image, actionable insights	Decision-making quality, brand trust
Consumers	Honest representation of experiences	Access to accurate information

Source: Created by the authors based on case material.

EXHIBIT 9: MAJOR MILESTONES OF THE ORGANIZATION (IN TERMS OF CAREER PROGRESSION)

Career stage	Title/level	Time frame (approximate)	Responsibilities/expectations
Entry level	Research Associate	0–1 year	Drafting surveys, supporting data collection, learning best practices
Early career growth	Research Analyst	1–3 years	Managing survey design, data analysis, contributing to client reports
Mid-level role	Senior Analyst/Project Lead	3–5 years	Leading client projects, mentoring juniors, client-facing presentations
Managerial path	Research Manager	5+ years	Overseeing multiple projects, handling client relationships, strategy
Leadership track	Director/Partner	7–10+ years	Firm leadership, business development, setting research philosophy

Note: Career progression is merit based but heavily influenced by client satisfaction and team integration.

Source: Created by the authors based on company documents.

EXHIBIT 10: IMPACT ON CONSUMERS IN LIGHT OF NEW QUESTIONS

Area of concern	Impact of biased question framing
Decision quality	Consumers may rely on misleading feedback when choosing grocery stores.
Market representation	Actual pain points may be underrepresented, distorting market insight.
Brand trust	Positive spin may backfire if consumer experiences do not match reported results.
Service improvement	Missed opportunities to identify and address areas for customer service improvement.

Source: Created by the authors based on analysis of case materials.