Book review

A Guide to the 2001 Census: Essential Information for Gaining Business Advantage

Keith Dugmore and Corinne Moy (eds)

The Stationery Office, UK, 2004; ISBN 0 11 621652 2; £35

There have been some dramatic changes in the nature and availability of census information in the current round.

Questionnaires have been 100 per cent coded (unlike in 1991) and the area statistics data are 'free to air' for the first time, not least by means of the National Statistics website. Indeed, the fact that this is the first census the availability and manipulation of which is internet-based will inevitably change the way in which users will regard such data and employ them in their market analyses.

Understanding quite how such changes can materially assist businesses reliant on high-quality and comprehensive market information poses a challenge which this timely and well-constructed book seeks to answer. The use and interpretation of market data on this scale is only going to be as good as the understanding of the assumptions and methodology underlying its collection. Written by 15 acknowledged experts for the practitioner audience, this surprisingly slim guide provides a *tour d'horizon* of the 2001 exercise. The book is logically constructed. It provides two initial chapters outlining the case for the commercial use of census data and then two further contributions that seek to summarise how the data have been collected. The strengths and weaknesses

of the new social grade and output area frameworks are explained and their implications for analysis explored.

To my mind the most useful chapters are those dealing with applications issues. Barry Leventhal's chapter on 'Starting to analyse the Census' is particularly strong. As well as providing an introduction to bespoke analysis, Leventhal outlines possible pitfalls in data use, especially between countries (that is, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). These are points developed further by Karen Pettigrew of CACI in a specific contribution. The chapters by Peter Sleight (on geodemographics), Gordon Farquarson (on linked data sets) and Martin Callingham are also valuable — particularly Callingham's. This latter deals in a characteristically direct and pithy way with so-called 'advanced' uses of data and the ways in which the use of census data might evolve over the next ten years, involving surface representation, and the use of geographically-weighted regression. Recognising the increased interest in international comparability issues, one of the shortest, but most enlightening, chapters in the book is that by Peter Furness on how censuses vary between countries. The growing importance of register-based sources in many

continental European countries is, in particular, examined.

If I had any criticisms of the book it would be that many of the contributions are quite short. While there is a good range of further reading, some of the authors barely get into their stride on often complex topics, before their word count is up. Perhaps the editors underestimate the attention span of practitioners! It might also have been helpful to select one or two particular geographical areas as case study areas for

the various chapters. As it is, examples whizz around the country. Although the book is aimed at educating the novice practitioner, there is something for pretty nearly everyone here. And so it is a useful addition to the practitioner's bookshelf of reference sources.

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