

ANDREI POSTOACA

The Anonymous Elect

Market Research
Through Online Access Panels

 Springer

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For Karin, Staffan and Carlos, whose confidence in me in times of doubt was big enough to base a movie on and hardly smaller than what you need to start a revolution.

This book wouldn't have been possible without Raluca Boboc. It is her commitment that turned the anonymous into elect and this project into reality.

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Introduction

This book on access panels is not intended to be handbook of access panels. Although it ultimately aims to offer guidance and establish some procedures for the more efficient use of access panels in online market research, it is far from being a handbook. *The Anonymous Elect* is a pragmatic analysis of communication in market research through online access panels. Its purpose is that of investigating the language of online market research as compared to that of offline market research in an attempt at discussing the increasing levels of self-awareness with today's respondents to market research surveys.

As a starting point, however, the first chapter of the book is concerned with establishing reference points for the defining of the online trend in the context of offline market research (subchapter 1) and online access panels in the context of market research methodologies (subchapters 2-5). In endeavouring to make the definition of online access panels comprehensive enough to support a pragmatic analysis of online panel communication practices, we have delimited online access panels from both offline access panels and other methodologies of conducting online market research, within two definition areas: subchapter 2 ("Online vs. Offline Panels") approaches online access panels as an element of the overall market research paradigm, opposing it to offline access panels, while subchapter 3 ("Who Are Our Online Respondents?") comparing online access panels with the other methodologies of online market research. Further questions about access panel building, maintenance and employment procedures are answered in subchapter 4 ("What Makes an Online Access Panel?"), while subchapter 5 ("What Doesn't Make an Online Access Panel?") attempts to highlight some of the major differences between access panels and mega databases.

Thus, however extensive, the first chapter of the book has a defining role; its main purpose is that of drawing clear borders in the world of access panels to which the subsequent pragmatic analysis will be applied. Hence the distance between the handbook of access panels we have not written and our small book of access panels is that of pragmatic analysis.

In effect, the following three chapters of *The Anonymous Elect* take the form of an invitation to a pragmatic analysis of communication in market research through online access panels. Having in mind Searle's pragmatic

account of language as the fundamental institution underlying any other social reality (Searle 1995), the contribution of the following pages to the debate and ever-increasing amount of literature about online market research is that of raising an equally pragmatic series of questions: **(1) is there a language of online panel communication? (2) If there is a language of online practices in market research based on access panels, what does it say about the relationship between the online researcher and the online respondent? (3) How does this relationship influence market research conducted through online access panels?**

Far from sharing a functionalist's interest in communication, we will look into the way the electronic medium affects communication in market research by fostering a certain "language of online access panels".

Equally different from a linguist's interest in language, we will be trying to explore this "language of online panels" in pragmatic terms, where language is interesting not in itself but as an index of behaviour. In pragmatics, decoding language means decoding relationships. In approaches to language, syntax is about *conveying* information, raising issues of coding, transmission channels and message reception, while semantics deals with *meaning* and the way meaning is produced and grasped. Pragmatics, on the other hand, explores the way *communication influences/affects human behaviour*. Pragmatics is an approach focused on the relationship between sender and receiver, insofar as it is mediated by communication, rather than on the relationship between subject (sender or receiver) and sign (Watzlawick 1967). Essentially, pragmatics never isolates, its purpose being the investigation of the sender-receiver relation in its breeding context.

Although initially looking at the concept of *meaning*, accounting for how *meaning* is produced and grasped, this book essentially falls under the scope of pragmatics. Just as when pragmatically conceived, *meaning* is envisaged as arising out of the interaction between people. Discussed in functionalist terms by reference to the symbolic interactionist trend (Blumer 1969) and briefly to Watzlawick and the school of Palo Alto, *meaning* is the realm of negotiation, a world of interpersonal transactions. Engagement in interpersonal transactions via electronically mediated channels is only one option in this universe, the study of which has partially been started by cyber psychology, but whose specificity – as we have perceived it in the context of computer-mediated communication in market research using panels – is challenging enough to call for an interdisciplinary approach.

