Dealing with Professional Respondents

The concept of “professional respondent” or “professional panelist” means different things to different people.

If it is taken to mean people who will do only the research project if they get paid for it then they ought to be included in the panel; otherwise the panel will not be inclusive enough.

The same applies to people who say they like taking surveys.

The issue should not be one of payment or interest, it should be an issue of accuracy and honesty in responses. If the panelist gives honest, thoughtful responses we should avoid questioning her motives.

From time to time even the best panelist may give less than optimal responses, a behavior known as satisficing, or doing just enough to satisfy the demands of the task. Usually this is due to poor questionnaire design or poor research design. Given a better questionnaire the panelist reverts to giving high quality information. To avoid punishing the respondent for the error of the researcher/client we employ a “three strikes and you’re out” style policy where panelists’ behavior is monitored across the entire lifetime of their membership.

The real “professional respondent”, one who is in it for the money and does not pay attention to the survey, is, more often than not, fraudulent in their activity. Given the relatively small amounts of money on offer to complete individual surveys the fraudster needs to:

a. have many identities
b. be able to qualify for most of the surveys she is offered
c. complete the surveys in the shortest possible time.
d. ensure that the reward is worth the effort

Highly organized fraudulent behavior of this type is thankfully a small problem resulting in not much more than minor noise in the data. However, it has no place in market research and has the potential to be a real threat to data quality.

Usually it is highly correlated with having an out-of-area IP address. The so-called panelist claims to be in the USA when in fact they are located somewhere else where the reward is worth more than it is in the US. The presence of a fraud can also be identifiable in database records if one ‘thinks like a fraudster’.

Use of SSI Verify and ongoing checks on data quality and survey taking behavior enables us to identify and exclude fraudulent panelists.
For further information on these topics, refer to SSI’s POVs on Data Quality in Low Incidence Surveys Fraud Prevention and Verification Online