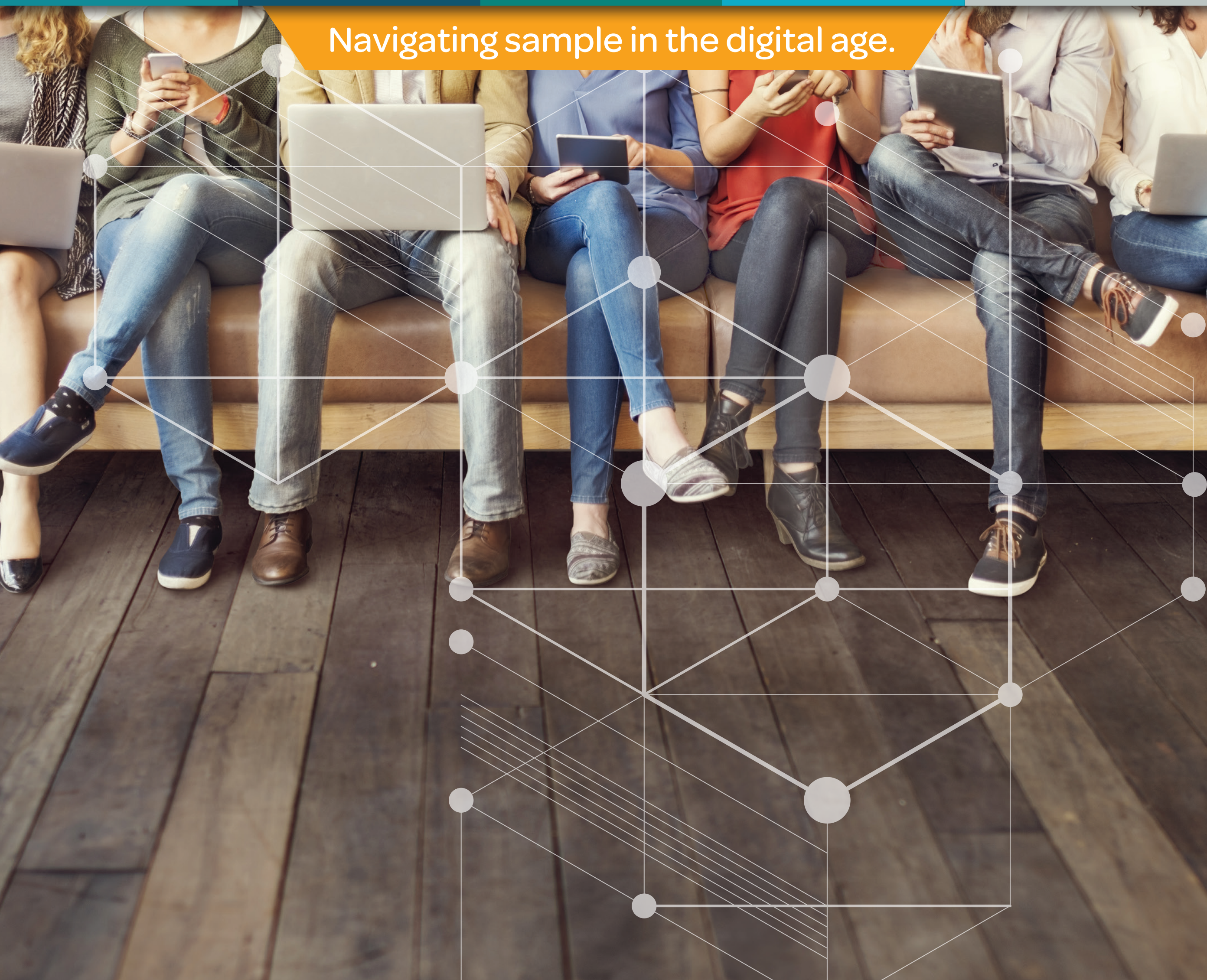
THE ULTIMATE BUYER'S GUIDE: How to Select a Sample Supplier

Navigating sample in the digital age.



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"With the shift to programmatic sampling, some think that quality and respondent respect are in tension. In this book – and as an organization—P2Sample exemplifies the harmony that exists between quality and automation." —Patrick Comer, CEO, Lucid

FOREWORD BY KRISTIN LUCK, ADVISOR & GROWTH STRATEGIST, LUCK COLLECTIVE

Research sampling used to be easy. There weren't many options. You could interview folks face to face or on the phone. My first sample buy was via a company ironically named Genesys. You may remember, as I do, sifting through a big binder of sample demographics, then sitting down at a Genesys dedicated computer and dialing through a modem to order and download a file of random digit dial phone numbers. Those numbers were then sent (by courier!) to a phone room where rows of interviewers dialed and cajoled impatient respondents to answer their questions.

Then came the internet. Quantitative research lost its one to one connection with consumers and we failed to adapt our methods to fit changing modes of communication and consumption. Data quality and respondent engagement suffered.

But there's hope! The following pages outline sample driven strategies that can easily be implemented to improve the respondent experience and, as a result, data quality.

Buyers, I hope this eBook inspires you to design shorter more engaging surveys that respondents truly enjoy taking. Suppliers, think of this missive as your crib notes for panel quality. Read on!

FOREWORD BY RAY POYNTER, FOUNDER & CHAIR, NEWMR

The world keeps changing and this eBook shows you how to get 'best in class' sample in 2018.

The book shows the importance of moving beyond the 'panel book'. For example, you need to be asking about things like 'spot feasibility' ('if we had to do a survey today and we contacted everyone we could get our hands on, how many people could we get on the spot?')

