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Case Study: Definitions Significance and the three Cs (principles for good data collection)

Statistically significant

Statistical significance refers to the probability that a result could have happened by chance.

For example you ask 100 people whether they like red or blue best in 2011, and 53% say red. In 2012 you ask a different 100 people the same question and 57% say red. How do you know whether this is a real increase / upward trend in people preferring red or just a coincidence because you asked a different 100 people?

Statistics provides a way to measure whether results are significantly different or not, all you need is two percentages and two base sizes. If a result is statistically significant at the 95% level, this means that we can be 95% sure that it didn't happen by chance (95% is the industry accepted level and 99% is even better – note that these are also sometimes referred to as the 5% and 1% level). You might hear research agencies use the term 95% confidence to describe the level of statistical significance.

The smaller your sample / base size, the less likely your shifts are to be significant (or the bigger your shifts need to be to be significant).

Continuous

Most communication activity aims to get people to start, stop or continue a particular attitude or behaviour. To quantify its effect, try to measure people's attitudes or behaviour before, during and after the activity runs. Benchmarking before it runs is particularly important to demonstrate the effect of your activity. For ongoing activity, measure performance regularly enough to show the effect it is having on attitudes or behaviour. The more data points you can capture, the more obvious the trends will be.

Consistent

Use consistent measures and methodology to assess activity that you repeat or run continuously over time. Using the same wording for questions, tracking against the same audience and collecting data in the same way every time will enable you to measure longer-term trends accurately.



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Comparable

As far as you can, try to use the same measures for every piece of activity that you run. Try to make your measures as similar as possible to the ones used by other communicators in your team and across government. This will make it easier to compare results in the future. The appendix gives you guidance on the types of measures that you might want to use for your activity to help with standardisation.