In response to this challenge, we have intended our book to be one of shifting perspectives in more than one sense. On the one hand, we want it

to foster an eclectic, interdisciplinary approach to communication in online market research in terms of sociology, cyber psychology and linguistic pragmatics. On the other hand, we have organised it in three chapters following – by recourse to the methodological cues introduced in the first chapter – two different perspectives: that of the online researcher and that of the online respondent/panellist. Thus, by being structured on two shifting standpoints, the book as a whole will be investigative but will also re-enact the act of mediated communication between two distant subjects.

In taking up questions of frame, mediation, the imagination or expectation of the communicator, the assumption of roles, dialogue vs. monologue etc., we have written this book to look for and interpret behavioural cues during the transaction of meaning in online panel communication and in the hope of going some way towards answering a number of questions of great interest for researchers: **(1) Is there a language of online panel communication? (2) What does it say about the relation between researcher and panellist? (3) How does this relation influence market research performed through online access panels?**

Though it hinges on “statistical evidence”, our enterprise will not be one of presenting clear statistical evidence; rather we will use statistical data to support a point of view that is put forward for further negotiation. We are writing this book to start a debate.

CHAPTER 1:

To Panel or Not to Panel – *What Is* and *What Is Not* an Online Access Panel

They say that time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.

(Andy Warhol)

Online Market Research. Perspectives

The Online Trend in the Context of Offline Market Research

There is no fully unbiased data collection method. All data collection methods influence respondents in research surveys in one way or another, skewing their answers to a greater or lesser extent. Offering quality in market research, however, means offering consumers/clients a view as close to reality as possible.

In effect, the quality of the research depends on the honesty of the responses, correctness of the sample and quality of the collected data. The more sincere the answers, correct the sample and well-collected the data, the higher the quality of the research study. While the correctness of the sample must take into account certain parameters like response rates and non-response percentages, the quality of the data collected owes much to the quality of the open-ended questions; equally, the honesty of the responses can not be calculated without taking into account the biases introduced by the interviewer/collection method.

Since none of today's research methods can claim complete correctness, researchers normally weight their data in order to have it fit as closely as possible with the general consensus based on gender, age, social class and region. It is as equally impossible, however, to weight the data for all the variables that define a person, as it is to find a totally un-biased collection method.

As a result, where an accurate estimate is far better than knowing nothing at all, we will approach our brief account of online research trends in the context of offline market research from the issue of sampling.

Sampling

To many an experienced researcher, random samples are the only correct samples, being the only samples where each member of the sampling frame has an equal probability of being sampled. Equally, In-Hall interviews are accepted and considered a proper methodology only when conducted with every n-th person entering the facility. Experience shows, however, that the gap between theory and practice is not insignificant in both respects. Practitioners know that In-Hall interviews are primarily conducted with people who look “less likely” to turn down the interviewer and “more likely” to respond to the survey, and who generally are relaxed enough to be picked as the “n-th”. Likewise, it is well known that offline random samples are prohibitively expensive, while in practice impossible to get online.

For decades, market researchers have been using the quota method. While CATI and CAPI interviewers may sometimes have a hard time finding populations to match the quotas and *region/market size* is the only parameter controlled in advance, online researchers control all parameters in advance. As a result of using all background variables to reduce hidden biases, stronger samples are built online. Of course, the quality of the final sample depends on the response rate but market researchers who operate online using access panels can and do control the response rates without much difficulty.

However, in terms of sampling online market research is still considered risky. The online population is not representative for the overall population. Actually neither is the CATI population representative; still, CATI is among the most reliable methods of doing market research. However, the Internet incidence is increasing and it is only margin household (which are hardly eligible for any other collection method) that are not expected to reach the trend.