This eBook highlights the importance of respondent experience. Unless the research industry improves its performance, the spiral of declining confidence in research won't be reversed. Too many companies are paying lip service to the respondent experience, but buyers should note that a bad respondent experience makes sample harder to find and results less reliable.

One of the biggest changes facing panel providers and users is created by automation. Automation can make things better, faster, and cheaper—but it does not always deliver all three. You need to be asking questions about deep profiling, the integration of support with automation, and linking automation to an improved respondent experience.

FOREWORD BY LENNY MURPHY, FOUNDER, GREENBOOK

Like every other aspect of our world, technology is disrupting the insights space too, and nowhere is that being felt more keenly than in the critical issue of how brands engage, understand and activate consumer relationships. Insights as a business need is woven into that trifecta, and to gain insights you have to reach the right people at the right time with the right questions. In other words, sampling is the foundation of the entire process.

Effective sampling is driven by technology to achieve the speed, cost and quality demanded by buyers of research, but not all sample providers are created equal and few have achieved the balance of delivering all three. I consider P2Sample one of the companies that has gotten it right and is helping to blaze the trail of how we continue to deliver the highest quality experience to the entire insights value chain at scale and at the speed of business. The have based their take on how to select a sample provider on their own experience building one of the category's leaders.

If you are looking for direction on how to use insights to engage, understand and activate consumer relationships it starts with effective sampling. This is where you will learn all you need to know to make the right choices.

TOP INSIGHTS IN THIS GUIDE

- Look beyond size and reliability when it comes to measuring quality and start asking questions about fraud mitigation, respondent engagement and more
- Stop relying on the largely fictional "Panel Book" for audience reach and demographics and seek more accurate metrics like recent completes and spot feasibility
- Find a supplier who is using automation for more than just speed and cost savings, and is implementing this technology at every stage of the process for better outcomes and heightened quality from the ground up
- Create a checklist for judging sample suppliers that shows how they can help achieve core goals of trusted data, dependable execution and becoming a nimble partner that can evolve with changing needs
- Specific "Buyer Tips" are outlined to help explore a supplier's capabilities in important areas like representativity, profiling, identity verification, engagement and transparency

INTRODUCTION

Sample quality remains one of the single biggest challenges in the market research industry. This premise is proved time and again by findings in the bi-annual industry benchmark study, Greenbook's GRIT report, as well as the existence of several sample quality initiatives that are underway from industry leaders like ESOMAR, GRBN and Samplecon.

The good news is that recent massive advances in technology, such as automation, have unlocked valuable and necessary improvements for the sample space. One of the most obvious benefits is speed—that which used to take days now takes only hours or even minutes. This is amazing. Automation actually has the potential to take us far beyond simple time savings and solve many other common problems, when properly implemented. New technology like this can provide:

- Precise sample targeting across hundreds of qualifiers
- Better respondent engagement resulting in better data quality
- Smooth facilitation of APIs to programmatically exchange information
- Faster, more dependable and more accurate feasibility that encompasses a greater number of factors
- Instant detection of anomalies when it comes to quota management and field monitoring
- Improved recruitment that positively impacts feasibility estimates, response times and economics
- Fraud mitigation that uses artificial intelligence to better detect and combat fraud

New technology unlocks these possibilities, yet many suppliers are not fully implementing them, so we continue to struggle with ongoing issues. In fact, sample is often still viewed as a commodity, with nothing except pricing to distinguish suppliers from one another. This fact alone shows that we have a long road ahead toward improving outcomes. Panel and sample companies have great potential to provide the foundation for quality insights, and so let's start demanding better processes from the ground up. New technologies give us this opportunity.

SO WHY THE SAD FACE?

There are clear reasons that sample companies are perceived in a poor light. Mergers and acquisitions in the panel space, among some of the largest players no less, give buyers the sense that competition and choice have decreased. At the same time, new technology-based players, who can deliver sample quickly and at lower price points, are often plagued by poor quality. The umbrella over these trends is a downward pricing movement, driven not only by technology, but by the liquidity and transparency provided by automated exchanges. Just as we associate better products with higher dollar amounts—like top-shelf wine or whiskey—this trend is causing buyers to wonder whether sample quality is declining along with the prices.

Part of the struggle is a shifting definition of quality, which has traditionally been associated with two things: panel size and reliable customer service. Buyers look for large panel sizes, but the reality is that size doesn't actually address more important issues such as project-level feasibility and data quality. Buyers also look for providers who can deliver sample reliably, on time and on budget. Of course, both these things still matter, but aren't sufficient ways to judge a supplier any longer, as we must also start examining issues like respondent engagement and data quality. Better quality is within our reach, and it takes an evolved, multi-pronged approach to get there.

WHAT IS INSIDE THIS GUIDE

In this guide, we will outline a new definition of sample quality based on solid research practices as well as technological innovation that has disrupted the industry as a whole. We will answer the question "what does it mean to be a good panel/sample provider in the digital age?" The answer provides a new foundation for evaluating suppliers, one in which there are clear and meaningful factors beyond price that differentiate them. These factors are crucial to solving now-critical problems of fraud and engagement that yield bad data and undermine confidence and credibility.

> *"What does it mean to be a good panel/sample provider in the digital age?*

In the following pages, we will draw on our industry's shared experience to:

- Explain the modern online sampling process, especially the traditionally murky practices behind sample recruitment.
- Explore the significant impact technology has had on the sampling process, for good and for ill.
- Speak deliberately and transparently to the issues of cost, speed, fraud and respondent engagement—all of which are associated with the current problems in the sample space.
- Unveil clear ways to judge capabilities and explain the difference between panel books and project feasibility.

