

# Maintaining Quality in the Rapidly Changing, Cost Pressured Media Measurement Landscape

## Or in short...Managing Change and Maintaining Quality

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### Synopsis

The behavior of the public is changing in numerous ways given advances in the technology for distributing and accessing printed content, the flexibility of technology and general lifestyle shifts. This situation is creating the need for changes in media measurement techniques and similarly research users are requiring increased speed and flexibility in measurement products. To better serve customers many measurement services explore enhanced methods on a routine basis; now this activity is being accelerated more than ever before.

The challenge in this environment is maintaining the quality and representation of media measurements when faced with increasingly strong pressures to the contrary.

Most of the measurement services involved in the MRC Accreditation process (see [www.mediaratingcouncil.org](http://www.mediaratingcouncil.org) for further information) have significant research and development efforts underway, changes planned or changes in-process, that advance methods of consumer measurement. These changes can involve adoption of new technologies, enhancing existing procedures or introducing wholly new measurement methods.

This paper presents the key indicators of quality contained in the MRC's *Minimum Standards for Media Rating Research* and the process-controls which are typically maintained to ensure compliance with these Standards in today's dynamic environment. Additionally, through the use of real measurement service examples (anonymously), the paper will explore the testing and communication processes followed to further illustrate the process-controls.

Key points covered include:

- Execution Parameters and Management of Off-line and "Live" Testing
- Disclosure of Test Results and Seeking Customer Input
- Implementation Controls and Inspection Procedures
  - Technology Controls
  - Manual Process-Controls
- Error Correction and Back-out Procedures, if Encountered

Last, the paper presents a practical guide and checklist for the research user in seeking measurement products that meet the demanding needs of the marketplace, while maintaining sufficient quality.

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#### **1. Introduction**

Many people have heard the old cliché “be careful what you wish for.” In many ways, the authors of this paper believe we are entering the “be careful what you wish for” era of media research. Long-standing media consumption habits of the population have always changed gradually as new technology and lifestyles are assimilated. However, technology building upon technology, enabled by rapid successive innovations in communication, data processing and storage functionality, are leading to significantly accelerated options for how consumers can consume media and significantly lower price points for media with broad appeal.

Consumers, particularly young and young ethnic consumers, in the U.S. are embracing these changes in a manner that many are studying, but few truly understand. It is clear that multi-tasking, mobile, Internet, interactive, digital, on-demand and the consumer electronics facilitating these technologies and usages are changing the way media is consumed in the U.S. – so not only *can* consumers acquire this content, for example new ways of accessing the written word, but they *are* using these methods in growing numbers. Many young consumers are less familiar with the concept of reading a daily

newspaper or a weekly news magazine (as compared, for example, to accessing the publication's web site, a news portal, or social networking), and many likewise don't understand the concept of conventional radio listening (as compared to their MP3 player or Internet streaming).

Information is as critical as it ever was – but the acquisition methods are new. So we should tell you something you don't know.

(We should acknowledge that the U.S. is playing catch-up to some other countries, especially in the mobile media area. Nonetheless, we continue.)

With this type of change arise opportunities for commerce, which many of you will recognize as a mantra of U.S. business. Commerce opportunity drives advertising opportunity, and in particular, coupled with these new technologies (an increasing focus of consumers) new advertising platforms are emerging. Further down in the business chain, but the principal focus of our little part of the Media Industry, is measurement and determining the value of this activity for advertising purposes.

Things sound tough already. Well...the authors are not pessimistic about all this. To the contrary...we are energized by these dynamics. However, the operative word for us in our opening cliché (there are many more to follow) is “**careful.**” At the Media Rating Council, where the authors work, (see section of this paper entitled *Background on the Media Rating Council* or [www.mediaratingcouncil.org](http://www.mediaratingcouncil.org) for more information), ensuring *careful* progress is one of our mantras.

