<http://blog.vovici.com/blog/bid/21379/Sample-Quality-of-Online-Panels-Putting-Lipstick-on-the-Piggy-Bank>

**Sample Quality of Online Panels: Putting Lipstick on the Piggy Bank**

Posted by Jeffrey Henning on Fri, Sep 04, 2009

I’ve ignored many of the initiatives to improve the quality of third-party online panels. To me, these initiatives are laughable. Yes, you should…

* Seek to identify panelists participating in the same survey multiple times under different names
* Remove respondents who speed through their answers
* Have a broad-based demographic representation so that you do not need to weight individual respondents

But these simply put lipstick on the piggy bank. They make it easier for organizations to continue to put cost before quality and to justify doing research on the cheap with third-party panels. “See? The panel companies are working hard to ensure consistent high quality!”

Um, a consistent high quality convenience panel is certainly better than a low quality convenience panel. But it’s still a pig. Er, piggy bank: a cheap alternative to a [random sample](http://blog.vovici.com/blog/bid/18107/Random-Sampling-Explained).

The laws of mathematics have not been repealed: a convenience sample cannot be used to extrapolate to any target audience. A convenience sample is representative of its respondents only. This point keeps getting lost, as I saw last year at the MRA Conference at the presentation [What's the Catch? Does Sample Sourcing Matter](http://blog.vovici.com/blog/bid/17843/What-s-the-Catch-Does-Sample-Sourcing-Matter):

A pointed question from the audience said that probability sampling was the theoretical basis for the projectability of survey research and asked what the scientific underpinnings were for assuming that Internet research was similarly representative.  Melanie [the presenter] answered that replicability is emerging as the standard instead of randomization and that the results from her research were replicable.

What "irrational exuberance" was to NASDAQ, the third-party online panel is to MR.

This week, Gary Langer, director of polling at ABC News, writes [in his column](http://blogs.abcnews.com/thenumbers/2009/09/study-finds-trouble-for-internet-surveys.html):

A new study led by Stanford University researchers raises doubts about the accuracy of one of the most common forms of survey research, polls done among people who sign up to fill in questionnaires via the internet in exchange for cash and gifts.

In the most extensive such analysis to date, David Yeager and Prof. Jon Krosnick compared seven non-random internet surveys with two surveys based instead on random or so-called probability samples. The non-probability internet surveys were less accurate, and customary adjustments did not uniformly improve them.

While the random-sample surveys were “consistently highly accurate,” the internet surveys based on self-selected or “opt-in” panels “were always less accurate, on average, than probability sample surveys, and were less consistent in their level of accuracy,” the researchers said. Further, they said, adjusting these samples to known population values had no effect on accuracy (and in one case even worsened it) as often as that process, known as weighting, improved it.

Most Vovici customers are surveying house lists of customers, employees, resellers and other key constituencies.  It’s very easy to do a random survey of employees when you have the email address of every employee and have empaneled the list of employees by synchronizing your HRIS.  For surveys of prospects, many organizations are using the web for all lead generation and can easily field random samples of prospects.  Unless you’re an e-commerce or SaaS business, though, it is more difficult to build a representative house list of customers that you can then random sample: check out these tips for creating and managing [representative email lists](http://blog.vovici.com/blog/bid/18232/Representative-Web-Surveys-Require-Good-Email-Lists-of-Customers) of your customer base.

Putting in regular processes to build a quality house list is like setting up automatic monthly withdrawals from checking to savings: better than the panel piggy bank as way to save research costs in the long run. Building such a house list is a sound investment towards conducting quality, representative survey research.

**Tags:**[**Panel Management**](http://blog.vovici.com/blog/?Tag=Panel+Management)**,**[**Research on Research**](http://blog.vovici.com/blog/?Tag=Research+on+Research)

**Comments**

It's not a problem that is going away anytime soon. Panel companies have an incentive to continue using less than precise and less than accurate samples, defined by two-words: gross margin.

The shear volume of online research done on 3p panels, relegates any ability to go back to the old methods of random sampling. As the costs associated are ridiculous and the availability of truly random sample scarce.

While I do not agree that all research done on 3p Panels is totally invalidated by this fact, I do think that it carries inherent flaws. The proverb "better, cheaper, faster - choose two" fits quite well here, with "cheaper and faster" being the only options available.

If I was a PnG or a Unilever, I might be willing to accept the value-proposition: it's less accurate and precise but it's also significantly less expensive. When you have 1000's of products to test and track, I would imagine that value proposition remains agreeable. Sometimes, being close is enough (don't quote me on that)

Understanding that it's going to continue in perpetuity, it is entirely necessary to continue to find and implement methods for improving the quality of respondents. It's not laughable, it's just the only thing a 3p panel can control for.

Posted @ Friday, September 04, 2009 10:21 AM by [Actualize](http://www.actualize.ca/)

Did you read article to look at the methodology?

They ran 9 of the same survey, using two separate methodologies (CATI and Online), different incentives, at different times of the year, with different types of sampling methodology, quotas and no quotas, and they received significantly different responses, and response rates.

Amazing, they changed almost everything and everything changed.

Posted @ Friday, September 04, 2009 12:22 PM by [Actualize](http://www.actualize.ca/)

Yes, though, I was more concerned with the sheer age of the research. You have to think it has changed somewhat in the intervening years.

I do look forward to reading how the panel companies spin the results.

Posted @ Friday, September 04, 2009 2:30 PM by Jeffrey Henning

I am wondering what are the metrics how you measure high accuracy of one or another survey?

Really interesting findings but no empirical metrics on what you base your conclusions.

Posted @ Monday, December 14, 2009 8:44 AM by Iveta

Krosnick et al used 19 truth benchmarks from the US. federal government: primary demographics, secondary demographics and nondemographics (smoking, drinking, health quality, passport, driver’s license). These are treated as the actual amounts, given the significant expenditure in data collection and attention to quality paid by the government. Random Internet surveys were closer to these benchmarks than panel-access surveys.

Posted @ Monday, December 14, 2009 3:18 PM by Jeffrey Henning

In the UK, at least, sample frames which would permit proper random sampling are less than perfect.

Random sampling is often (usually?) topped up with an element of purposive sampling, to compensate for the gaps in the sample frame.

We are in the business of modelling the population.

As such, I am very happy to use an accurate, computer generated, multi-variable, QUOTA sample (I feel the term 'convenience sample' is pejorative) which *works* rather than the mythical 'perfect' Random sample. The quota sample provides a better model of the population.

I fear that simple random statistics are, increasingly, a thing of the classroom and not of real world research.

I note that the most accurate predictors of voting intent seem to use quota sampling.

Mark Hodson

Posted @ Thursday, February 18, 2010 5:31 AM by Mark Hodson