Respondent Convenience

In the last decade, respondent convenience relative to completing research surveys has increased in value and its importance has become paramount in view of the declining response rates in most countries and for most research methods.

Online, matters of the convenience for the market research respondent are almost exclusively time-related. However, so-called perceptions of time seem to differ from research method to research method. What can

seem a long time on the phone or face-to-face can still be acceptable in front of the computer, and vice versa.

However, initial perceptions of online research as just as time-efficient as it is cheap are far from the reality today. Online surveys do not take only five to ten minutes, nor are they ridiculously cheap. Where online interview costs have grown to compete with CATI costs, thirty minute questionnaires are everyday practice with online access panels. And interviews of up to forty-five minutes, though still inadvisable to run online, are still conducted where the client accepts a lower response rate and a higher non-termination rate.

Speed

Speed has long been counted as one of the major assets of online research. Experience shows that when online research is too slow to live up to its reputation, the main inhibitor is neither the availability of access panel respondents nor the scripting or field time, but the speed of the client or research agency.

From a macro perspective, an ordinary offline research project normally takes 4-6 weeks, which includes one week for preparation and questionnaire design, 2-4 weeks for fieldwork and one week for data analysis. Online, the time needed for preparation and data analysis is more or less the same, while fieldwork should not normally exceed 7 days, and may even be done in 2-3 days. By receiving the interim data and beginning the analysis and preparation of the report on time, the researcher can perform the final analysis even faster. However these are exceptional cases and would be unrealistic in everyday practice.

All in all, online research appears to be faster than offline research by 25-50%. Still from a macro perspective, working online enables us to deliver up to double the number of projects as is possible offline and the consequences of this will be hard to overlook both by market researchers and their clients. The switch to online is expected to bring about changes that will affect the entire industry from interviewing techniques to reporting habits. Most reports today do nothing but describe the numbers shown in the tables; and despite spicing things up with nice-looking charts, they only show what a reasonably intelligent person can read for themselves. The shorter the fieldwork time and the bigger the number of projects, the shorter, more concise and exclusively confined to facts the researcher's reports will be.

At this point, however, the online research industry is still in its infancy. Deadlines are not so appealing and the difference from offline is far from great. Many researchers dare not assign a period shorter than 7-10 days to their fieldwork, two weekends included. The logic behind this is based on the assumption of panellists who check their emails once a week and who are less likely to answer the survey than panellists who check their email daily. Arguably, this is not a reason to keep a survey in the field for 10 days, since most members of an online access panel also check their email on daily basis.

The advantages of online research in terms of speed reach the highest level of transparency with global research. When it comes to coordination, online projects can be really fast. Conducting multi-country online research involves dealing with only one or two suppliers instead of ten or twenty, as is the case for offline. Also, scripting is uniform, being in most cases done by one piece of software and involving a lower risk of scripting mistakes, in turn increasing the chances of the data delivery files being correct.

The fieldwork for a global research project conducted offline in 8-20 weeks can take no more than 2 weeks online. Speed associated with global projects is one of the major advantages of online research, not to mention the cost-efficiency of conducting global projects online.

However, being able to conduct global research online depends on the availability of panels. Today, panels of reasonable quality are available for most European and main Asian countries, and of course for the US and Canada. Depending on the rate of Internet penetration, building panels in the remainder of the world is no easy task and can be expected to take a lot of time. However, the difference between estimates in early days of the Internet age and the most recent data available on online penetration shows that the Internet population has grown spectacularly. Countries like USA, Canada and South Korea have almost reached universal penetration, though the data strongly suggest that once a penetration rate of around 70% has been reached, subsequent growth tends to stagnate or even slow down.

Cost & Price vs. Quality

Cost and price make for an interesting discussion when it comes to online research. What is the cost of a fifteen-minute interview in France as compared to Romania, for instance? While offline, the cost of interviews are entirely country-related, depending on the cost of both labour and incen-

tives, online interview costs involve only one variable parameter: the incentives. In most cases, however, where points or prize draws are offered, not even the incentives constitute a variable parameter.

