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SURVEY SAYS: NEW TOOLS AIM TO ENSURE THE INTEGRITY OF ONLINE SURVEYS

BETTER SURVEYS WOULD HELP TOO

IT'S BEEN THREE years since Kim Dedeker, then vice president of market and consumer knowledge at Procter & Gamble, questioned the "integrity and methodology" of online panels at a research summit in Chicago, effectively firing the starting gun on an industry-wide race to find smarter, more accurate methods for conducting consumer research online.

Since then several groups have developed intriguing methodologies for confirming the integrity of online panels, ensuring that respondents are who they say they are, that they are engaged and that they aren't being counted more than once.

The most extensive examination of the problem came from the New York-based Advertising Research Foundation (ARF), which in 2007 convened its Online Research Quality Council—its largest and most costly research initiative to date, according to Raymond Pettit, an ARF researcher—to offer recommendations. The council unveiled its finding Sept. 29.

"Based on the results of this and other research, because a lot of good work has been done on this, we developed this framework, which we are calling the QEP," or Quality Enhancement Process, Pettit says. It is three sets of templates that are intended to provide structure to the conversation that clients and suppliers should have when embarking on an online panel. Eight marketers, including Microsoft, Unilever, Coca-Cola and General Mills, have agreed to pilot the program, after which it will be revised and offered to all ARF members and non-members.

The ARF's recommendations are "intended as a minimum … a foundation," Joel Rubinson, chief research officer with the ARF, wrote on his blog. "As long as suppliers and other solution providers meet the needs of the QEP, we welcome their efforts to layer in additional elements of a solution on top of the QEP."

Indeed, there are aspects of online research that need more than an adherence to best practices to improve. Among the most vexing problem are respondents who take surveys strictly for the incentives. One group that's come up with a novel solution is the New York-based CMO Council.

The council, in conjunction with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, has developed a system that rewards respondents for their participation while effectively removing incentives. The new program, "Pause to Support a Cause," donates money to the preferred charity of anyone who takes an online survey, rather than promising cash or, say, a free T-shirt. The idea is to give people a reason to participate, while removing the opportunity for personal gain that may tempt some.

The council also hopes the charity angle will help bring a wider swath of the population, such as African-Americans or Hispanics, who have long been underrepresented, to online surveys.

"We always knew online panels brought in a thinner group than we were hoping to get, and at the same time the industry struggled with trying to figure out how not to have professional survey takers," says Ed Martin, director of international insights and new methods at Hershey Co. and a senior fellow with the council. "The biggest marketers for this will be the thousand of non-governmental organizations who go out to current supporters and say, 'If you

have 15 or 20 minutes and don't have much money left because of the economy, you can go here and take this survey.' "

Another major step toward ensuring the validity of online surveys is confirming that respondents are who they say they are and have not taken the survey before. Peanut Labs Inc., a research firm in San Francisco, is taking advantage of the rise of social networks to combat this problem. Peanut Labs is one of several firms that draw survey respondents only from social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn, and then use their profile information to confirm that they are not only real people (as opposed to bots), but also the age and gender that they say they are.

"People who post in those networks are not going to lie about their age and gender," says Sean Case, senior vice president of sales and client services at Peanut Labs.

Peanut Labs also combats the incentive problem by only giving out "virtual currencies," things like points for a Scrabble application in Facebook, for example. "The motivation is not really there to cheat or beat the system," Case says. "You may want more Scrabble points, but you're not trying to earn a million of them."

But even research companies need help, and there is no shortage of vendors coming up with solutions. One such supplier is San Francisco-based MarketTools Inc., which

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THE ONLINE SURVEY CHALLENGE

Problems

1. Determining survey takers are real people
2. Determining survey takers don't rush through surveys just to get incentives
3. Weeding out chronic survey takers driven by incentives

Solutions

1. New tech tools that weed out bots and fraudulent respondents
2. New guidelines from ARF for structuring online panels
3. New approaches to incentives
4. Better online surveys that encourage consumer engagement

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recently debuted an offering called True-Sample that uses a three-layered technique to catch duplicate or false respondents and also weeds out those who are disengaged or are simply rushing through answers just to finish a survey.

By taking a first name, last name and e-mail address and comparing them against industry databases, TrueSample can verify whether a person is real and whether he has taken a particular survey before, even if that person is using multiple e-mail addresses, says John Ouren, executive vice president and general manager of panels and communities at MarketTools.

"We found that 20% of people who signed up for panels were not real, but also many who signed up were taking [surveys] more than once," he says.

TrueSample also works after the respondents are brought into the survey, monitoring their behavior to determine whether they are actually taking time to consider the questions or simply checking off answers in order to finish quickly. "Anyone who can't pass those filters are held out of the final results," Ouren says. General Mills was among the launch clients that signed up for TruePanel.

But for all the technology and clever schemes, there also are some very simple things researchers can do to improve the integrity of online research.

"If online surveys were better, you could get more people to take them," Peanut Lab's Case says. He—and the ARF's report—point out that online surveys have not evolved much since they were adapted from their pen-and-paper forebears in the 1990s, making it less likely that respondents will pay attention through the whole thing or agree to get involved in the first place without compensation.

"The majority of mail and phone surveys did not have to offer incentives," Case says. "You had a good, persuasive person who could get someone to pay attention."

"I believe that the problem is being pushed to panel companies to resolve, even though they really only control engagement. After that it's up to the client to have a good survey," he says. "Until we fix that, you're going to have to have incentivized traffic because the only way you're going to get people to suffer through surveys is to pay them." **m**

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