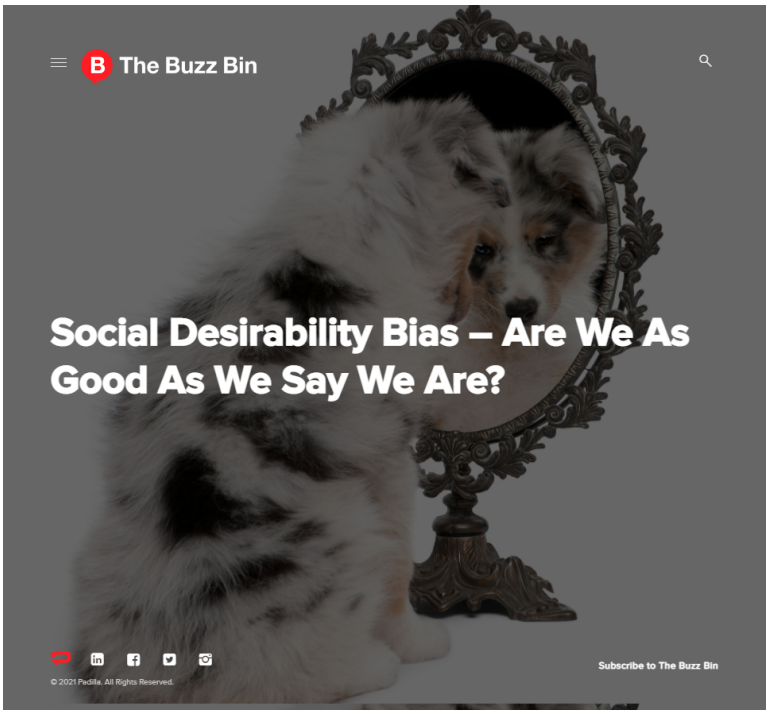

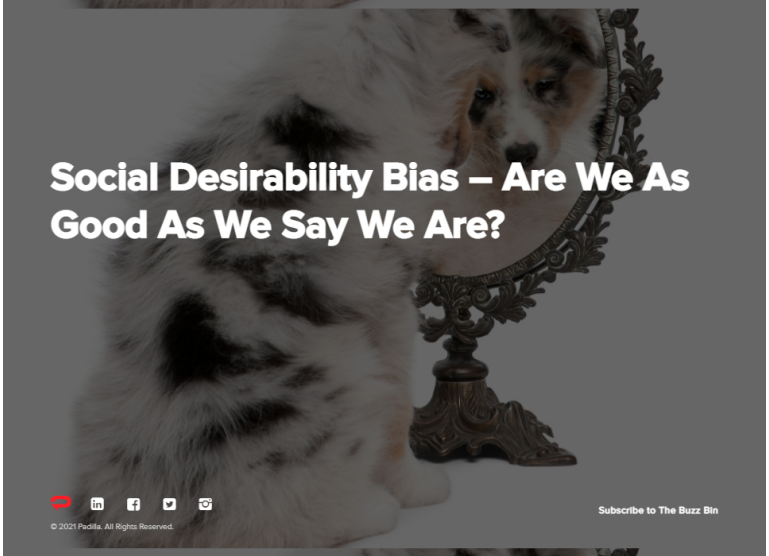

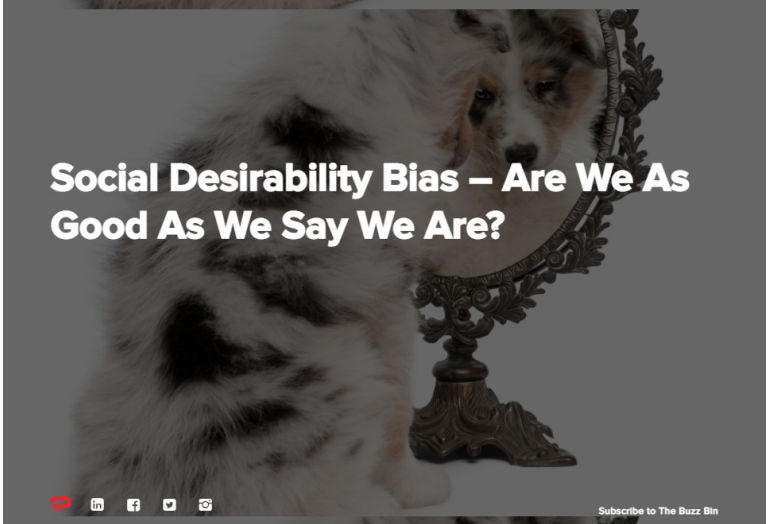

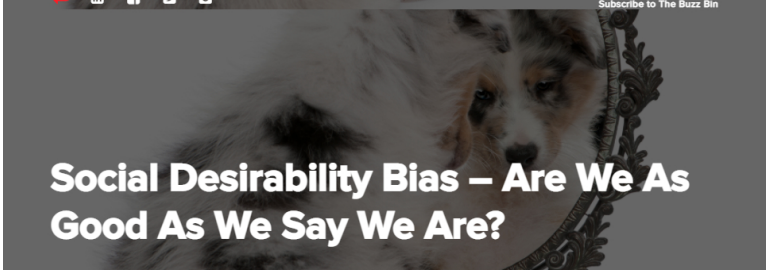

MARCH 26, 2019 BRAND

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As a rule, people want to portray the best versions of themselves – even when it is not completely truthful. In behavioral economics, we call this social desirability bias: a tendency to respond in ways we feel are appropriate or socially acceptable.

On platforms like Instagram, influencers show the 'healthy' food they cook and eat on a daily basis, but really live off coffee and granola bars behind the scenes. In research, participants often over-report 'good' behavior and under report 'bad behavior.'

Social desirability bias can skew your results of everything from an employee review to a customer satisfaction survey; respondents unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) misrepresent their behavior, attitudes or reactions.

> **Often, social desirability bias occurs when individuals try to avoid the judgment of their peers and feelings of shame about sensitive topics.**

Some topics are notorious for encouraging social desirability bias: self-reported personality traits, income level, medical issues, food behaviors, religion, patriotism, bigotry, illegal acts, physical appearance, or even intellectual achievements.

The outcome? This could result in research that misrepresents the problem, solution, or approach. This causing ad campaigns that fail, **products that flop** or **messaging that flounder**.

Some tips from research experts to mitigate the impact of social desirability bias:

Keep it anonymous:
When soliciting customer, client, or **employee feedback**, allowing a level of anonymity (or confidentiality) is the best way to get someone to open-up without fearing social blowback. Communicate confidentiality with the participant.

Use a third-party:
Sometimes the best way to get feedback is having someone else ask the questions. When evaluating various brands, one way to get direct feedback is using a third-party provider to sponsor the survey. Even better? Make it a blind study.

Use an online platform:
