

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Not many people in our industry know there is a war going on. A high-level war that appears to be all about the fundamentals on which our industry is built: the respondent.

Undoubtedly with all the right intentions, a core of high-volume research buyers are forcing their providers to implement tools that systematically validate respondent identity and more importantly, engagement. An imposed system by which respondents' engagement levels are measured each time they take an online survey. When a respondent is flagged as 'disengaged' that information is then stored in a shared database. Multiple flags ensure that the respondent is never invited to do a survey again. This is the way our industry is dealing with people who dare to be 'un-engaged' when taking a survey. Interesting development ... not? What many do not recognise is that research buyers are also at the root of this unwanted behaviour. Before I explain, let's go back to the fundamentals.

FUNDAMENTALS

Our industry invented online research about 15 years ago. We learned that inviting people to be part of a panel, and profiling them, was the best way to get consistency in results. That was the start of a huge explosion of online research. The technology was initially a challenge, but participation and response rates were decent and people seem to like taking surveys. Of course, at that time there was not much else to do on the internet.

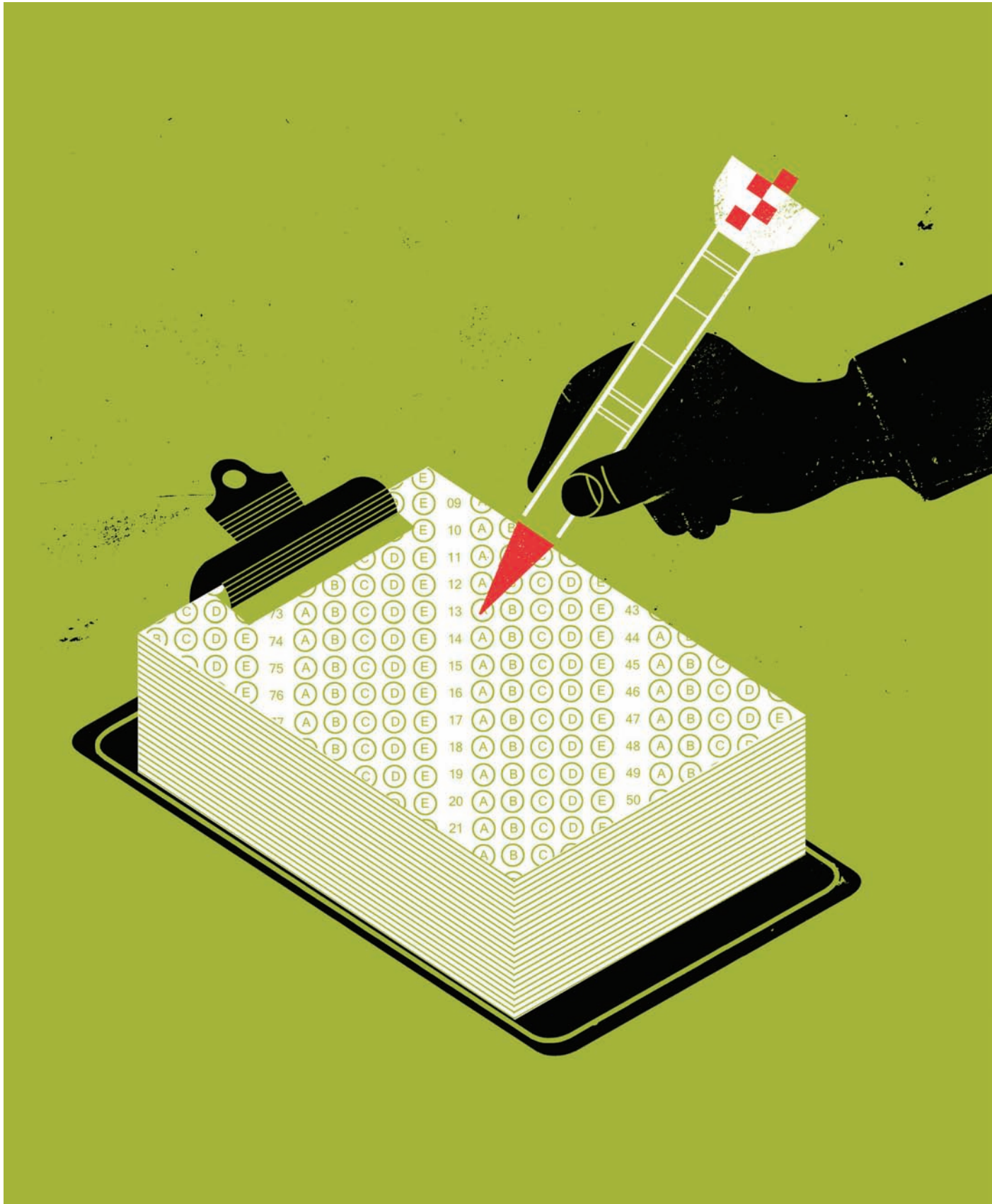
CHANGING BEHAVIOUR

Today we live in a world where people's online behaviour has dramatically changed. Interestingly enough, this transformation seems to have gone almost unnoticed by the market research industry. Yes, we are listening by scraping blogs and yes, we are creating artificial communities to generate interaction around products and experiences. But, the way we engage people and try to get them to take

surveys is still very much as it was ten or more years ago. We seem unaware that the game has changed. We are now, more than ever, competing for people's attention and we are losing. As a result we see that fewer people are willing to be on panels and fewer still are willing to take long surveys. Response rates on email invites have declined alarmingly, click through rates have decreased and people drop out more than ever before. We are in competition with online games, magazines, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and thousands of other great interactive sites and applications. Think we can win this battle without changing what we do? Think again.