PREFACE:
PROBABILITY SAMPLING

Any discussion of online sampling today has to be couched in the knowledge that the commercial pursuit of market research faces challenges related to the use of non-probability samples. The principles of statistical inference are clear: to obtain unbiased estimates of a population's behavior based on the observation of a sample, the sample must be properly constructed. Concretely, this means every person in the population must have some known probability (chance) of being selected that is greater than zero. Short of this, you should expect biased results.

But probability sampling is expensive and difficult. Thus, driven by the belief that some data is better than none, market research in commercial contexts (and even some academic and governmental contexts) has been done based on "convenience samples." We use them, as the name implies, because they are more convenient, i.e., they are faster to execute and more cost effective.

No single factor has done more to swing the balance in favor of convenience sampling than the World Wide Web. When our consumers moved online we, as researchers, followed them. Not only did the cost of reaching them drop by a staggering amount, but the entire process of research became massively cheaper and easier to execute. These factors were so compelling that the industry now willingly dives into the pool of convenience sampling. Was this the right decision? It's still up for debate. A recent study by the Pew Research Center on opt-in panels explored the risk that respondents selected in this manner won't represent the larger population. By employing techniques such as raking, propensity weighting and matching, researchers hope to get closer to a representative sample. Yet, the Pew Center data showed that these techniques did not eliminate bias.

From a practical point of view, a discussion of sample quality must be prefaced by recognizing that we, as an industry, are operating in a "convenience" world. This background, and the constraints under which we are working, can help us start to reduce divergence between the techniques and promote quality for this widespread practice.

> *"No single factor has done more to swing the balance in favor of convenience sampling than the World Wide Web.*

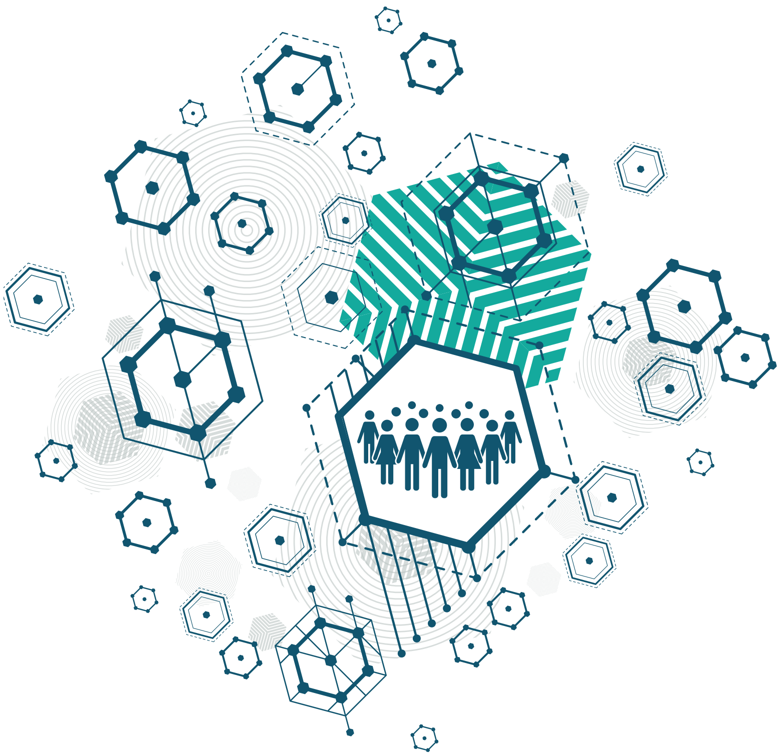
RECRUITMENT:
WHERE THE PEOPLE COME FROM

Market research is not an island. It is part of a broader online ecosystem that encompasses not only our respondents, but also the procurement of "eyeballs" by our compatriots in marketing, advertising and other related fields. The market research environment vastly changed as it ventured online and so did that of entities such as target list brokers and marketing agencies. This created widespread change over the decades.

THE LATE 1990s

The growth of the commercial Web gives birth to performance marketing,an online field in which marketing companies are paid when a specific action is completed, such as a sale, form submission, click or ad view. Sample companies benefited (and continue to benefit) from performance marketers because, through them, we were able to get participants without worrying about managing media buys and antecedent acquisition processes to obtain them. Also, online recruitment was still new, exciting and vastly easier. People were still captivated by online interactions and digital connections at this stage. User experience was in its infancy, as websites were little more than electronic brochures.

As with anything new and hot, clear leaders emerged in the performance marketing sector. The most successful of these actively pursued panel companies as part of their growth strategy. This was the birthplace of overlapping panel memberships and "professional respondents"—a predictable outcome when multiple companies in an industry fish the same waters.



THE EARLY 2000s

As the Web matured, better experiences emerged. Market research underwent a sea change as it no longer had a monopoly on mediating customer service feedback. Web 2.0 allowed consumers to have direct conversations with brands.

The fallout from this shift was significant. By around 2007, participation was dropping steadily and the industry turned to what is now known as the "river." This method again used performance marketing companies to find potential respondents in real-time through placed online advertisements. These respondents—willing to participate based on the offer of an immediate reward—were instantly screened and then sent on to a live survey if they qualified.

