Online market research: A focus on accuracy and engagement

In late 2013 Stable Research conducted an online Respondent Survey of 10,000 panel members to ascertain what type of research people participated in and what they preferred. The findings showed that the majority of respondents had previously participated in an online survey. 84% had completed an online survey, this represented 30% of all research that they had engaged in.

Almost half of the respondents had used a mobile phone for research, and even more so for those under 40 (and significantly less for those over 50). A large majority responded to the online survey via a computer rather than a tablet or mobile phone.

At present a larger proportion of survey participants continue to engage via a computer, but there is no denying that the use of videos, blogs and specialised apps for online research are engaging panels in new and exciting ways.

At the same time market research companies need to continue to focus on developing best practice approaches to online engagement ensuring that the quality of online data continues to add value for clients.

This paper examines panel consistency in online surveys, participant preferences, protocols for maintaining panel quality and the importance of online survey structure and design.

The digital economy is lowering barriers to entry for many businesses. It is also providing the market research industry with new ways to reach and engage survey participants. At the same time the industry continues to build on protocols that support the integrity of survey data in an online environment. Insights from panel participants will assist this process.
Online: Panel reliability, bad data and variables

A Forrester Research paper The Online Panel Quality Wars: All Market Researchers Benefit – Especially B2B Tech highlights that major buyers like Microsoft and Proctor & Gamble were making specific quality demands from their research vendors.

The paper noted that while the market research industry continues to grow the problem related to ‘how representative online panels really are. This is not just a matter of maintaining a representative panel; it is a matter of ensuring that respondents are who they say they are, answer accurately, and do not take a survey more than once – under multiple aliases’.

The issue of bad respondents was also raised in a study conducted by MarketTools titled, What Impact Do “Bad” Respondents Have on Business Decisions? The study attempted to quantify the impact of bad data on business decisions. The MarketTools paper highlighted a number of results focusing on an experiment that utilised MarketTools TrueSample, a technology solution developed by the company to promote quality data.

The MarketTools experiment found:

Even a small proportion of bad respondents caused risk to increase exponentially. Once TrueSample had identified bad or invalidated respondents in a comprehensive attitudinal survey about consumer goods they then included different proportions of those respondents into the survey mix to determine the risk in terms of data quality. They found that if a sample has 10% bad respondents, the increased risk was relatively small; but at 30% the risk doubled and at 40% the risk of making a wrong decision based on market research nearly tripled.

**As sample size increased, risk increased even more:** The experiment determined that increasing the sample size also increased the risk of an incorrect decision based on the research findings. The report noted ‘if your sample has 30% invalidated people, you have more than twice the risk of making the wrong decision if your sample size is 600: and if your sample size of 6000 doubles the risk even if only 10% of the sample is invalidated’.

**Eliminating only one type of bad respondent actually compounded the risk:** It was noted that many companies focus on removing one type of bad respondent at a time, for example duplicates and nonmatching people. But this will not work because both groups have opposite tendencies and removing one group will pull the average score further from the TrueSample average or alternatively closer to the TrueSample average.

**Protocols to maintain data quality in online surveys?**

Stable Research has adopted a number of protocols to maintain data quality for online surveys. These include:

**Do Not Use Register:** Stable Research utilises a ‘Do Not Use’ Register for those people who are found to have given dishonest or inaccurate answers.

Participant identity: Registration to the panel requires response to a confirmation email. A deduping process has also been established utilising either mobile phone numbers and/or email addresses. As an additional requirement face to face interviewees are required to bring identification to groups in order to be allowed to participate.

Panel and sample management: Panel members can be excluded on the basis of when they last participated, by jobs, clients and by category of the last research they attended. For qualitative research, participant standard industry rules dictate one qual research activity each 6 months. Online research exclusion is dictated by the client.

While multi-panel membership is a challenge to manage Stable Research is able to tag members who have been identified as multi registered and those panel members can be excluded when necessary from samples.

Panel ownership and engagement is an important element used to support data accuracy. Stable’s 110,000 member panel has been developed and grown over a number of years and the panel is always engaged.

Research structure and design

Various elements of research design also affect survey outcomes. The growth in online surveys and the various elements of those surveys ultimately affect engagement and in turn data outcomes.

A Research Now study has correlated the relationship between survey design, participant behaviour and data quality.

Findings indicate that surveys that are too long or complicated also impact abandonment and non-response bias rates. There have been a number of studies conducted that show that participants in long surveys gradually decrease their focus on survey questions.

