

Point of View



Verification in the Online World

Verification procedures employed in telephone and face-to-face interviewing (both at the interview and data entry stage) are usually carried out as a check on the veracity of the interviewer, not the respondent. It is the interviewer who has the means, motive, and opportunity to cheat.

In online surveys, of course, it is the respondent who has the opportunity to cheat. The question is: Why would they do that?

You could imagine that a person would cheat to qualify for a survey, in order to claim any reward on offer. In fact there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that hard-core fraudsters over-qualify for interviews. Research also suggests that a large majority of such people are physically located in places where the small rewards on offer from market research are worth a great deal – places like India, China, and the Philippines. For this reason, many research agencies do not allow respondents into surveys with "out of area" IP addresses. One needs to be careful doing this, however, because if the fraudster finds they are blocked they will find another route into the survey – possibly proxy-hopping to look like they are "in area."

SSI's quality control product, SSI Verify has IP verification functionality built in, as do many other proprietary systems. SSI Verify also prevents the same "person" doing the same survey more than once, either because they are coming from multiple panels being used on a project or exist multiple times within the same panel.

Otherwise "good" respondents might be tempted to cheat to get into a survey because a high reward is offered, especially if the invitation gives the game away by telling you how to qualify! We know, from our own research, that large incentives do not encourage generally better response rates, so we discourage clients from trying to offer them. We also advise against invitation text that says too much about the survey itself.

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One good idea is to use the questionnaire itself, where possible, to verify that the person is indeed what they claim to be by asking them something that they should know. This is easier to do in business-to-business settings where knowledge based questions can be asked.

Poor data is quite strongly correlated with speed, so it is a good idea to work out the minimal reasonable amount of time it would take to complete the survey with reasonable attention to the questions (remembering that some people make very quick decisions), and look carefully at the data from records faster than this. Look for straightlining on grids and the over-use of “don’t know” responses. It is also a good idea to have statements that are in some way opposite to each other – where agreement with one implies disagreement with the other.

SSI’s point of view is that the majority of panelists are engaged and honest in their responses. The “bad” respondents have been shown, time and time again, to make no material difference to the survey results, although this is not a reason not to be concerned about them. In SSI’s view, more problems are caused by poor questionnaire design than by bad respondents.

About Survey Sampling International

Survey Sampling International is the premier global provider of sampling solutions for survey research. SSI offers access to more than 6 million consumer and business-to-business research respondents in 54 countries via internet, telephone, and mobile. Additional client services include customer profiling, survey programming and hosting, data processing, sampling consulting, and survey optimization. SSI serves more than 1,800 clients, including nearly three-quarters of the top researchers, worldwide. Founded in 1977, SSI has an international staff of 400 people representing 50 countries and 36 languages. The company has 15 offices around the world for local client support. For more information, contact SSI at +1.203.567.7200 or info@surveysampling.com.

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info@surveysampling.com
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