River sample arose for three reasons: lower costs, instant sample and greater feasibility. The critical driver was the fact that users were not forced to pledge loyalty to a panel company with limited and proprietary incentive currency. While a great innovation in principle, the early days of river sampling were fairly dire. There was no way to estimate how many people would actually complete a study and data quality was uniformly poor. The negativity that ensued from this state of affairs haunts the term "river sample" to this day.

2018

Where are we now? Huge strides have been made in speed, execution and dependability with the help of automation. Application program interfaces (APIs) are forming direct connections between buyers and suppliers, providing not only the ability for better dynamic pricing and improved incentivization, but also fixing many of the shortfalls of river sample and routers. In fact, APIs offer the opportunity for the elimination of routers altogether. No doubt, this is an exciting time for the future of our industry, but it is fair to say there is still a lot of progress to be made.

Challenges remain surrounding retention, validation, profiling and engagement. Although most incentive systems are no longer proprietary, panel and river sample still exist. In a marketplace where top priorities are speed and price, we must start the conversation about how to shift the focus on quality, starting with the nimble use of automation by sample suppliers.

DEATH TO THE PANEL BOOK

While it wasn't actually chiseled into stone with a rough-hewn instrument, the Panel Book is a document that dates back to ancient times. Its ostensible purpose is to provide sample buyers with approximate figures on how many people they can reach, and the demographic characteristics of those people, with a given supplier.

THE PANEL BOOK, A FICTION BEST SELLER!

In practicality, the figures in a panel book represent the number of people who have passed through the front door and signed up to take surveys with a given supplier. While there is a kernel of truth to these numbers, they are effectively meaningless for judging a supplier's ability and dependability to supply respondents for a given project. So why do we use them still? They serve a marketing purpose. Everyone talks about big numbers, even though there is little consistency in the definitions surrounding what those numbers actually mean. At some level, the numbers are true, but apples-to-apples comparisons are impossible.

A BETTER, BUT STILL FLAWED, METRIC: ACTIVE X DAYS

One thing most suppliers acknowledge, even publicly, is the need for better, more precise definitions. One commonly used metric is "Active in the Past 90 Days," which refers to how many people have visited the supplier's site to register, complete a profile or take a survey in the past 90 days.

Why 90 days? Perhaps for no better reason than "past 90 days" is a common recall period in market research. How many days are sufficient? Well, we know that the fewer the number of days, the lower the actual feasibility. For some, going out longer is too old, while making it shorter will result in smaller numbers! In any event, and whatever the period, the metric still has its drawbacks. The definition of "active" can differ wildly from one company to the next. Some companies may consider a person "active" who has joined and yet leaves five minutes later without ever taking a survey. Some include people who have already opted out and are thus unavailable for sampling.

If a supplier provides this metric, make sure to probe for definitions to the term activity. And don't be surprised if you see considerable differences even at three months of activity as there is meaningful attrition (particularly among important and difficult audiences like young men and minorities). Whatever the period of time, the closer one gets to present day, the more reliable the number becomes.

A GOOD METRIC (#1): COMPLETES IN THE PAST MONTH OR YEAR

This metric needs no explanation as it reflects the reality of a supplier's business and puts all the cards on the table. It also, importantly, removes from the equation both aggressive and conservative estimates of capabilities. The number can be sliced and diced as needed to get down to more relevant levels (e.g., completes by mothers 25-54 with children under 18 living at home). About the only caveat here is that it can be helpful to know the supplier's business trajectory: you may choose to expect slightly more from a company that is experiencing strong growth versus one that is staying steady.

A GOOD METRIC (#2): MAXIMUM OR SPOT FEASIBILITY

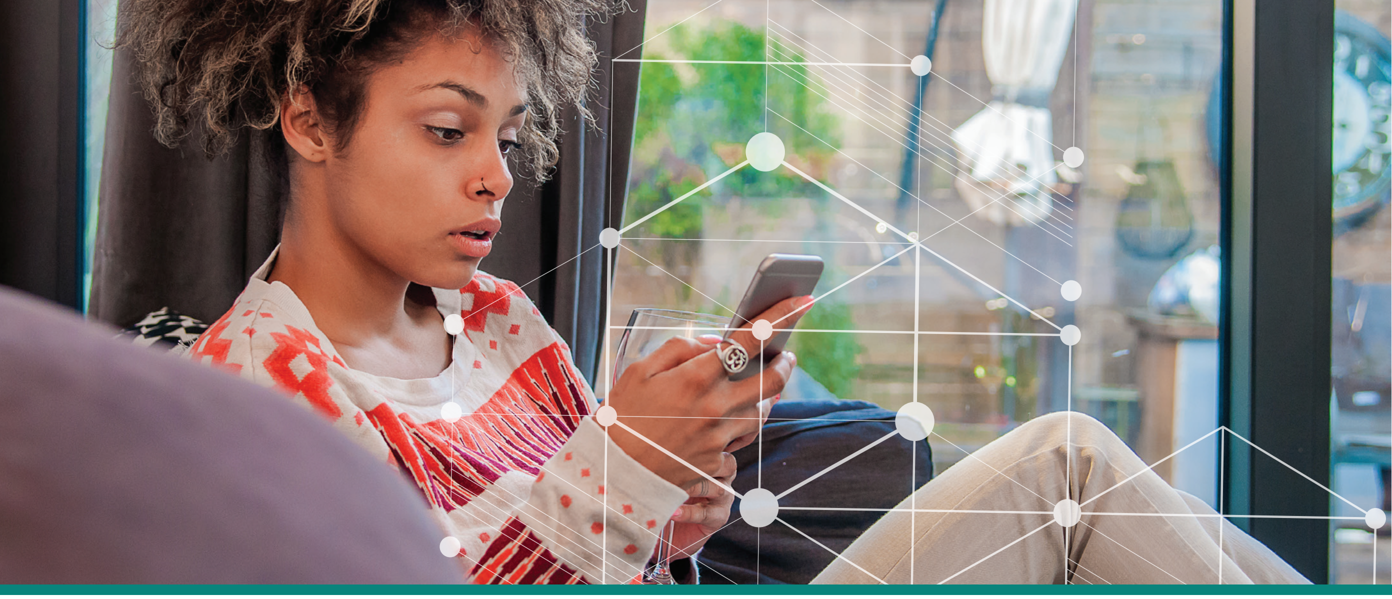
The definition is as it sounds: if we had to do a survey today and we contacted everyone we could get our hands on, how many people could we get on the spot? It is the most precise and practical number you can get as it effectively represents a promise on the part of the supplier to deliver. It is also a real eye-opener in terms of judging supplier feasibility. This is not something suppliers are typically willing to share outside of direct "I have a job and need a quote" scenarios, as the number will be smaller than even the "Active X Days" number.

