



How to get commercially sensitive data to evidence economic impacts from research

If your research has been commercialized in some way, then you may be asked to evidence the economic benefits arising from your work. Economic claims are harder to evidence than you might think, because many companies are nervous about sharing commercially sensitive data. But this doesn't mean you shouldn't try. In this blog, I've suggested a few things that might get you something useful.

- 1. Go in person to your “warmest” contact with a specific data request** (e.g. turnover, profit or savings related to the specific product or service that arose from your research). If you don't ask you won't get. Rather than pitching your request out of the blue via email, ask to meet up to find out where they are at and if there's anything you can do to help them, and offer to bring a short summary of some of the latest research in the field. You are more likely to get a reply and a meeting if you offer something of value to them first. In the context of a meeting in which you have added value, you are more likely to get a positive reception to your data request. Crucially, even if you get a “no”, if you are face-to-face with the person, you can quickly move to your plan B so that you don't leave empty handed. This is much harder to do if you have received a clear “no” via email, and less likely to work via email.
- 2. Offer redaction and anonymization.** A number of levels of anonymization and redaction were available in REF2014 and are expected to be available in REF2021, providing some re-assurance to companies that want to help but don't want to take the risk that the data becomes public. However, for some companies, such re-assurances are not enough, and they will not take the chance that something goes wrong and the data gets into the wrong hands.
- 3. Move to persuasion if it looks like you are going to get a “no”.** This is more likely to work for SMEs and small businesses than large corporations, but it may still be worth trying (GlaxoSmithKline have highlighted their role in REF2014 case studies and contributed a panelist to the process, and so understand the pressure on researchers to evidence their impact). You are conducting an evaluation of the impact of this company's product or service as an independent academic that will go beyond the economic impact and provide a public record of its benefits that can be used in marketing. Depending on the perceived marketing value of such an independent assessment of the company's product or service, this may be enough to persuade the company that there is something in this for them, and they may co-operate. In the business world, any deal is possible, and if you treat your request for data as a business deal in which you will give them something in return, you may find you're shaking hands on a deal that gives you the data you need (possibly with assurances around redaction thrown in to sweeten the deal)
- 4. Ask for proxies.** If you can't get access to any of the data you need, then go prepared to ask for proxies that you could use instead. What information might provide those evaluating your impact with a sense of the significance of economic impacts? If you are working with a large company, can you get global figures for turnover that indicate the



significance of the company you are working with? What proportion of this is attributable to the product or service linked to your research? Is this their flagship product representing more than half their revenue or something much smaller? If you can't find out what proportion of their turnover comes from that product or service, can you find out if it is in their top sellers (top three, top five?) and what proportion of their turnover comes from those top sellers in aggregate? What is their market share in a specific marketplace, and how many products do they sell into that market in addition to the one based on your research? If you know the size of the market and their market share, you can get a sense of the size of your contribution. The answers you get from a conversation like this are necessarily estimates, but you will be able to communicate the order of magnitude, and give readers an overall sense of the significance of your impact. To evidence this, you would need a testimonial on letter headed paper. If they will not do this, ask if you can name them as the source of the information for someone else to be able to corroborate the evidence in future. If they won't even do this, then at least you have the information, which you can now communicate, even if it is weaker than you would like. Better than nothing. But there's still one final option...

- 5. Ask their customers.** If you can't get data from the company itself, see if you can get them to tell you who some of their customers are (even better, who is their biggest customer if they are selling business to business) for the product or service based on your research. The customer may be willing to tell you how much they spend on the product or service, and if you know that they are the company's largest customer then you have the basis for an estimate that would tell you something about the scale of your economic impact. Alternatively, if you can discover a more representative customer who is willing to tell you how much they spend, you may be able to couple that with information or estimates about the number of customers to get a feel for the scale of the economic impact. Bear in mind that these estimates will be commercially sensitive and you will want to ensure these are redacted if you want to retain a good relationship with the company. If these customers can't give you information about how much they spend, they may tell you how much money the product or service saves them, or the other benefits they get from it, such as improving the health, safety or wellbeing of their staff in measurable ways, or reductions in their environmental impact. Even if you can't get estimates of the number of other customers, you can use this one customer as an example of the breadth of impact felt by customers using the product or service based on your research.

Evaluating economic impacts is not only challenging – it can get you into trouble. Companies who fear your evaluation may compromise their interests may sue you or your University. Always take advice from your Business Development Manager, and if possible get them to accompany you to high profile meetings to make sure you don't take unnecessary risks.