And now, finally, we get to the subject of this paper:

**Print measurement services (really, all measurement services) are dealing with rapid consumer and technology change by adjusting their methodologies accordingly:**

- *To stay relevant, their corresponding methodological adjustments need to be similarly paced.*

**Customers of print measurement services – advertisers, agencies and your basic media conglomerates – are demanding these changes:**

- *To stay competitive, they need faster and more granular data as each day passes.*

These measurement service changes can involve adoption of new technologies, enhancing existing procedures or introducing wholly new measurement methods.

This paper presents information on how these changes can be controlled and managed to ensure continued quality and full disclosure of necessary information to measurement

service customers. Philosophically, we seek to encourage measurement services to change toward better and more consumer-accessible measurement techniques; however we seek to encourage that this change be undertaken “carefully.”

## **2. Relating Measurement Standards to the Business World**

We believe that many countries have produced, and seek adoption of, measurement standards for media research. In the U.S., the Media Rating Council promulgates the *Minimum Standards for Media Rating Research*. These Standards are composed of four primary sections:

- Ethical and Operational Standards
  - Basic guidelines for conducting valid, reliable and effective research
- Disclosure Standards
  - Establishing transparency between measurement services and customers
- Electronic Delivery Standards
  - Controls for electronic tools that are used to deliver audience measurements to customers
- Live Testing Guidance
  - Processes established to allow approved and disclosed live testing with reasonably known impacts on production audience measurements

These Standards are the key assessment benchmark for all of the measurement services participating in the MRC Accreditation process, which represents many of the syndicated measurement products used in the U.S. (The full text of the MRC Minimum Standards for Media Rating Research can be found at [www.mediaratingcouncil.org](http://www.mediaratingcouncil.org).)

We recognize that audience measurement is conducted in the context of business, and that at least in the U.S., the audience measurement services are generally for-profit entities. While the MRC is not interested in protecting measurement service profits, a realistic point of view tells us that cost-effectiveness is a key consideration of the measurement services we interact with.

As such, the Standards recognize that things change. For whatever reason – consumer behavior, more effective methods, more efficient methods, new technology, and on and on – change happens. These allowances are made in the Standards in all sections:

Specifically:

- Ethical and Operational Standards
  - Setting the circumstances under which experiments in methodology (temporary changes) are accepted – Standard A.10.

- Disclosure Standards
  - Setting the circumstances under which changes in methodology (permanent changes) are accepted – Standard B.2.
  - Establishing disclosure requirements for changes in methodology and experiments in methodology – Standard B.2.
- Electronic Delivery Standards
  - Requiring versioning in electronic delivery tools – Standard C.3.
- Live Testing Guidance
  - A supplement to the requirements of Standards A.10 and B.2, providing a process for a measurement service to gain approval to conduct experiments in methodology in its live, production process.

#### a. Discussion of Relevant MRC Standards

The following presents the actual text of the Standards referenced above with further information on how the MRC interprets each Standard:

#### **Standard A.10:**

*“Experiments in methodology shall not be conducted in conjunction with regular syndicated surveys unless previous independent tests have indicated that the possible effect on the audience data reported will be minimal and unless full disclosure is made as provided in B2 below.”*

This Standard is designed to protect the accredited quality of the production environment, and, while not prohibiting experimentation, it does establish a requirement that “live” testing must have been previously studied (implied in a non-live environment) and that the audience data effect of “live” testing is known and quantifiable. The Standard also requires a “minimal” impact of experimentation, although this is not specifically quantified within the Standard.

#### **Standard B.2:**

*“Each rating report shall point out changes in, or deviations from, the standard operating procedures of the rating service which may exert a significant effect on the reported results. This notification shall indicate the estimated magnitude of the effect. The notice shall go to subscribers in advance as well as being prominently displayed in the report itself.”*

This Standard is designed to maintain transparency with users as it relates to permanent methodology changes and experimentation. The MRC closely monitors disclosure and emphasizes full compliance with the spirit contained therein.