When determining spot feasibility it is crucially important to provide clear specifications by answering the following questions:

- What is incidence of the topic to be studied? Buyers need to be honest about the reliability of their own incidence estimates, provided to suppliers, in order to gauge feasibility. Rosy incidence estimates are, in our experience, the leading cause of subsequent disappointment. Equally important is understanding what the supplier can and cannot target.
- What is the average length of the survey? Note the caveat here. Some suppliers count screening questions; some don't. Find the amount of time that the average respondent who qualifies for the survey will spend.
- What sort of demographic composition (age, sex, geography, kids, etc) are you seeking?
- Are there particular exclusion/repeat participation rules?
- What other factors are being included? Dropout rates? Device compatibility?

COMMITMENT AND CALCULATIONS

When you get a feasibility number from the supplier, this is effectively their commitment to deliver. There is no single way of estimating feasibility, and not all calculations are equal. At some fundamental level you have to know how many people are likely to be "in the system" at any given time, which is a function of everything from project specs to demographics to time of day. To minimize surprises, sit down with your suppliers and ask them to explain their assumptions.



RESPONDENT EXPERIENCE:

A SHAMEFUL DECLINE

If we look at the history of the respondent experience alongside the recruitment timeline, we can see some parallels. The evolution of the World Wide Web had a direct impact on both.

THE LATE 1990s

Not much attention is paid to user experience during the Web's nascent years. That said, the online survey experience actually compared favorably to the static "electronic brochure" style of most Web pages. One could argue that, because there was some activity beyond simply reading pages of marketing speak, users were more attracted to the survey as something they could actually DO.

EARLY 2000s, WEB 2.0

As the Web evolved, brands and developers presented users with new ways to interact online. As a consequence, they began to expect more in terms of experience, information delivery and personalization. Yet the panel experience failed to keep up and participation declined as other Web-based activities took priority. No longer was the reward or incentive payoff for completing a survey enough for people who were becoming conditioned to be more and more fickle. Moreover, the fact that individuals could interact directly with brands and other consumers meant that market researchers lost their monopoly as mediators of consumer sentiment.

In order to continue reaching respondents, some suppliers built routers that effectively "daisy chained" surveys: if a respondent failed to qualify for one survey, s/he would be sent to another. Techniques like routing or running screeners were originally limited to managing low incidence work (e.g., using a screening survey asking participants about multiple low-incidence categories) due to legitimate methodological concerns, but then came into more widespread use.

LATE 2000s, EMAIL FALLOUT

With the evolution of Web 2.0, market researchers had a harder time keeping pace with the improved user experiences and user engagement. We were still so excited about reaching respondents via a fast low cost emails that we started abusing this privilege. In 2009, Grey Matter Research mystery shopped the biggest, most-used panels and found clear evidence that many were relentlessly blitzing people with emails. As soon as a participant completed one study, they'd often be immediately invited to another study. The study was repeated in 2012 and found the same thing, just with other providers. At the time, this was quite scandalous and caused a lot of uncomfortable squirming in the industry. Routers were used as an alternative to mass emailing.

However, while routing was seen as a solution to the email problem and seemed like a good idea in principle, it actually compounded poor respondent experience by mercilessly bouncing people around from survey to survey. This "feature" of the process, unseen by buyers and unexpected by respondents, has been the butt of many a wry joke at research conferences even as respondents have lamented being asked over and over for their age and gender.

THE 2010s: CONNECTED ERA / MOBILE

When we made the shift from paper to internet-based surveys, we simply took our existing survey format and published it online. This approach was not ideal, but served its purpose at the time. With the advent of mobile, this simplistic method no longer worked and we scrambled to catch up. Thus an increasingly poor respondent experience became truly awful. The industry discovered its surveys were long, cumbersome and ill-suited for use on a smartphone or tablet. Discussions regarding mobile-first design and execution have dominated the market research space for almost a decade and still continue. The fact that we are still talking about this is indicative of the industry's inability to deal with massively important changes in the consumer landscape.

2018: AUTOMATION PITFALLS

As the industry enters the world of automation, we see history repeating itself. While automation promises efficiencies on many levels, we regularly hear of its failures, particularly with sampling. Problems manifest themselves in worst case scenarios for clients: suppliers letting them down with late or incomplete delivery or, even worse, weird data.