Generally speaking, calculating the price involves counting the cost of the incentives, calculated amortisation, general expenses and the margin calculated on top of these. Recruitment costs, which some researchers see as one of the factors affecting the price per interview, do not in fact appear to make a huge difference. In practice, it is the maintenance costs that prove significant. Where recruitment costs per panellist are for example 1-5 euros, maintenance costs per panellist per year can amount to 10-15 Euros, depending on panel size and quality.

Ultimately, it is all a question of margins. The research industry today has to work with ridiculously low margins. Online research, however, would be able to offer operating profits of 20%.

Once the costs are settled for a panel – including recruitment costs, general expenses, maintenance costs, incentives and the targeted margin – the next issue to attend is the amount of interviews to be conducted on average per respondent.

An exaggerated focus on the number of panellists available has led the market research industry to overlook the quality of the available panellists and misinterpret their readiness to answer frequent research surveys. The quality of a panel is determined by the number of interviews conducted on average per panellist. In this respect, figures lower than two interviews on average per year indicate poor quality.

Online Reporting Tools

The Internet has enabled researchers to conduct surveys which were previously impossible to conduct offline. However, if online research is on its way to revolutionising the market research industry, this will not only be thanks to the data collection method it offers, but also a result of the reporting tools it features.

The industry is still too concentrated on tables and charts. Online reporting tools enable researchers to decrease reporting time while placing additional focus on the analysis of results. Researchers, worried that their clients will have no more need for their market research company once the data has been delivered, can rest assured: our clients will always need research agencies for the same reason they need advertising and media agencies. Large corporations that have begun conducting their own media buying, advertising and market research will soon begin to realise that they are

losing focus. There is no danger of the market research company losing its market by giving clients quicker and better access to figures. On the contrary, by taking this step market researchers will be showing their willingness to move forward, openness to technology and eagerness to change for the better.

No doubt one of the first visible consequences of this change will be a strengthening of the point of differentiation between field companies. While field & tab companies will focus on online data collection and data delivery, traditional market research companies will become increasingly analytical, spending on interpretation and recommendations the time they today use to create more and more charts and write reports to reinforce the data already available in online charts. Since simply delivering results will no longer be sufficient in itself, traditional market research agencies will be expected to invest in interpreting results.

The big consultancy companies like McKinsey and Accenture, as well as many other smaller but well-focused consultants, represent another worry for the market research industry today. These consultants boast high levels of familiarity with the client, good connections and a willingness to buy the data and interpret it for the client. So far the reason these companies have steered clear of the market research industry has been transparent: too low margins. Once the margin reaches levels of around 20%, which is far from being unrealistic given the potential of online market research, large companies in the industry will expect to achieve margins of 10-14%, a level which would also appeal to consultants.

When it comes to online reporting tools, however, there are two categories of system: one that offers basic charts and some standard analysis; and another which includes more complex, tailor-made systems that offer of all types of analysis and fully customised designs to satisfy even the most demanding clients. It is the latter of these two systems which is expected to provide one of the major assets of the online market research industry. Properly used, these systems dominate the market, offering extensive tracking systems and highly standardised products.

Questionnaire Complexity

Ideally, the software used for online scripting is supposed to enable researchers to script all the things they were used to scripting offline. In practice, the online medium presents no limitations whatsoever in this area: in terms of speed, the questionnaire scripting area never reports any difference between offline and online.

Background Information

Most access panels contain large quantities of updated information about their panellists. A gold mine itself, this information enables the online researcher to build robust samples and access hard-to-reach populations. Availability of low incidence targets for reasonable prices is another major asset of online market research. In many cases the cost of screening for low incidence populations can be far higher than the cost of the main stage of research, making it extremely costly, if not impossible, for many clients to carry out market research.