<table>
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<th>Future participation /loyalty</th>
<th>Members are tolerant, but a consistently poorly designed survey experience impacts loyalty.</th>
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<td>Likelihood of inactivity is highest amongst new members.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>Panel members are generally honest, but surveys do not always allow them to be.</td>
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<td>Data Quality</td>
<td>Small differences in questionnaire design can cause very different data results.</td>
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<td>Representivity of data may be impacted if only more tolerant and loyal panel members complete poor surveys.”</td>
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In relation to respondent preferences, Stable Research’s Respondent Survey found that the top three research turn-offs were completing prequalifying questionnaires and never being contacted again, completing surveys and failing at the end, and irrelevant repeated questions. It is also interesting to note that length of survey fell just outside the top three.

In discussing the issue of survey quality a MarketTools paper noted that ‘as survey length...”
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goest from 10 minutes to 30, the ratio of partial completes doubles. Beyond 35 minutes the partial rate doubles again. In fact, for surveys longer than 30 minutes, the number of partial completes is likely to be half the number of completed surveys'.

It’s not only survey length that affects engagement and outcome. Poorly worded surveys also ultimately affect data quality. As MarketTools notes ‘poor questions flow or wording can confuse panellists, resulting in respondents choosing answers that aren’t reflective of how they truly feel’.

The research conducted by Stable Research in 2013 indicates that qualitative survey research invitations were the most popular type of communication with respondents. Focus groups and in-depths were the most enjoyed type of research.

While online surveys are quick and cost effective, part of their future development could include research into trying to emulate the focus group experience developing an atmosphere that engages respondents and allows them to provide their feedback in more detail through the development of videos, blogs and specialist apps.

International standards and benchmarks

The role of market research industry groups and global bodies will be relevant in shaping a best practice approach for future market research methods.

Bodies like the Australian Market & Social Research Society (AMSRS), Association for Market & Social Research Organisations (AMSR0), Australian Marketing Institute (AMI), Asia Pacific Research Committee (APRC), Global Research Business Network (GRBN), European Society for Opinion & Market Research (ESOMAR), Market Research Society New Zealand (MRSNZ) and the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA) provide avenues for collaboration and further research into best practice approaches in a fast changing digital marketplace.

International compliance standards like ISO will also play a role in helping market research organisations continue to develop internal processes and procedures that support quality.

Quality research has many variables

In his 2005 number one best seller Blink, The Power of Thinking Without Thinking, US author Malcolm Gladwell examines the 1980’s tussle between Pepsi and Coca Cola following the success of the Pepsi Challenge and Pepsi’s growing impact on Coke’s market share.

Coke’s reliance on market research based on the Pepsi Challenge resulted in the company changing the formula of Coca Cola to make it taste more like Pepsi. Coke was also re-branded as ‘New Coke’. Yet, as Gladwell explains ‘it was a disaster. Coke drinkers rose up in outrage against New Coke. Coke was plunged into crisis, and just a few months later, the company was forced to bring back the original formula Classic Coke – at which point the sales of New Coke virtually disappeared’.

So why did this all go so wrong from a market research perspective? The problem was not with the data they collected; it ultimately related to the way that they researched the product.

The research focused on opinions gathered after people sipped Coke and Pepsi. As Gladwell explains an employee from Pepsi’s new product
development said that ‘a sip is very different from sitting and drinking a whole beverage on our own’. They did not test New Coke in a home use test to determine how people would behave when the new model was released to the marketplace. viii

The same principle could be applied to participants who are engaged in an online environment. For example, will someone who engages through a mobile phone while on a crowded train have the same online survey engagement experience that they would sitting in their home office on a computer?

The industry needs to consider what steps it will take to ensure that the gathered data truly reflects the opinions of participants.

Experience and a quality panel counts

The provision of quality market research services is ultimately also shaped by experience.

As online research methods continue to build the scope of what’s possible, in terms of access and speed of information, it is integral that the market research industry continues to work towards best practice approaches. At the same time it is also important that the industry clearly articulates the benefits qualified market research services have over do it yourself research services that are probably missing the mark.

Additionally, by continuing to engage panel members and seek their opinions, likes and dislikes the industry will be better equipped to shape a future approach and in turn not only provide a more satisfactory experience, but also a higher level of engagement.

About Stable Research Online

Stable Research Online is a service that was developed at the request of Stable Research clients who were looking for research methods that engage changing consumers preferences and practices.

Online surveys can be tailored to suit brand images and customised for maximum response rates.

Online surveys can also be combined with traditional market research methods.

Services include scripting surveys, programming surveys, hosting surveys, management of sampling processes, data collection and data analysis.

3. ibid
6. ibid
7. Malcolm Gladwell, Blink, 2005, p 158
8. Ibid, p 159