> *“Discussions regarding mobile-first design and execution have dominated the market research space for almost a decade and still continue...*

Many of these problems arise from improper implementations. Common issues include:

- Inadequate data mapping, resulting in inconsistencies and errors that can easily reduce feasibility by 10-25 percent
- Failure to build programmatic intelligence into feasibility calculations and field monitoring, which means all pieces don’t match up and create a “Frankenstein-style” process
- Insufficient fraud detection techniques in a landscape where “industry standard” defenses are inadequate and obsolete
- Abuse of respondents by bouncing them from survey to survey in search of a complete due to poor mapping and integration

So what does all this history tell us? Respondent experience has taken blow after blow, right in line with every attempted innovation and technological advancement. Even today, when the industry recognizes the impact of respondent experience on data quality, little is being done to rectify the situation. Most pay lip service to respondent engagement and satisfaction, while their practices do not demonstrate this in any meaningful way.

> *“Respondent experience has taken blow after blow, right in line with every attempted innovation and technological advancement.*

RESPONDENT EXPERIENCE DECLINE

THE LATE 1990s

Little attention paid to user experience during rise of the WWW

EARLY 2000s, WEB 2.0

New ways developed for users to interact online

LATE 2000s, EMAIL

MR starts to abuse the privilege of reaching respondents through fast, low cost emails

THE 2010s: CONNECTED ERA / MOBILE

New ways developed for users to interact online, an increasingly poor respondent experience became truly awful

2018: AUTOMATION PITFALLS

While automation offers many efficiencies, problems can arise with improper implementations

THE RISE OF AUTOMATION FOR SAMPLING

Without a doubt, much good has come from advances in technology in online sampling. As machines do more routine work, buyers and suppliers benefit from lower costs, greater efficiency and reduced error rates Automation is now indispensable in the sampling process. Yet as we have seen in previous waves of technology adoption, it is suffering its own growing pains.

Since market research began the move to computerized processes nearly three decades ago, we have been setting the stage for automation. Each new technological advance in the "outside" world has left us

> *"...automation is an indispensable element of the research process.*

scrambling to catch up and embrace innovation. In the beginning, these advancements were mainly about format and participation: we migrated from paper and phone to online; we became more thoughtful about the user experience; and we moved (or at least have started moving) from cluttered and clunky surveys to mobile-first design. More recently, advancements have been about cost-cutting and speed. Yet, there are numerous ways in which automation can yield better outcomes and solve some of the thornier problems we face. These include:

- Improving field management, especially with proactive troubleshooting and alerts
- Improving data quality by optimizing respondent experiences, including the impact of poorly-designed surveys
- Ensuring vigilance against ever-increasing fraud while diversifying respondent sources

- Creating greater transparency and consistency around methods of sample blending
- Building deep profiles of demographic and behavioral data that can be employed in real-time to finely target respondents
- Realigning staffing and training programs to create new competencies

All of these things are areas in which automation has a significant role to play, yet the vast majority of suppliers are only focused on one or two. Over the years, profiling has improved, but relatively little of it is "mapped" in an automated interface between sample buyers and suppliers. Fraud mitigation, validation and respondent experience are all areas at which suppliers are failing miserably. In fact, apart from barring non-mobile respondents from mobile-only studies, there is little that's been done by suppliers on an automated front to address survey design. Transparency is limited and is generally only a function of project parameters. So, on every point at which we should be implementing automation and using its power to move forward, many of us are falling behind. In short, there is much to do.

"...we are falling behind. In short, there is much to do.

PROGRAMMATIC VS AUTOMATION: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

As this space continues to mature, there is naturally confusion about terminology. Our colleagues in the advertising industry, in a move led by the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), a standards body, are seeking to shift the industry's focus from being "programmatic"—which they define as data-driven ad buying—to "automation." The implications for doing this are obvious: the benefits of broader automation are numerous. If we take their impact categories (transparency, data quality, inventory quality, brand safety and reputation, ad effectiveness and marketing intelligence, user experience and organizational alignment and staffing), we find easy analogues for market research:

- **Transparency**: Automation can increase visibility into areas such as processes, platforms, services and associated costs, helping to inform decisions about where efficiencies can be achieved.
- **Data quality:** Proprietary and widely varied data collection systems require advanced data mapping to accurately match disparate data and identify unique respondents.
- **Inventory quality:** This concept can be equated to survey quality in the market research field. Essentially, automated technologies can judge quality based on specific desired outcomes based on various data points, like performance, user experience, completes and more.
- **Brand safety and reputation:** Automated processes do not have the benefit of a human filter, and can sometimes place the brand near undesirable content – or, in market research's case align with bad data or practices. Active management is underway with layers that measure and control these issues.
- **Ad effectiveness and marketing intelligence:** Tying directly back to the market research space, this area has to do with the active and passive collection of consumer insights based on ad effectiveness.
- **User experience:** While automation allows further personalization and relevant experiences, it also operates without standardized best practices, which can result in sour user interactions. It's everyone's responsibility to fix these problems and start to allow users greater control over their own experiences.
- **Organization alignment and staffing:** The result of all the platform-collected data is that organizations must align workflows and become driven by a data-centric approach from the inside out.

EVALUATING SAMPLE SUPPLIERS

While market research has been historically slow to adopt new techniques and technology, change is now happening so quickly that it has eclipsed the buyer's ability to keep up. A baseline understanding of trends in the sample space, along with clear identification of buyer needs, can help to create a checklist for evaluating suppliers and lead to better business decisions.

Let us start then with the universal truths. Every one of us seeks:

1. **Data we can trust**
2. **Dependability in execution**
3. **A partner that can evolve with us**

...and the market should provide these things at a competitive price.