#### **Standard C.3:**

*“The rating service or third party processors must have reasonable controls to ensure:*

- a. *Users have received the current version of the System.*

- b. *Users are notified timely of errors noted in the System and/or data, and where necessary, that corrected software and/or data are distributed timely.*

This Standard establishes a requirement for versioning of electronic delivery products (application software) and that these versions should be monitored and controlled. Not all customers are required to use the most current version of the application; however, they should have received an opportunity to use this current version. The MRC seeks to enforce this Standard quite vigorously.

### **Live Testing Guidance:**

*“For MRC Minimum Standards for A10 and B2*

*In an effort to assist research companies in their adherence to MRC Minimum Standards A10 and B2, the MRC suggests the following:*

- I. *Each research company is encouraged to provide the MRC a “Journal of Changes” on a quarterly basis. This Journal would include any and all changes in methodology and procedures that the research company is planning to test and/or implement in the next quarter or, if known, beyond. Submission itself, does not imply any waiver of A10/B2.*

*and/or*

- II. *Each research company is encouraged to avail themselves of the following voluntary ‘Live Test Procedures’:*

*Live Test Procedures:*

1. *Before implementing a Live Test of any of the methods and procedures used to collect audience data, the research company agrees to review such proposed tests with the MRC Staff and two Ad-Hoc MRC Board members (Hereafter referred to as the MRC Group), detailing the objectives of the test and the contemplated procedures. Results of prior tests supporting minimal effects, if available, should also be offered.*
2. *If the evidence suggests to the MRC Group that the possible effect on Audience Data will be minimal, then the research company will be advised that implementation of the test will not be considered a violation of Minimum Standard A10.*
3. *Should the MRC Group or the research company feel the need for outside technical counsel, this would first be jointly discussed and outside technical counsel will be jointly agreed on.*
4. *Should the research company request it, the MRC Group would agree not to reveal the specific nature of these tests other than to the independent auditor working with the research company on behalf of the MRC and, if required, outside technical counsel.*
5. *The research company would disclose to all subscribers that a test was conducted and reach agreement with the MRC Staff and the MRC Group as to the statement(s) to be made. Disclosure, per Minimum Standard B2, will go to subscribers in advance as well as being prominently displayed in the report itself should the staff and group feel required.*

6. *It is also understood that, ultimately, the decision to conduct a live test rests with the research company. The procedure described above is intended to assist the research company in working within the framework of MRC Standards A10 and B2.*

The MRC encourages all participating measurement to follow these suggested procedures, however, not all do.

Many MRC member representatives participate one or more times per year in these “MRC Group” activities. Several measurement services prepare periodic Journals of Changes to further facilitate this process and ensure full disclosure.

The MRC generally requests a measurement service’s acceptance criteria for a live test. This adds assurance that the full impact of the testing has been thought-through by the measurement service.

Taken as a whole, these Standards – A.10, B.2, C.3 and the supplemental Live Testing Guidance – provide a framework for measurement services to conduct experiments, in a responsible and disclosed manner, and change methodology with likewise responsibility.

These Standards are critical in today’s media research environment, which as discussed earlier, is changing in rapid and very significant ways.

### **3. Discussion of Internal Controls**

The previous section of this paper outlined the provisions available within the MRC *Minimum Standards for Media Rating Research* that allow for measurement service experimentation and methodological change. Underlying the applicability of these specific Standards is an assumption of Internal Control over the operations of the measurement service. After all, testing or changes can be executed, but if operations are not subject to strong Internal Controls, errors or unintended consequences can result.

The following presents a summary of key Internal Controls that can be relevant to experimentation or methodological changes. The MRC seeks to ensure the functioning and effectiveness of these Internal Controls overall in the Accreditation process (through auditing, control evaluation and testing) as most of these controls are important to measurement quality.

An additional benefit of maintaining these controls: If experimentation and/or methodological changes are proposed by the measurement service these controls are present to ensure intended changes are realized.

#### **a. Information Systems Infrastructure**

The MRC considers Information Systems related Internal Controls to be central to the quality of measurement service products. In concept, two aspects of the control environment are assessed: (1) software development, testing and documentation functions, and (2) appropriate limitation of access to software coding and data files.

