

3 Three Factors to Ensuring Quality Online Research

The disruptive nature of the internet has changed market research more than anything else in the previous decade. While we have reaped its benefits, online implementation has created issues for data and research quality which should concern all stakeholders in client and provider organizations. To ensure the success and longevity of online research, we must all work in concert to take this transformational research capability to a higher level.

DMS Research sees three factors that are critical to ensuring quality online research:

- Broad and Diverse Sample Sourcing
- Engaging Online Survey Experiences
- A Stable and Repeatable Method

1. Broad and Diverse Sample Sourcing

Clients should be well-versed in how their suppliers acquire online sample. There are three main types of online sampling: Panel, River, and Lists. It's essential to know the pros and cons of each sample type to choose the most appropriate method given study objectives. Below are some considerations:

- **Panels** are generally recruited from a limited number of affiliate and partner sites, through which members are registered and encouraged to become long-term survey participants. As such, all panels have some degree of bias resulting from their recruitment plan. As a positive, due to the long-term nature of respondent relationships, panels can be deeply profiled. This results in excellent targeting capabilities and fast turnaround for narrow samples. Duplicates are usually well-managed within a single panel, but sample aggregation or consolidation from multiple panels can be problematic.
- **River samples** are those created in real-time from online promotions using banners, pop-ups, hyperlinks, and the like. This method of random recruitment drives potential respondents to a portal where they are screened for studies. If security to prevent re-entry and fraud is not employed, resulting samples can be self-selected in nature (most real-time approaches fail here). When evaluating River sampling, one should assess the breadth, stability and relevance of promotions used, as well as the security and quota controls used in sample creation. River provides access to a broad, general population of casual survey-takers, but is not well-suited for extremely low-incidence targets (< 5%).
- **List samples** are generally purchased or acquired from internal sources, and represent a group of pre-identified people with a common characteristic (such as customers). Lists can be the best, most economical solution for hard-to-find populations, but again, sourcing and representativeness should be assessed. Samples from lists can vary in quality due to database errors, omissions, and the quality of an opt-in.

When assessing sample sourcing, it is critical to consider from where a company recruits respondents, as well as where a company does **not** recruit. Quality online sample providers avoid partnering with sites that source multiple panels simultaneously. While these sites generally provide the cheapest recruitment costs (or best ROI), they tend to populate panels with undesirables.

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2. Engaging Online Survey Experiences

Gone are the days when researchers could simply transfer traditional surveys directly to online. With the novelty of online surveys having passed, it is critical to provide respondents with a compelling reason to participate and engage in two-way dialogue. For over a decade we have learned much about engagement and tailoring the survey to the online environment. Areas of learning include communication and positioning, survey length and flow, and user interface and navigation. Some tips include:

- Invitations should be clear and concise, with honest disclosure of expectations (including survey length).
- Study criteria should never be revealed in advance of screening, especially in a list of selectable, available surveys (DMS strongly cautions against using this type of offering, which is provided by two of the largest panel providers).
- Screening should be brief and conducted immediately upon starting the survey process.
- Sensitive questions should be positioned delicately and ideally asked at the end of a survey.
- Survey text must be clear and concise, leaving little room for interpretation.
- Surveys must move quickly, and be designed to make input easy on the respondent.
- Survey length is best kept under 25 minutes for the highest completion rates (which reduce non-response bias).

Additionally, encouraging today's time-strapped respondent to participate in research requires traditional value exchange analysis. Respondents offering their time and opinions should receive a nominal incentive to thank them for their efforts. To achieve the best completion rate among all sample subsets, a variety of offerings meaningful to each demo group should be employed. Rewards should be tangible; cash, credits, and gift certificates are the most popular forms of incentives. The monetary value of the incentives should not be so substantial that they bias results or encourage respondents to commit fraud to receive them.

3. A Stable and Repeatable Method

Sample management is critical to research stability. Given the ability to dramatically reduce field time, researchers run the risk of short-changing solid sampling technique. Good researchers have studied the impacts of multiple, controllable variables such as length of time in field, weekday versus weekend interviewing, time and day of launch, and response rates over holidays. Understanding variable interaction with the drawing and completion of samples is fundamentally important.

Beyond sample management, there is much we can do at the respondent level to foster data quality. Employing monitoring and "data traps" help identify valuable respondents at both the survey and panel levels. These controls should not be over-zealously employed, acknowledging that fatigue and honest mistakes occur and that respondents are a valuable and non-renewable resource. The internet allows for intricate behavioral monitoring upon which researchers continue to capitalize.

Additionally, a growing trend on the internet at-large is the identification of individuals and the verification of self-stated information. This is becoming critical as more commerce moves online, and the research industry will benefit from advancements here. Research stakeholders have an immediate need to know with assurance that they are speaking with those they are targeting – verifying a respondent is who they say they are.

On this front, DMS Research has recently taken respondent verification to a higher level by checking name, age and location of potential respondents through third-party validation using *billions* of publicly available database records. This strengthens our Security Suite™ as we add this identification capability to existing techniques including double opt-in, physical address verification, and technical verification (e.g., monitoring IP address and cookies).

To learn more about how DMS employs our best practices to produce samples of the highest quality, please contact **Melanie Courtright**.



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