DATA WE CAN TRUST

Quality data is the primary goal. We must be able to trust the data we're receiving in order to make decisions. In order to take steps in this direction, several factors must be in place from a sample standpoint:

1. Representativity

In a world where the industry has willingly departed from the principle of probability-based sampling, we must at minimum be sourcing respondents from a large and diverse number of sources. From online forums and blogs to search engines, shopping sites to social networks, from gaming sites to app stores, automation makes it possible to recruit a wide variety of people from hundreds of sources while managing quality and costs. Conversely, sample buyers should avoid companies that use a limited number of recruitment partners, or source from only one channel (e.g., only drawing respondents from mobile gaming networks).

BUYER TIP:

Buyers should also recognize that some traditional parameters that connoted quality don't necessarily still apply. For instance, the fact that a panel is double opt-in doesn't mean it will yield high quality data. Double opt-in has been used as a way of ensuring the person's commitment, as well as an additional layer transparency surrounding exactly what's on the table in terms of privacy. In this day and age, it is a stronger (but not mandated) sign of GDPR compliance. Nevertheless, if a panel supplier is doing little on the engagement and fraud detection fronts, double opt-in matters little. (A fraudster could automate his response!) The bottom line is that each person needs to be real, deeply profiled, engaged and treated respectfully in accordance with the law.

2. Profiling

Proper management of one's panel makes it possible to develop deep and rich profiles with literally hundreds of demographics and behaviors. This provides immense benefits to both suppliers and respondents. For suppliers, it means effectively targeting participants, which boosts conversion rates and lowers waste. For the respondent, it yields better experiences and maximizes the likelihood of completing a study and earning an incentive. But these benefits can only arise if the profile data points are put to use in field through APIs so that respondents aren't asked questions which aren't relevant for a study or for which suppliers already have data. This is commonly called "dynamic profiling" and it less time-consuming and less intrusive for the user.

BUYER TIP:

Buyers should ask about profile points and how exactly they are used in execution. A good supplier will have a strong commitment to automation and APIs, and will put these practices to use for the benefit of not only the bottom line, but also for the benefit of respondents.

3. Identity validation

Automation and artificial intelligence (AI) are poised to create overall efficiencies in our industry, including when it comes to fraud mitigation. AI allows us to do tasks like distinguish between real fraud and false positives, identify anomalies and more, yielding a better user experience and better data. As fraudsters become increasingly more savvy and efficient, suppliers must employ ever more vigorous practices to defend against them.

Traditionally, we've employed several techniques to mitigate fraud. These included things like:

- Email and address verification;
- Captcha, which provides an artificial, puzzle-like block that requires human intervention;
- Honeypots, which employ computing codes to act as a trap that machines find irresistible but humans never notice; and
- Open-end questions, which make it difficult for most fraudsters to create realistic, genuine, non-spammy open-ended answers on a large scale.

Employed on their own, these approaches are helpful, but are no longer sufficient in the face of the sophisticated, technologically armed fraudster. This new enemy is not a "bot" or an unarmed person, and engages in fraud through a complex mix of machine and human power. We must take a similar approach to battle this.

The clear path is to combine traditional methods, such as those mentioned above, with advanced technology like artificial intelligence (AI). AI goes beyond algorithmic decisions: AI is self-learning and will continue to find new patterns. Algorithms are typically more static in nature and require constant human intervention. Using AI to fight fraud requires:

- A machine-learning method that compares pattern behavior by analyzing billions of data points for anomalies
- A large amount of historical data to provide accurate classification and help the machine learn
- A vendor with experience in identifying, understanding and managing fraud, providing a solid foundation

BUYER TIP:

This is an issue that may require further probing on your part. Quite often, suppliers will maintain that they have various static methods of verification or digital fingerprinting solutions to fight fraud. Ask for concrete information and be wary of techniques that are not constantly evolving.

4. Engagement

Suppliers need to start demonstrating a real commitment to respondent engagement by ensuring accuracy and attention to detail. With problems like router bouncing and more that create negative user experiences, suppliers must directly manage the process in field to stop bad experiences. Of course, buyers still have a large role in this equation as the biggest element of experience is the survey itself. Yet, suppliers need to be vigilant in their own efforts to minimize disengagement.

> *"To truly accomplish better engagement, we must start using technology to proactively manage experiences in field.*

Some suppliers make a minimal effort on this front by kicking out mobile studies for non-mobile respondents, and similar more superficial attempts, but there is more to be done. To truly accomplish better engagement, we must start using technology to proactively manage experiences in field. This can include everything from employing automation to spot trouble in field -- trouble which can be algorithmically identified by using things like low complete rates and even user-generated survey ratings. Engagement can also improve when suppliers take advantage of the millions of data points that are available to them. Using this data, backed by automated algorithms, surveys can be targeted appropriately so users spend less time trying to qualify for a study and find a faster path to a good experience. This kind of forward-thinking approach can help boost engagement and satisfaction, while also eliminating avoidable delays and weird data that only become apparent once the project is complete.

BUYER TIP:

If a supplier isn't actively managing engagement in field then buyers should be wary. Buyers should ask suppliers how their routers work, how they deal with qualification, how they measure bad experiences and what they do to prevent them. Often an indication of weakness is a lack of automation to manage experience.

> *"...suppliers need to unveil the mystery surrounding recruitment, process, technology and more.*

5. Transparency

This is an extremely simple concept: suppliers need to unveil the mystery surrounding recruitment, process, technology and more. Where are respondents coming from? How are they being obtained? What technologies are being employed to ensure quality at every step along the way? These are just a few of the questions that suppliers should answer as a matter of course.