Specifically, the relevant MRC Standard over this area is as follows:

#### Standard A.7

*“Each rating service utilizing computer systems for processing audience data shall establish procedures to insure that:*

- a. The operations to be performed by the computer system are documented in sufficient detail to specify for each computer program at least: the objective of the program; the input data to be used; the editing and processing steps to be performed, and the output data.*
- b. The computer programs and data are diligently protected from unauthorized manipulation.*
- c. Changes in any computer program are documented in enough detail to identify what is being changed, the reason for the changes, tests performed to confirm the effect(s) of the changes, and the effective date of the changes.”*

These standards are tested rigorously in the MRC Accreditation process.

#### b. Quality Control Functions

The operations of a measurement service should contain several types of quality control functions. Quality control should be maintained within functional departments, for example, within fieldwork departments (sample selection, interviewer assignment, production control, etc.) or data editing (edit-rule development and testing, periodic review of cases failing edits, etc.). Additionally, many organizations also maintain centralized quality control functions, such as an internal auditing department or overall software quality assurance group, to provide an umbrella-control across functional departments.

Specifically, the relevant MRC Standard over this area is as follows:

#### Standard A.2

*“Appropriate quality control procedures shall be maintained with respect to all external and internal operations which may reasonably be assumed to exert significant effects on the final results.*

*Quality control shall be applied to, but not necessarily limited to, sample selection, sample implementation, data collection, data editing, data input, tabulation and data delivery in printed and electronic formats. It shall include (where relevant) periodic independent internal verification of fieldwork and periodic accuracy checks of meter performance and computer accumulations of base data.”*

These quality controls ensure management's intended methodology are executed as designed.

c. Ongoing Monitoring

Information Systems controls and other quality controls should be continually monitored and assessed (tested and evaluated for effectiveness) by measurement service management as well as external auditors. In addition to these basic monitoring procedures, several other monitoring functions are important:

- Service Performance Metrics
- Standards Compliance Monitoring
- Pre-Issuance Inspection
- Customer-Reported Problem Logging, Follow-up, Escalation and Resolution

We'll discuss each item in further detail.

Service Performance Metrics – Management, external auditors and customers of the measurement service should periodically obtain and evaluate performance metrics associated with reported estimates. Key metrics can include, but are not limited to – cooperation rates, response rates, tabulated sample distributions compared to population distributions (pre and post weighting of sample), statistical efficiencies, ascription levels by instrument and item within instrument, and levels of non-tabulated received cases or instruments.

General monitoring of this information is important, however, during periods of testing or methodological change, these metrics can inform the users of potential quality impacts. They can also help illuminate unintended consequences that may arise due to changes. If systems are structured to enable real-time monitoring, changes in these metrics during the survey period (for example interim levels of instrument returns or agrees as compared to prior cycles) can provide early warnings of problems encountered.

Standards Compliance Monitoring – In some MRC-participating measurement organizations, an ongoing position of “Compliance Officer” has been established. This function serves to monitor issues encountered in audits and routine issues encountered during production, or production tests, or changes, to ensure fixes are implemented and problems are resolved timely, when encountered. Typically this is an executive with significant authority in the measurement organization to ensure necessary changes are acted-upon.

For added control, a measurement service could pre-determine an estimated impact on any of these metrics as part of determining the acceptance-criteria for the testing.

Pre-Issuance Inspection – A fairly basic, but important, ongoing control function is performing pre-checks, trending and review of measurement service reports (or data-files) before they are released to customers.

In certain environments, because of the necessity to release measurements quickly, a manual review can be a challenge – therefore we typically see certain inspection procedures conducted in an automated fashion – for example trending data within statistical tolerances and issuing warnings for follow-up when tolerances are exceeded.

Again, this Inspection function becomes extremely critical in periods of testing or methodological change, where errors, unintended consequences or other matters can be discovered and addressed timely.

