

Point of View



Valuing Respondents

SSI views respondent time and attention as a scarce and largely non-renewable resource. Therefore, we must treat respondents 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.

It's important to have quality procedures in place to ensure respondent 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 respondent behavior is not the only, or even the major, cause of quality issues in online research. The language we use when describing respondents 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of "blacklisting" frequent survey-takers, the industry should undertake further research, and, revise some possibly outdated assumptions about survey frequency if the evidence shows that it doesn't affect the quality of the research results.

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" respondents in this situation, we turn our relationship with them upside down -- as if the respondent is beholden to us and needs to follow our rules, instead of the reverse.

There is much that the industry can do to engage respondents. SSI's REX (Respondent Experience) team for example, was formed to focus on engaging and serving respondents 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 respondents happier, directly improves the quality of the data they give us.

Respondents 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.

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