BUYER TIP:

Don't work with people who give you a song and dance on this issue. Require transparency from start to finish. Ask the questions mentioned above. Learn more about the diversity of sources.

DEPENDABILITY IN EXECUTION

1. Rock-solid feasibility

Automated feasibility processes give us the opportunity to instantly take into account a huge number of factors--from field parameters to individual behaviors—to provide accurate estimates of how a project will fill. This approach also delivers greater speed, accuracy and dependability when compared to the old method of manually producing feasibility calculations in spreadsheets using simplistic formulas. While some companies are still using these outdated methods, automation is providing a path toward better feasibility across the board.

BUYER TIP:

If your vendors are still calculating based on spreadsheets or using methods that don't take into account not just incidence and project days, but every other aspect of field and individual respondent profiles, you may be at risk. This is another area where you should require transparency. Ask how it is done. A good objective metric is to have the supplier provide data on how many jobs it failed to deliver on time and in full.

2. Monitoring

Most suppliers handle field issues reactively, but the fact is that automation now allows them to manage field proactively. Reactive field management, which is the way human-based project managers generally operate, means delayed problem solving and bad respondent experience. Using automation, suppliers can now constantly watch each and every project, detecting anomalies instantly, closing quotas automatically as they fill, and otherwise quickly and efficiently ensuring projects remain on track and raising alarms when they are not. Automation thus brings peace of mind to the research buyer and better experiences to the respondent.

BUYER TIP:

Beware of manual field monitoring. While human project managers are still essential to solving problems, machines provide the best way of detection. Gain an understanding of how your suppliers use automation to ensure an on-time delivery.

3. Sophisticated Fraud detection

While mentioned above as a data quality issue, good fraud detection is also a field issue. When fraud mitigation is executed properly, there is no need to throw away sample due to strange data. Many buyers often build this into their projects, over-buying sample with an expectation that they will need to trash a portion.

BUYER TIP:

Make sure that your supplier is using a multi-pronged approach to fraud detection and mitigation to reduce wasted sample.

4. Real engagement commitment

As with fraud detection, solid respondent engagement is essential both for data quality and field dependability. Poor practices mean lower completion rates, resulting in a need to significantly over-sample.

Even worse, sub-par methods can easily yield field delays and dissatisfied clients.

Suppliers who employ proper engagement practices usually are also more capable of managing special projects like trackers, IHUTs and recontacts. Put differently, buyers should be skeptical of suppliers who claim to be able to do these types of projects without solid automation and engagement practices in place.

BUYER TIP:

A commitment to respondent engagement is indicative of more advanced capabilities. Make sure your supplier is making this a priority, and that their methods are actively improving respondent experiences.

A PARTNER THAT CAN EVOLVE WITH YOU

Perhaps the most important aspect that a supplier should have is the ability and agility to evolve with buyers and meet the changing needs of their business. This means being nimble enough to develop out-of-the-box technical and sample needs, and create flexible solutions that can deliver on even the most complicated and unusual projects.

Part of achieving this kind of flexibility means investments in technology that boost platform quality and speed. A supplier that constantly monitors the broader industry's innovations and has the ability to share these with the buyer can mean both time and cost savings. A deep understanding of the work, and the way it makes sense for every individual project, is at the heart of good sample facilitation.

BUYER TIP:

Buyers will recognize this by the fact that suppliers are challenging them to think differently, not for the supplier's sake, but for the buyer's own sake. We are in an age where transitions are challenging. Suppliers who consult and advise, and who take the time to truly understand the client's end goals, will help projects have better success rates and drive improved data quality.

DATA QUALITY ASSURANCE

Communicate survey expectations and requirements up front

Involve sample supplier in pre-launch testing

Test the survey flow yourself with the respondent in mind

Focus on enjoyable survey design

Treat respondents like humans

Provide value beyond incentives

Select survey platforms that put user experience first

State disqualification clearly so that users understand

CONCLUSION

Sample companies have the capability, especially with the advancements that automation allows, to make a significant impact on research outcomes. This is great news for the future of our industry. Technological advances give us the not-to-be-discounted benefits of speed and cost savings, with the additional potential of improving fundamental processes, like respondent engagement and fraud mitigation. All of this directly affects data quality. It is true that disruptions like widespread internet usage and mobile-first practice have pushed our industry to positive change. Again, we stand on the precipice of a major shift spurred by technology like automation and artificial intelligence, which both provide the opportunity for sample suppliers to positively impact market research outcomes.

We must let go of old thinking that sample is a commodity, and start to view sample providers as a true partner in uncovering insights. This guide was designed to help buyers take a much-needed critical view when it comes to partnering with a sample company, and start asking the hard questions about process, technology and innovative thinking. With buyers looking for solid partnerships, sample companies must show a concrete commitment to things like improving respondent experience, utilizing the latest technology and displaying process transparency. When we start to shift the way we look at and understand sample, we can start to see the meaningful improvements that it can have on data quality and insights.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JD is a twenty-year veteran of the market research industry. He began his career client-side in financial services, then went on to hold senior global positions at The NPD Group and Ipsos. Prior to P2Sample, he held executive positions at AYTM and Bakamo.Social. JD is a frequent speaker and a thought leader in the insights industry as it evolves to tackle the challenges of the digital age. He has a Ph.D. in Political Science with Distinction from The American University and a BA from the University of Pennsylvania. He lives in France with his wife and two sons.

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