Customer-Reported Problem Logging, Follow-up, Escalation and Resolution – Customers sometimes find errors. This is truly not optimal, but it is generally an unfortunate fact-of-life. Handling customer inquiries, which sometimes contain error-related feedback, should have associated systems and regimented processes. Recording inquiries, documenting follow-up and results of follow-up, escalation procedures to measurement service management, and eventually error correction and communication policies are important sub-processes within this function.

It is particularly important to have pre-scribed and objective rules for dictating error correction follow-up and when customers will be notified and/or data will be reissued.

During periods of testing or methodological change, customer feedback should be monitored for specific matters related to changes. These can provide important indications of issues.

The above areas of Internal Control – Information Systems Controls, Quality Control Procedures and Ongoing Monitoring Functions – are critical enablers of change.

Tests and methodological changes are necessary; the above Internal Controls become doubly necessary for ensuring continuance of quality and timely discovery of things that can go wrong.

#### **4. Measurement Service Examples**

The following examples illustrate situations where testing, disclosure or change controls, as described above, were not followed. They are presented to help the reader understand the potential significance of these principles.

##### Case #1 – Lack of Disclosure of a Data Collection Change

Measurement Service X uses a mailed self-completed booklet to gather media, demographic and qualitative information from respondents. X had differential

editing procedures for newspapers and magazines which were structured in such a manner to provide advantage to one of the two types of publications.

X changed its cleaning process to be consistent between type of publication, and did so by equalizing the editing procedures for newspaper readership to be consistent with the editing procedures for magazine readership.

This change was not disclosed to clients in advance with a magnitude of impact or in the description of methodology with the release of data. Eventually, significantly after the change, certain disclosure was made of the change, however impact data was never fully disclosed.

#### Case #2 – Lack of Disclosure of a Systems Change

Measurement Service L conducts interviews and uses leave behind booklets to gather media data, demographics and product usage information from respondents. L made a change in its method for ascribing missing data for a certain media and product questions. L failed to disclose the change and the impact of the change to its customers.

Subsequently a disclosure was made, including magnitude of impact

#### Case #3 – Failure to Pre-Test Adequately

Measurement Service B conducts interviews and uses leave behind booklets to gather media data, demographics and product-usage information from respondents. B made a change in a readership question so that certain types of print media received a different questionnaire treatment (i.e., a different worded question).

Subsequent to making the change, an increase in missing answers (i.e., non-response to the question) was noted, essentially a multiple of 2 to 5 times as much non-response as prior to the change. B determined that the error was due to interviewers failing to execute the question properly in some instances. This error was disclosed to customers.

#### Case #4 – Failure in Quality Control

Measurement Service R gathers media and demographic data through interviews and electronic means. A new version of data collection software was introduced and although tested, certain conditions of risk were not included in testing. Subsequent to introduction, unusual media estimates were noted by R's management. Investigation determined that a software problem caused certain media data from respondents to be un-creditable.

This error was disclosed to R's customers, including a magnitude of impact.

However, so authors are not perceived as focusing on negatives, we include the following case as an example of a change in methodology that follows the principles that are described in this paper.

Case #5 – A Well Controlled and Communicated Change in Methodology

Measurement Service P gathers media, demographic and product usage through a combination of media interviews and respondent self-completed instruments. P initiated a process to change its methodology for ascription. This process began with various quantitative studies (non-live) to determine the optimal change to the method and the impact of the change. This change was described in written papers and presentations made to customers, in advance, as well as being shared with auditors. Estimates of the impact of the change were also discussed with these groups in advance.

Software for the change was developed and thoroughly tested, including by P’s Internal Auditors. The change was implemented and the initial measurement cycle subject to the change was also submitted for external audit.

Full disclosure of the change, including estimated impact was mailed to customers in advance and included in measurement reports for the first cycle.

**5. Assessment Checklist**

The following summarizes key points for consideration when measurement service live-testing or methodological changes are proposed. For purposes of this check-list, “change” represents either a proposed live-test (a temporary change) or a proposed change in methodology (a permanent change). Indicate item Present/Considered. If not Present/Considered, then applicable risks should be assessed.