Also, gaining access to correct background information on the panellist decreases the length of interview. More often than not, online market research collects more background information that is automatically added to the client's data file, which in turn results in enriched data. Typically, data stored in an online research company's database about panellists is, on the one hand, related to the panellist as an individual and as a member of a household, and, on the other hand, to the Internet connection and tenure. Below comes a collection of entries summarising the data stored by a market research company with a well set-up online panel:

- Name
- Date of birth
- Sex
- Postal code
- Email
- Mobile phone number
- Education
- Employment status
- Occupation
- Company sector
- Name of the company
- Individual income per year
- If chief income earner
- Household size
- Household income

- Whether chief shopper
- Main shopper in household
- House/housing type
- Car ownership
- Personal flights
- Business flights
- Cable/satellite dish/possession of digital receiver etc.
- Type of usage, i.e. email only, web
- Time spent using the Internet
- Frequency of using the Internet
- Time spent per week on the Internet
- Location of net access net – home, work
- Internet connection type at different locations
- If modem – speed/capacity
- Method of payment to provider
- Activities on the web – shopping/banking/chat/job hunting etc.

Online Attempts of Re-Contextualising Market Research: The Digital Trend

Online market research is less a matter of switching old projects from off-line to online and more a matter of developing ways of conducting research that is impossible to do offline. To the adventurous mind, the potential of online environments in market research represents an area of endless possibilities.

Print pre-testing and readership pre and post testing are already expected to grow. The online medium allows several versions of magazines and newspapers to be created, the best cover to be tested and the optimum balance between articles and advertising to be achieved etc. There are endless ways of measuring ad awareness online, with outdoor advertising just one of the industries that could benefit from the incredible potential of online environments.

Modernism is and always has been a movement without a definite end. Paradoxical though this may seem, its only stable feature is that of “be-

coming". Following the argument that each period in modern times has a notion of its own about *postmodernity*, it is time we acknowledged *postmodernity* as the intuition underlying the trendsetter's chosen path.

What is the *postmodernity* of market research? In an attempt to answer a trendsetter's question in a trendsetter's way, we base our intuition on changes that border on a complete *reshaping* of the technological world: the ascent of digitalisation.

It is not to be denied that news and figures related to digital TV all show an increasing availability of interactive television services. The penetration of digital TV into European and North American households has steadily increased in recent years. Accordingly, interactive TV (iTV) – enabled by digital TV – is expected to support a large and mass-market customer base. With iTV services gaining mass acceptance, both through increased availability and subscriber awareness, using them to deliver interactive services to an increasing number of users undeniably offers profitability and competitive advantage.

Seven years ago, however, the entertainment industry became a victim of over-optimism in terms of the projected growth rate for iTV and supported a wide range of services which, at the time, led to overzealous investment in this area at too early a phase of its development.

Nevertheless, there has been a complete change of the conditions that contributed to this iTV failure, coupled with significant improvements on the technology market. As a result, the parameters of the situation are now essentially different. Furthermore, the increased interest from subscribers provides standing proof of the overall confidence in an industry expected to deliver high-quality services: 73% of UK digital cable and satellite subscribers claim to have pressed the "interactive button" on the TV remote (source: BMRB Audience Interaction Monitor, May 2003).

It will soon be time for the market research industry to approach iTV with a view to using it effectively in the delivery market research services. As a further *reshaping* tendency in the world of technology, the concept of *digital convergence* can be employed as an additional argument in favour of experimenting with interactive TV based research to complement Internet-based services. Internet and TV services will be delivered over the same infrastructure, using similar components (hardware and software) and technology, but will differ in terms of audience, complexity, flexibility and level of user interaction.

Big changes leave few unaffected, but the amplitude of change comes early and is most visible among those who dare to acknowledge *postmodernity*. Clearly, the *postmodernity* of market research is Internet-related.

