

Sample is Not a Commodity

By Matt Dusig

The Internet has made it easier than ever to assemble a group of people for any particular purpose. That ease sometimes implies that anyone can do it. But just because it's possible to build a mechanism that enables people to participate in a survey, it doesn't follow that the company assembling the participants actually has the core competency when it comes to finding the right people, directing them to the right surveys and keeping them engaged and responsive.



When I think of a commodity, I think of something that can be mass produced to the point at which the price starts to fall – and the resulting product looks about like everything else at that (low) price. While it's true that prices for online sample have been driven down – particularly for high-incidence studies of people who are relatively easy to find – that alone isn't sufficient to make sample a commodity.

We all know that, among other things, quality research depends on the quality of the respondents providing you with valid, credible data. Quality, in this case, refers to how accurately that person measures up to your ideal research panelist. You want to know that your survey of IT decision makers in Germany did actually yield the opinions of IT decision makers in Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich and so on.

The question then becomes: how can you know for sure that you're getting quality? Providing quality online sample – that is, finding the right person at the right time – is both an art and a science. It combines Web-based tools to know your audience, with methods of communication that keeps them engaged and properly rewarded.

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Ultimately, the source of the sample dictates quality. It takes careful recruitment and a keen sense of attracting more than just a check box.

The following are some things that affect sample quality, and some questions to ask your providers to confirm that quality is what they're delivering.



A good panel starts with good sources.

Some market researchers want panelists with whom the sample company has worked for some time, while others have such specialized needs that the sample company must be able to put together a pool of targeted panelists when needed. Still, others prefer the river approach – random Web site traffic directed into the survey. All approaches are valid and necessary, depending on the current need.

Look for an approach to recruiting that embraces a variety of sources and strategies. A good sample company will nurture its own proprietary panel, while approaching requests for build-to-order samples with creativity.

Recruitment techniques can involve exclusive relationships with Web sites that target specialty segments, and even the ability to build proprietary private-label panels with global brands. One sign that a sample company takes this part of the process seriously is if the company has a recruitment department for finding specialty segments.

What to ask: Ask the sample company about the demographic balance of its proprietary panel – men vs. women, number of active panelists in the categories/demographics you care about, etc. Ask the company to show you Web site traffic, current response rates and where the current panelists are coming from.

Pay special attention to the care and feeding of panelists.

Finding the right people is sometimes easy, sometimes not. Either way, it's simply the first step. The next step involves keeping those people engaged and encouraging them to participate and share desired information in a thoughtful manner. The one-size-fits-all model doesn't work.

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Take rewards, for example. While adults might respond to offers of cash, teens are more likely to participate if the reward specifies something they value, like MP3 downloads. Others may not care about the reward for themselves, but would respond if they knew they could donate their reward to the charity of their choice. Find a sample company that speaks the language of the audience you're trying to target.

Other strategies for the proper caring of a panel include a limit on invitations based on client preference, monitoring for non-responders and non-leading invitation language.

What to ask: Ask for non-identifying data on a handful of panelists in your target category, including the recruitment source, a history of participation and the rewards earned for those particular panelists. This will essentially give you a peek into the operations.

Make sure the technology filters out duplicates and professionals.

If the first two sections were about the art, this one is all science.

Your sample provider should closely monitor panel member activity and immediately deactivate accounts of members who attempt to cheat the system. Common cheaters are respondents who are too fast, obviously not actually answering the questions; straight-liners – again, not really answering the questions; duplicate survey takers and bad data responders. You also want to avoid people who create multiple panel accounts on the supplier's Web site, or people who say they're in the United States, but actually are in another country.

One of the must-have technologies today for detecting duplicates and professional survey takers is digital fingerprinting. It involves creating a unique ID for each respondent's computer to prevent them from over-participating in online surveys. One strategy involves validating a respondent's country across a database of global IP addresses and removing users who are in the wrong country.

Fraud prevention is especially important when combining multiple sources of sample for a given survey. You want to make sure that John Smith can only take the survey once, even if he gets invited to the survey from a few different places online – perhaps he signed up individually for the proprietary panel, and separately is a registered member of a Web site that has partnered to provide panelists.

What to ask: Get specific about the technology powering every stage of the process – the recruiting, the inviting and the confirming. Ask what tools are in place and find out what kind of post-survey reporting the company offers.

It should be clear by now that one of the key ingredients to determining the quality of the sample provided is transparency – the transparency of the sample provider; that is, the company's willingness to show you the goods. As it turns out, that in itself is a great test of whether or not a company believes in the quality of its own product.

Surveys are all about questions, after all, so think like a survey. Ask the questions, and demand the answers. Quality data never lies.

Disclaimer: This article does not reflect the views or opinions of the Marketing Research Association.

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