**Change-Related Matters:**

- Change has been studied in pre-testing sufficiently so a reasonable estimate of impact can be determined. \_\_\_\_\_
- Change is disclosed, in advance, to customers including the estimated impact of the change on reported estimates. \_\_\_\_\_
- Change is documented, with acceptance criteria and full impact of the change has been considered. \_\_\_\_\_

**Measurement Service Operations:**

- Appropriate Information Systems Infrastructure
  - Documentation \_\_\_\_\_
  - Software Development Controls \_\_\_\_\_
  - Testing and Retention of Documentation related to Changes \_\_\_\_\_
- Quality Control

- Departmental Level Controls for Affected Departments \_\_\_\_\_
- Overall Quality Control Function \_\_\_\_\_
- QC Groups Notified of, and Participating in, Change Process \_\_\_\_\_
- Ongoing Monitoring
  - Performance Metrics Assessed During Change Period \_\_\_\_\_
    - Consider – Cooperation Rates, Response Rate, Tabulated Sample Distributions Compared to Population Distributions (pre and post weighting of sample), Statistical Efficiencies, Ascription Levels by Instrument and Item Within Instrument, and Levels of Non-Tabulated Received Cases or Instruments
  - Management Involvement in Monitoring Change \_\_\_\_\_
  - Pre-Issuance Inspection Function Notified of Change and Applicable Processes Incorporated into Inspection Function \_\_\_\_\_
  - Customer Service Area Notified of Change and Problem Reporting Systems Monitoring in Place \_\_\_\_\_

## **6. Background on the Media Rating Council**

During 1963 and 1964, regulation of the TV and Radio industries in the U.S. including the purpose and accuracy of audience research were the subjects of extensive governmental hearings. This process culminated with a progress report issued to the 89<sup>th</sup> Congress of the U.S. (House Report No. 1212) in January 1966. These hearings were held by a Special Subcommittee on Investigations of the House of Representatives Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce and are commonly referred to as the “Harris Committee Hearings on Broadcast Ratings.”

After investigation and extensive testimony, the House Committee determined that Industry self-regulation, including independent audits of measurement services was preferable to government intervention. On page 21 of the House Report, the Committee concluded as follows: “The enactment, at this time, of legislation providing for government regulation of broadcast audience measurement activities is not advisable. The administration of a statute providing for such regulation would place an unnecessary burden on the Federal Government, and it is doubtful that more would be accomplished than can be accomplished by effective industry regulation.”

The Harris Committee hearings resulted in the formation of an Industry-funded organization to review and accredit audience rating services called the Broadcast Rating Council (now referred to as the MRC). At that time, the Broadcast Rating Council’s proposed Industry self-regulation procedures were reviewed by the U.S. Justice Department.

Aligned with the actions deemed necessary by the House Committee, the activities of the MRC include the following:

- The establishment and administration of Minimum Standards for rating operations;
- The accreditation of rating services on the basis of information submitted by such services; and
- Auditing, through independent CPA firms, of the activities of the rating services.

The Bylaws of the MRC document the organization's mission as: "to secure for the media industry and related users audience measurement services that are valid, reliable and effective; to evolve and determine minimum disclosure and ethical criteria for media audience measurement services; and to provide and administer an audit system designed to inform users as to whether such audience measurements are conducted in conformance with the criteria and procedures developed." This mission was established with the support of the House Committee.

The Minimum Standards for Media Rating Research became effective March 31, 1964 and have been maintained and updated by the MRC Board of Directors. The Standards relate to: (a) ethics and operations, and (b) disclosures. Ethical and Operational Standards govern the quality and integrity of the entire process by which ratings are produced. Disclosure Standards specify the detailed information about a rating service's methodology and each specific survey which must be made available to users, the MRC and its CPA firm, as well as the form in which the information should be made available.

