

SSI POV: Online

Valuing Participants

- **SSI views participant time and attention as a scarce and largely non-renewable resource. Therefore, we must treat participants with as much attention and respect as we treat our clients. We need to listen to their preferences, and design surveys they will want to take by using better communications, rewards and survey design.**

Inattentive Behavior Tends to be Situational

It's important to have quality procedures in place to ensure participant care and integrity, but SSI's evidence—following tens of thousands of online research studies for thousands of clients—shows that inattentive behavior is situational and rarely repeated, and that true fraud is a rare occurrence. SSI believes that participant behavior is not the only, or even the major, cause of quality issues in online research.

The language we use when describing participants is important. Frequent survey-takers have been described as “gaming the system.” The market research industry practically begs people to take surveys, but tends to treat enthusiastic survey takers as criminals. With this attitude we risk losing credibility with the general public. Studies conducted by SSI and our clients examining responses of frequent versus less frequent responders have shown little, if any, correlation with quality.

SSI believes that instead of “blacklisting” frequent survey takers, the industry should undertake further research, and, revise some possibly outdated assumptions about survey frequency if the evidence shows that it doesn't affect the quality of the research results.

Some Larger Threats Receive Less Attention

It's important to be vigilant against fraud, but research by industry leaders has shown that real survey cheaters are a tiny minority of survey takers—probably less than 1%. In fact, the major sources of poor quality response are fatigue, boredom and poorly designed surveys. This is a bigger threat to quality, and has received far less attention than the much smaller category of fraud or duplication.

People have busy lives—they may rush through a survey and not pay attention because the phone's ringing, they need to take care of a child, or something else is competing for their attention. When we focus too much on “catching and eliminating” participants in this situation, we turn our relationship with them upside down—as if the participant is beholden to us and needs to follow our rules, instead of the reverse.

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What We Can Do To Re-engage Respondents

There is much that the industry can do to engage participants. SSI's REX (Respondent EXperience) team for example, was formed to focus on engaging and serving participants and checking surveys from the point of view of the people taking them.

Recent SSI research, published and available to the industry, shows that better survey design, as well as making participants happier, directly improves the quality of the data they give us.

Participants are our clients just as much as the companies who commission research. SSI's point of view is that they should be encouraged, consulted, valued, and thanked, instead of "bullied" with traps, lockouts, blacklists and controls.