Certainly, not!

Conventional wisdom acknowledges the inevitability of uncertainty. And Socrates apparently said something about it too, so it must be right (“As for me, all I know is that I know nothing”). Fashionable popular science topics – randomness; black swans; irrationality; failed predictions et al – all belong to the ‘let’s just accept uncertainty’ camp.

Good research design and method can improve the chances of an accurate outcome, but of course we can never really know.

Given that most of the research I conduct is ad-hoc, one-off enquiries into a set of current and specific business objectives, I find the following chart somewhat disconcerting (but not unsurprising):

![Chart showing the relative risk of cancer for various foods.](source: Schoenfeld and Ioannidis, American Journal of Clinical Nutrition)

It says that when we run a single study we don’t have a great chance of getting the right answer. It also says that if you’re a research buyer and are somehow able to magically commission seven different agencies to each approach the objectives in their own inimitable way, you might still be none the wiser!

So, why bother?

Well, because, ultimately – knowing something is better than knowing nothing.
But what else is going on here? Are there other reasons why numerous single studies don’t converge as we would like, or imagine? Could it be because each single study has its own back-story, a leading part of which is the original brief; the framing of the objectives; the views in the room at design stage; the choice of sample, and its composition...

Potentially a lot of influences, all well-intentioned, combine when we state our research problem.

If the reader has some sympathy with this contention then is there room for techniques/processes that seek, openly, to eliminate such confirmation bias? Could we ask our colleagues to review our thinking for bias? Could we re-read our briefs before sending? Could we review our language for ‘charged’ words? Could we imagine what we’d want to know if we didn’t have the agenda that we do?

Independence should, in my view, be regarded as research’s greatest attribute. Client/agency partnerships can be good of course, but how can we reliably recognise when independence has been compromised by creeping partisanship?

**Bottom line: uncertainty is a given, let’s be open about that, and give our ad-hoc research the best chance of being accurate by stressing independence in research design above all else.**

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