Offline vs. Online Access Panels

If offline access panels have never been fully accepted as a methodology and used as such in Europe at least, this can be accounted for by most researchers and clients perceiving it as too much of a niche segment to represent an important part of the research portfolio. Only a small number of clients has developed an interest in offline access panels and uses them to their full benefit.

Nonetheless, the use of online access panels in market research can have many significant advantages, which, once acknowledged, are expected to cause the whole panel business to explode. In its turn, this will result in increased acceptance by clients of the panel methodology in general and will influence their perception of offline as well. The distance between accepting access panels as a methodology in market research and discovering the unknown advantages of offline access panels is small.

The higher stability of offline access panels means the availability of a higher degree of longitudinal data. While the average mortality of an offline access panel does not exceed 15-20% per year, it normally reaches 50-100% with online access panels.

However, offline and online access panels should never be viewed as competing methodologies. They are in fact the same methodology adapted to respond to different needs and address areas that rarely overlap. Some surveys are better-suited for online, while others, especially the longer questionnaires, can only be done offline.

Online and offline access panels can live in a perfect symbiosis, recommending each other to clients still hesitant about the advantages of using access panels as a methodology in market research.

Who Are Our Online Respondents?

History

Online market research started with website evaluation. The first researchers daring enough to acknowledge the potential of the Internet for market research brought online market research to life by doing website evaluation in the mid 1990s. As an area that had a lot to gain from the market research industry, website evaluation was at the time conducted exclusively by the research departments of large companies. However, the mid 1990s was also the dotcom era, when market research companies could have

made high profits from changing the industry and investing more in the online research business.

The main activity of the online business, apart from website evaluation, was to collect email addresses from the people interviewed; an activity which resulted in the first would-be panels. Initially, these were merely lists of people. Over time, the lists evolved into mega databases – the difference between the two being that mega database respondents were re-contacted for interviews and the company began to gather basic information about its respondents, albeit only 3-5 variables. Mega databases are still a big area in the online field, though they are slowly moving towards loosely managed panels with market research companies growing increasingly aware of the necessity to start creating real access panels.

Few companies began creating proper access panels from the outset. However, those that did were all companies with extensive experience in the area, such as Ipsos, NFO and NPD, that had been running access panels offline and could afford to start building online access panels.

Even today, there are still few market research companies that have the knowledge and can afford to have their own online access panels. Building, running and maintaining panels involves steps that require increasing knowledge on the part of the market research companies, and the ability of these companies to follow clear standards when dealing with panels is expected to put an end to the problems the industry is facing today.

Trends

Probably the biggest problem faced by the online research industry today is that self-recruitment acceptance has allowed people to join several panels, thus making panel rules fully inefficient. Frightening figures from the US show a membership average of more than 3 panels per panellist, while for specifically hard-to-reach target groups the average has reached 7 panels per panellist. In so far as a company doesn't know the kind of surveys other companies are running, the multiple panel membership of its panellists will render useless the panel rules it establishes and has based its panel maintenance policy on.

Assigning a third party panel washer, most likely a law firm, to check if a newly recruited panellist is already part of another access panel, could be a solution the industry may have to consider soon. Once this problem is acknowledged, we expect the suggestion of a third party panel washer to be taken very seriously.

Probably the next most interesting trend in the development of the online research industry is the creation of proprietary panels. Admittedly, this trend feeds upon a tendency to exclusivity that we all know. Increasingly, companies that start by using general online access panels also gradually develop a lot of interest in creating their own proprietary panels. To as high a degree as possible, these companies want to ensure their respondents can be followed over time, while not responding to surveys other than theirs.

Defining sub-panels in the main access panel is another trend which opens the gates to interesting debates about access panels and they are of particular use for companies targeting populations with an incidence lower than 20-30%.

What Makes an Online Access Panel?