Individual rating services apply for MRC Accreditation on a voluntary basis. Accreditation is granted by the MRC Board of Directors if a measurement service complies with the MRC's Minimum Standards for Media Rating Research and makes materially complete methodological and survey-performance disclosures to their customers.

The Board of Directors of the MRC is comprised of one appointed representative, generally a top media research executive, for each member organization. Currently there are approximately 100 Board members in total representing TV and Radio Broadcasting, Cable, Print, Internet and Advertising Agency organizations as well as Advertisers and other Trade Associations. Additionally, we have a provision for formal liaison relationships with the American Association of Advertising Agencies, the Advertising Research Foundation and the Association of National Advertisers. Membership is open to any media organization that relies on, or uses media research and presently includes both general-market media and ethnic-focused media organizations. Organizations such as Arbitron, MRI or Nielsen for example, which provide media ratings, are not allowed to be members.

The specific methodological approach of the measurement service and the Minimum Standards for Media Rating Research are the primary drivers of the audit scope for each participating measurement service to be executed by the CPA firm, on behalf of the MRC. Audits are required to be conducted at least annually. The MRC establishes an audit committee made up of member organizations that use research of that media-type to

evaluate audit results and recommend Accreditation to the Executive Director of the MRC, who then submits such recommendation to the MRC Board of Directors. Provision is also made for the suspension or withdrawal of an accreditation and a documented, formal hearing procedure applies in such instances.

#### The MRC Audit and Accreditation Process

The central element in the monitoring activity of the MRC is its system of annual external audits of rating service operations. MRC audits serve these important functions:

- They determine whether a measurement service merits accreditation (or continued accreditation); the audit report and related insight provided by the CPA firm is the primary input into the accreditation decision,
- They provide the MRC with the results of detailed examinations by CPA auditors which become the basis for quality improvements in the service, either by voluntary action or mandated by MRC as a condition for accreditation, and
- They provide a highly beneficial psychological effect on measurement service performance. Knowledge that their work may be reviewed by CPA auditors is a powerful spur for quality work by all field and home-office personnel of the measurement service.

The MRC audit includes an independent, detailed and objective examination of each significant aspect of the operations of a measurement service by an independent CPA firm, hired by the MRC. In the event that a measurement service uses outside professional vendors (for example, for sampling procedures or for editing and tabulation of data) these sources are also audited and reported upon.

Resulting audit reports are very detailed (typically 150-300 pages); containing many methodological and proprietary details of the measurement service and illumination of the primary strengths and weaknesses of its operations. The reports are confidential among the MRC members, who all sign non-disclosure agreements, the CPA firm and the measurement service. Audit reports include detailed testing and findings for:

- Sample design, selection, and recruitment
- Sample composition by demographic group
- Data collection and fieldwork
- Metering, diary or interviewing accuracy
- Editing and tabulation procedures
- Data processing
- Ratings calculations
- Assessment of rating service disclosures of methodology and survey performance

Pursuant to the last bullet above, the MRC mandates measurement services to disclose many methodology and performance measures, which would be otherwise unknown, for example:

- Source of sample frame
- Selection method
- Respondents by demographic group versus population
- Response rates
- Existence of special survey treatments for difficult to recruit respondent groups such as young or ethnic persons
- Editing procedures
- Minimum reporting requirements for media
- Ascription and data adjustment procedures employed
- Errors noted in published reports
- Data reissue standards and reissue instances

As noted above, specific audit findings are not disseminated to the public or the press. Page 4 of the House Report describing the Industry self-regulation process states – “Unless waived by the service, all hearings and proceedings are closed and all information submitted is confidential except that a grant, denial, suspension or withdrawal [of accreditation] may be made public by the Council.” Public disclosure of proprietary techniques can be detrimental to a measurement service’s core business, for example endangering patented information.

Measurement services awarded MRC Accreditation are given permission to display the MRC’s logo on the audited research product indicating compliance with our Standards. MRC Standards are publicly available; more importantly, the extensive methodological and survey performance disclosures mandated by the MRC are required to be available to all measurement service customers.