

SSI POV: Online

Conditioning Effects

- Participants are often excluded from a survey based on their past participation survey history.
- For the majority of projects it is hard to support the need for these, particularly at the category level, especially when one category, e.g. “auto” could encompass such different topics as car stereos, tires, fuel types or new car preferences.
- If exclusion periods are to be implemented SSI recommends a maximum of 3 months.

What Is Conditioning?

Conditioning is defined as a change, either in attitude, knowledge or behavior that is solely caused by someone’s participation in market research. An example might be someone who takes a survey about soap. They see in this survey some brands of soap that they have never heard of before. They then take another survey about soap and, in the brand awareness question, mention the brands that they saw in the previous survey. If it does, is there a period after which it is permissible to re-include a participant in the sample?

Does Conditioning Exist?

The existence of conditioning seems to make “common sense,” especially to market researchers who spend so much time working with specific brands. But the academic literature on conditioning (across many disciplines) is divided and unclear. Research into traditional panels (ones where the same information is collected over and over again) does not show conditioning to be pervasive. Research by Toepoel, Vas and van Soest (Tilburg University, 2008) compared experienced panelists with “fresh” panelists. Their major finding was that questions of knowledge could be affected by conditioning whereas behaviors and attitudes tended to remain unchanged. This was more so the less common the knowledge. The increase in awareness was not great enough to lead to a different marketing conclusion from the data.

Is Conditioning Effects not as Pervasive as Expected?

Nancarrow and Cartwright (Bristol Business School/TNS,1997) explored the issue as it relates to tracking surveys (i.e. the same questionnaire rather than the more loose “same category”). By asking the same people to take the same survey up to 5 times over the course of 16 weeks they attempted to “condition” the participants. Interestingly the effects they found in the highest frequency of interview group were a mixture of “learning” (i.e. giving answers they had not given before) and “boredom” (i.e. no longer giving answers they had given before). SSI’s reading of the TNS data is that the effects are neither universal nor very large. Even showing a dummy brand 5 times to the same participant only resulted in 14% mentioning it in the final survey.

Conditioning effects are not as pervasive as we may expect them to be and do not seem to affect certain types of questions. Given the (relatively small) chance of the same person being included in two separate samples on the same tracker or repeat project the actual effect on the data will be extremely small.

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Of course on very low incidence projects this probability will increase, possibly substantially.

A second type of conditioning relates to survey-taking experience. A number of studies have highlighted the fact that those who have been on a panel longest (more particularly those who have done the most surveys) tend to answer some types of questions differently to those who are newer. It is unclear if it is tenure on the panel that causes this change or if those who hold these attitudes are more likely to stay on a panel longer.

Multiple panel and community membership means that we may not be able to rely on exclusion at the sampling stage. The question may need to be included in the survey itself.