The social desirability effect can even be impacted by the presence of a researcher. Phone surveys are more likely to elicit 'socially acceptable' responses than web surveys because of the participant's unconscious need for approval from the researcher.

Focus on word choice:
Framing the questions in a positive or neutral light can be helpful in soliciting more truthful answers. Instead of asking 'how often do you blow your budget on eating out?' you could ask a series of questions, such as: 'What is your monthly budget for eating out?' 'How much do you typically spend on a meal?' 'How often do you eat out?'

Use indirect questioning:
Instead of asking direct questions, try using indirect questions. People will often be more likely to answer in a truthful way when it doesn't apply to them directly. For example, when evaluating an **employee engagement program**, ask 'how often do you see this behavior at our company' instead of 'how often do you personally perform this behavior at the company.' This is specifically useful with negative behaviors.

Use both stated and derived measurements:
When asking participants directly what's important to them, participants tend to minimize the foundational aspects or maximize socially desirable traits. To counteract this, market researchers use advanced analytic techniques to get to the root of what participants really value.

In one of our recent studies, we asked employees at a waste processing company what the most important values are to create a beneficial and supportive work environment. No surprise, for most employees, safety was the most important value. But was it really driving employee satisfaction? No. Our advanced analytics determined recognition of a job well done and respect drove overall employee satisfaction more than safety.

Social desirability bias is one of many quirks of human behavior that can throw a wrench in your research findings if not circumvented properly. However, engaging in some of these techniques can help you better understand the truth behind participant responses and potentially prevent the negative consequences of poorly constructed research.

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