A natural person, on a voluntary basis, returns to the panel manager a minimum set of background data, completely filled in, and via a double-active-opt-in approach unequivocally indicates that he/she wishes to become a member of the access panel concerned on the clear understanding that the panel is solely used for purposes of market research and participates in panel activities for at least once a year. (Esomar)

If recruiting an online access panel means taking chances, maintaining it involves commitment and running requires expertise. The key to using panels as a methodology has generally been identified with the researchers' ability to maintain their panel. In practice, the quality of our access panels depends on the extent to which we commit ourselves to maintaining them, though it is equally true that maintenance hinges on the correctness of the recruitment and ability to run a panel. Recruiting, maintaining and running a panel are steps that are inextricably linked to one another and function as a whole. The standards today being established by important players in the industry will only yield high-quality panels if applied throughout the process. It is hard to achieve quality when running a panel which was badly recruited, and it is surely just as hard to achieve quality through running a panel which is not well-maintained. As a result, for the making of an online access panel a set of rules and standards has been acknowledged which addresses the entire panel handling process – from panel recruitment and panel maintenance to the ways of running an online access panel.

Recruitment

The two main variables in the paradigm of recruitment are the recruitment source and method and the recruitment questionnaire. In terms of the individual vs. household level, it is a fact that, in the consumer category, panels built at a household level – for which invitations are sent to entire households and the information stored in the database is available on all household members – are generally more profitable, enabling the targeting of the right person according to the specifics of the “product”.

Recruitment Source and Method

While the options for questions to be included in the recruitment questionnaire are as good as limitless, the availability of recruitment sources and methods is highly limited, especially for researchers that are keen on building high-quality panels and therefore against self-subscribing as a method of joining a panel. At first sight, looking at all possible combinations between the offline and online areas, there appear to be many recruitment methods to choose between. While market research companies that go in for online-to-online recruitment can choose between partnerships with Internet companies, email marketing/mass emailing (email list brokers), banner advertising, snowballing, text links, randomised pop-ups/web-site intercepts and search engine optimisation etc., those that stick to offline-to-online methods may count on telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, letters, fliers, faxes, newspaper advertising, omnibus, high-affinity specialty lists and niche marketing etc.

So in matters of recruitment, the range of possibilities is wide enough to cover both innovative methods, like web-site intercepts, and traditional methods, like face-to-face interviewing, thereby appealing both to the most conservative researchers still loyal to offline face-to-face recruitment and the most liberal of researchers that might even indulge in self-subscription.

However, from a theoretical point of view, offline recruitment through face-to-face interviewing is a very solid methodology but unfortunately so costly that most research companies do not see it as a realistic recruitment option. In effect, cost has made offline face-to-face recruitment ineligible.

On the other hand, online recruitment though self-subscription is a very cost-efficient method, but on a theoretical level it is inadequate. Both theory and experience have shown that self-subscribers make extremely skewed panellists. Generally speaking, people who seek panel membership themselves are either competitors or people who do it for incentives. Since neither of these are desirable and since nobody who wants to conduct and

deliver high-quality research can do so with a skewed panel, self-subscribing is a highly inadvisable method. Furthermore, from a theoretical point of view, this method should be prohibited since it contradicts the very principles of market research. The only good point about recruitment through self-subscription is that it helps recognise researchers who have made an effort to respect true standards of conducting market research.

As a consequence, we might say that the only suitable methodology of recruiting online panellists is online recruitment, either through mass emailing or pop-ups on large websites. Some practical recommendations for optimising recruitment efficiency through mass emailing by improving the discourse of the recruitment message will be provided in the section dedicated to the rhetoric of the online researcher (see chapter 3: *Launching the Bottle: The Rhetoric of the Online Researcher*, subchapter 1: *Recruitment Practices and Introductory Discourse*). In terms of using pop-ups and banners, the first advisable thing to do is to make sure the probability of the pop-up or banner appearing is low. Our suggestion is to maintain this probability at a level of 1 in 100 and to count a person who did not get the pop-up on a first attempt as ineligible for another. This will significantly decrease the risks of allowing the “unwanted” to join the panel. Unfortunately, a fully risk-proof method is yet to be found and the likelihood that such people will find ways to join the panel must be taken into account while being continuously reduced so as to make it as difficult as possible and hence not worth the effort.

