

# HANDS UP, WHO'S ON AN ACCESS PANEL?

Should the market research industry worry about multiple panel membership and its impact on the quality of research results?

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To facilitate this ongoing dialogue, ESOMAR creates and manages a comprehensive programme of industry-specific and thematic conferences, publications and communications as well as actively advocating self-regulation and the worldwide code of practice.

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*Jo Bowman.*

## **Multiple panel membership and outright fraud could undermine confidence in the industry. But is there reason to worry?**

Privacy laws, a switch from land lines to mobile phones, and consumer reluctance to give time and information are leading to a growing reliance on access panels – groups of people who are willing to answer market researchers' questions again and again.

But while these people may save a lot of legwork and speed up the research process, they're also putting confidence in the integrity of the industry at risk.

### **Alarm bells**

Alarming figures about the number of people on multiple panels fly around – one of which says that 0.25% of internet users are responsible for completing 30% of online surveys – but what's not clear is firstly whether these numbers are true, and secondly, whether it matters.

"Access panels are used for a lot more than online, and they're growing. Legislation, refusal rates and cost are pushing market research to access panels, and we need to maintain client confidence in them," says Adam Phillips, ESOMAR's professional standards chairman.

"Fraud and multiple memberships are real issues; the industry needs to define the scale of the problem and think about solutions."

## **Taking the high ground**

Phyllis Macfarlane, managing director of GfK NOP UK, says phenomena like Sky TV opinion polls and Tony Blair's focus groups have eroded public confidence in research. "Quality is paramount to us and if we can't distance ourselves from people doing that ... then we will deserve for the world to change," she says. "It's probably got the greatest potential to ruin this industry than anything we've seen before."

Macfarlane says clients need to understand that there's a cheap end and a premium end, and if they're basing longterm business decisions on cut-price research they're looking for trouble. "We have to make sure we take the high ground, do it properly and resist when clients want to go online when it's not appropriate."

At Survey Sampling International, the biggest supplier of access panels to the research industry, director of global development Debi Hart says that there's no agreement on what actually constitutes quality in panels.

While Survey Sampling does phone and online sampling, creates multi-sourced panels and closely watches responses – or lack of response – for unusual patterns, there's no guarantee that all access panels are assembled in the same way. Hart says that people who complete an online survey too quickly, tick boxes straight down the middle, or give inappropriate answers to open questions, are

picked out and removed. Usually, though, Hart says panellists reliably give well-thought-out answers, can be profiled, and can be a good alternative to random sampling.

### Quality assumed

Clients, though, it seems, haven't stopped to think about the quality of access panels. Not yet, anyway. "We've assumed our suppliers are taking care of it," says John Dimopoulos, Reckitt Benckiser's SVP and global director market research. Research agencies are differentiated based on their tools, the people and the value-added services they offer. The quality of panels used for research was thought to be a given. "We need to stop this blind trust on the client side," Dimopoulos says. "And the industry needs to help clients understand what quality means, and why data quality needs to be a key differentiator."

### Evidence

Certification of access panel quality under a new ISO standard is a way to guarantee panel quality and improve transparency for clients – but not necessarily the only way, WIN delegates agreed.

ESOMAR is now establishing a team of industry leaders who can propose evidence requirements to develop quality metrics for access panels. They will also look at whether an experiment carried out in the Netherlands, to establish the extent to which multiple panel membership occurs as well as its impact, could be replicated for other markets. CASRO has agreed to work with ESOMAR on a confidential study to look at doubling-up of panel members.

There is also the possibility of asking academics to review the quality of panels, and then the question of whether multiple membership is detrimental to the

quality of the results that access panels provide.

The team will also work on some 'killer questions' for clients to ask their research suppliers about the way their panels are formed, and how often panellists are called upon. These would be similar to the 25 questions to ask about internet panels which are already in ESOMAR's 'Guideline on Internet Research' (available at <http://www.esomar.org/index.php/researchusing-the-internet.html>).

The question of access panel quality will be put on the agenda for a future ESOMAR panel conference.

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