WAR

Let me go back to the war comment. From 2006 onwards the industry rapidly realised that it had become more and more difficult to engage people with panels. The universe of people taking surveys was apparently shrinking fast. We even created a whole new terminology: speedsters, satisficers, lazy respondents, inattentives and frauds. But regrettably, the industry reacted in an unfortunate way. Technology companies and side players jumped in and told the industry that we were surrounded by bad respondents who were only interested in rewards. The tone changed and we started to point fingers at the respondent. Providers were outbidding each other with alarming messaging. 'Thirty or more percent of all responses are fraudulent!' They played with fear, exaggerating the threat for their own business reasons. Many high volume buyers were vulnerable to the message that survey-takers were bad. They seemed convinced that market researchers and panel companies had dropped the ball and therefore they had to pay the price - implement a punitive respondent rating system or lose business.



Angus Greig

To be honest, it was not all bad. At least raising these issues caused the industry to focus more on 'quality' and more specifically on controlling fraud and disengagement using smart technology. But anything you focus on becomes bigger. We may have had the best intentions, but all this attention on validation, meta-data to identify unwanted behaviour, and way too extensive reporting to find bad respondent behaviour meant we took our eye off the ball. The finger should have been pointed at ourselves, including the high-volume buyers. Let me explain.

ENGAGEMENT

Most people actually don't mind participating in a survey now and then. As long as it's convenient, most people are fine with spending a couple of minutes of their time doing something 'good'. Of all the reasons people participate in surveys, 'the sense of contributing' and the 'fun' aspect are still on top. So if this is true, where did we go wrong? Why are we confronted with all these nasty respondent and quality issues? Well, that pivotal moment was when, early in this decade, we thought it was better to bribe people to have a bad experience, than enhancing the experience itself. Think about that. By paying high incentives, especially cash, we created the root of the behaviour we are now desperately trying to prevent: acquiescence, fraud and disengagement. Our world would be a better place if we just put a little more effort in designing more intelligent rewards based on perceived value, like services or information. Just doing that would have discouraged the behaviour we're now fighting against. We were lazy.

IT'S THE LENGTH, STUPID!

Following Clinton's remark on the economy, I'd like to help create a path towards fundamental solutions. Although there are numerous ways to enhance engagement, studies show that the length of the survey has the greatest impact on the experience and, most importantly, on the data. It has been proven that data collected after about 20 minutes of a survey is significantly different to data collected earlier in the survey. Nowadays we still see many 40-minute questionnaires, especially in tracking studies. These are killing our industry, and yes, many of them are from the high-volume buyers who may be unaware that these surveys are at the root of the problem. Their market research providers are probably aware of the problem, but miss the ammunition to convince their clients that they need to cut back. At the end of the day, what company will refuse revenue when a competitor won't? It is just like the environmental problem. We all know we need to change, but it takes a lot of money and effort to do the 'right thing'. Doing it alone will not make much of a difference and will reduce your competitive advantage. Communal change will save the world. So the only solution is a collective approach; the first step is to simply focus on questionnaire length, solving the data quality issue in parallel.

'But how?' is a question asked frequently. Well, I have seven simple down-to-earth suggestions on which we collectively should agree upon: (1) everyone on the team – those sponsoring, designing, planning or buying research must take their own survey at least once – seriously. (2) Let's create surveys on only one topic and not keep adding unrelated questions. (3) Let's decide that lists of eight attributes are acceptable and longer than eight is just lazy research. (4) Let's just say that you need a darn good reason to sacrifice data quality by creating a survey longer than 20 minutes. I also suggest (5) abandoning our dogmatic approach towards 'record-based analyses.' Let's start to think in data points instead of SPSS or Quantum record formats. Data can be easily created by 1,000 people filling in a 4-minute survey rather than 100 people doing a 40-minute survey. Or even better, 10,000 people answering just three questions. And (6) let's collectively reward programmers who create great survey experiences and add (7) punitive pricing to any questionnaire longer than 20 minutes.

THE RESISTANCE

Back to the war again. Hopefully you agree that battling with respondents about their level of engagement and forcing the industry to adopt controlling systems is fundamentally not the right fight. We need to focus on the root of the issues: paying people to have bad experiences. If we redirect 10% of current time, money and focus on creating shorter and more engaging surveys, most of the battle will be won.

The good news is that I can already see the growth of what I call 'the resistance'; a group of engaged industry leaders and thinkers who have gathered to share ideas and create awareness about how to create better experiences for respondents. With over a thousand professional members they call themselves 'Research Voice'. Hopefully Research Voice will create the right tone and the right platform for the discussions that we need to have to solve this war on the respondent. Collectively. If we don't, we will all lose. **RW**



Kees de Jong

has over more than 20 years experience in the research industry and has been a member of the project team drafting ESOMAR best practice guidelines for internet research since 2004. Kees is now CEO of Survey Sampling International (SSI). www.research-voice.com; www.surveysampling.com
