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An Evaluation of Online Panels: Incentives, Questionnaire Length, Closed Studies (and So Much More)

By Ron Sellers

For years, random digit dial telephone sample has often been considered a commodity by researchers.



Sampling experts with an advanced degree in statistics can wax eloquent about the nuances of how RDD numbers are generated, but the average corporate researcher or research vendor often doesn't give this much thought, feeling that RDD is RDD.

Unfortunately, this attitude about sample sources has frequently been carried over to the world of online access panels. Many researchers today simply don't pay a lot of attention to panel sample sources. Panels are chosen because of their costs, speed, profiles, or service. Corporate researchers don't always question their vendors about which panel is being used, or about the reason for that selection.

This lack of awareness about panels can be deadly for a research project. In 2009, Grey Matter Research had mystery shoppers join 12 different major research panels. The result was the report *Dirty Little Secrets of Online Panels*. We found there was tremendous variation from one panel to the next. For instance,

the average number of invitations our panelists received from each panel in 30 days ranged from just 1.5 to as many as 57.

Given the industry response to this study, and the changes in the panel industry since 2009, we recently repeated the test, with ten new panels and two repeats (due to mergers). We also expanded the test considerably, evaluating incentives, questionnaire length, closed studies, and other factors. *More Dirty Little Secrets of Online Panel Research* is the outcome.

Both tests showed there is such a wide disparity between one panel and the next that it is extremely dangerous to treat panel sample as a commodity. For example:

- One panel, in direct violation of CASRO standards (of which they are a member), offered panelists "surveys" that were actually sales messages with offers to compare car insurance rates or get bids on home improvement projects. These were called "surveys,"

and were on their website mixed in with all the other identically labeled survey opportunities.

- The number of invitations our panelists received during the 30-day test ranged from 6.5 to 51.3. One panel managed to send one of our panelists 15 unique survey invitations in a two-day period.
- Some panels allow members to complete survey after survey after survey, at one sitting, without pause. After each completed survey (or screening disqualification), panelists are asked, "Would you like to take another survey?"
- The average response time for our panelists was less than 17 hours after receipt of the invitation. Yet in that time, one panel actually closed over 42 percent of their studies, meaning they're skimming a convenience sample off the top of their panel, and consistently getting responses from people who just sit by their computers taking surveys. Other panels had not a single study close during our test.

- The average questionnaire length varied from 9.6 minutes on one panel to 22.1 minutes on another.
- A few panels regularly asked for other members of the household to complete a survey, even though the panelist's spouse or children had never agreed to join the panel. A couple of our panelists completed these studies anyway, trying to be helpful and figuring they would know what the other household member would say. When panels just assume another household member will participate, your data may have a whole lot of supposedly 52-year-old men or 12-year-old children who are actually 46-year-old women.
- The incentives being paid, when figured on an hourly rate, ranged from a low of just \$2.67 to a high of \$8.24 (some panels only reward members with sweepstakes or points that lead to coupons and discounts). One panel actually does not provide members with a way to redeem their rewards, and failed to respond at all to our panelists' requests for help.

There are many parameters on which a panel should be judged, including recruiting sources, data replicability, pricing, service, and profile comprehensiveness and accuracy. The Grey Matter Research test is only one method of judging panels (based on respondent experience). But our test revealed a number of issues which researchers must take into account if we are to have any hope of trusting panels for valid studies.

The first is that panel sample most definitely is *not* a commodity. At least on our measurements, there are good panels, bad panels, and very bad panels out there. It's critical that you know which ones are being used for your studies. It's not enough to assume the panel broker or your research vendor or your field director must know something about the panels – you need to get involved (or make sure someone you trust is involved).

In addition, you need to figure out what you value in a panel. Do you care whether your respondents are being paid pennies or getting a viable incentive? Do you care whether the panel is using a router? Do you care whether panelists are embargoed on certain subject matter (meaning unable to complete multiple studies on cars or beverages or investment products within days or hours of each other)? Determine what's

important to you and select your sample based on those criteria.

This may mean using panels that are not always the least expensive. Some researchers will pay thousands of dollars extra to use their preferred qualitative professionals rather than less expensive moderators – then turn right around and use a panel of dubious quality because the CPI is \$2.65 rather than \$3.20 for 1,000 completes.

Some of what we found in this test also cannot be blamed solely on panel providers. Panels can bid projects to include a reasonable incentive. Panels can refuse studies of absurd length, or insist that if respondents will be forced to answer ten minutes of screening criteria only to be disqualified, at least they are fairly compensated for their time. But often, it's not clear whether the panel providers or the end clients are responsible for these abuses.

Across all 12 panels, 23 percent of the studies we attempted were closed. Remember, this was with an average response time of 17 hours or less for our panelists. Is this the fault of the panels or the clients? Most likely, it's a mix of both. A common complaint about panels is that the same few people are completing study after study. When a study is in the field for a day or a few hours, it's the most active respondents who are more likely to participate – the less active respondents won't even see it. This just perpetuates the problem.

Length is also an issue. The average questionnaire in our test lasted 18 minutes or longer. But 1 out of every 7 to 8 invitations was for a questionnaire of 30 minutes or more, and we saw studies of up to 80 minutes. Panel providers generally don't design the questionnaires, so this issue falls squarely at the feet of their clients.

We also ran into some horrendous questionnaire designs. Here's an actual question from one study: "Of LCD TV, that you currently own, what type does you mainly watch?"

Our panelists were frequently given inappropriate or irrelevant questions, often based on wrong skip patterns. Sometimes, they were forced to lie or make up an answer in order to continue with a study. Some questionnaires asked for a level of detail respondents simply couldn't provide, e.g. the exact price per night on their last ten hotel stays. One of our male panelists actually qualified for

(and completed) a breastfeeding survey, which understandably left him quite bewildered. Bad research is bad research, regardless of whether it's conducted by online panel, mail, phone, or in person. Bad questionnaires are not the fault of the panel companies.

Why does the respondent experience matter? Because you're depending on these survey respondents to give you valid, accurate data that will help you or your clients make informed decisions on very important (and costly) issues. These 600 or 1,000 panel members are all that stand between you and some very expensive mistakes.

Ultimately, it is up to you and I to reward panel companies that are doing things right by giving them business. At the same time, it is also up to us to suffocate the worst offenders by denying them business, forcing them either to alter their practices or to disappear in a pool of their own incompetence. Nothing will change as long as we, as researchers, make sample source decisions based primarily on price, or as long as we close our eyes to some of these abuses and just figure that "someone else" is paying attention on our projects.

Ron Sellers is the President of Grey Matter Research & Consulting, a full-service qualitative and quantitative marketing research consultancy company. To request a free copy of either (or both) studies cited, please contact ron@greymatterresearch.com, or visit http://www.greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Online_Panels_2012.htm to request a copy.

Note from the editor: While aware that other articles regarding the reports referenced in Ron's compelling article above have circulated some research blogs and communication venues, this article was specifically written for Alert! magazine and is original in content. Although we were unable to enlist a contributor to author an article from the provider or corporate researcher perspective prior to the print deadline, the core motive for any content within the pages of Alert! is always in the interest of research quality. We welcome and look forward to future contributions that delve deeper into this important topic and which might well offer a varying point of view. This article is clearly based on research but is still, as all articles contributed are, an opinion piece.