Recruitment Questionnaire

With the recruitment questionnaire, recommendations are clearly easier to make. Since the people who have chosen to accept the invitation to join the panel may at any subsequent point reconsider their choice due to the length of the recruitment questionnaire, running a short questionnaire upfront is an equally efficient and elegant solution. Experience shows that using a short questionnaire upfront can increase panel size by 20-30%.

The policy is, however, not risk free. Having been first exposed to a short questionnaire, panellists can be left with the impression that they are expected to answer questionnaires of similar length throughout their activity. In other words, running short questionnaires first may delude future panellists, causing them to badly estimate the length of questionnaires they are going to be exposed to. As a consequence, the market researcher may discover at the end of the day that the people recruited were not really useful for what they were recruited for. However, on taking the second step

after the short questionnaire – enriching the data by conducting a second longer interview – it is common that complete information is only collected for less than half the panel. However, these are risks that can not be minimised: the longer questionnaire is a necessity; not only does it provide homogeneous information on all panellists upfront, it also ensures that the recruited panel can be relied on to answer 15-minute questionnaires without major complaints.

Management

Panel management is the real key to panel maintenance and the ultimate factor in deciding the variations in the life span of a panel. Where online access panels rarely live to reach two years of age and the variations in their life span generally depend on the way they are used, efficient panel management is a major asset.

Inefficient panel management thrives on the erroneous impression that panels die from overuse. On the contrary, panellists tend to drop online panels due to inactivity. Offering at least one survey per month is, therefore, a necessary minimum in order to keep a panel alive. Offering active membership is the only way to involve panellists; it is also the only way to find out average individual panellist response rates and thereby calculate disproportional outgoes for different target groups.

Roughly speaking, panel management starts by establishing clear panel rules and ends by respecting them. Efficient panel management through well established panel rules is the only way to understand panellist behaviour (who answers what and how often), control the panel and attain stability and response rates of at least 40%. Recruiting, maintaining and running an access panel is impossible without identifying response rates by target groups and keeping track of the most and least active target groups, the most and least used target respondents. This can only be achieved through efficient panel management.

Panel management surveys are a good way of cleaning panel data and keeping it homogeneous. An advisable time interval between two maintenance surveys addressed to the whole panel is three months, where one month is not feasible. The advisable number of questions on which to base a maintenance survey is fifteen, especially where the cost of incentives needs to be kept low.

Also, good panel management is the safest way to combat bogus panellists – seemingly plentiful in panels recruited through un-orthodox practices like self-recruitment. Of particular usefulness as a strategy of identi-

fyng and eliminating bogus panellists is a constant panel consistency check, a measure easy to implement by repeating maintenance survey questions from time to time. Of course, repeating maintenance survey questions is not the only way of looking for bogus panellists. Another method available, an interview length check, may also provide valuable panel maintenance information. An experienced researcher may have reasons to suspect that respondents who spend five minutes filling in twenty-minute interviews might be bogus panellists. In practice it is shown that this kind of panellist does not really express an opinion; all of their answers are average options on which they have spent an exactly similar amount of time. Identifying and eliminating bogus panellists is an attainable goal where well established panel management procedures can be applied.

Password Procedures

Surveys and individual panellist website pages are the two main areas where market research over the Internet requires password protection. Since it is respondents who use the passwords, it is for practical reasons that the principles of selecting passwords are respondent-oriented. Passwords should be both safe from the researchers' point of view and easy to use by respondents.

Surveys are probably easiest to protect and access by unique links of the type below:

<https://ipsos-interactive.com/survey/p1839/id2345pw39fg46464hj>
(dummy link)

Such links can easily be displayed in the invitation letter and used by the panellist addressed, while at the same time enabling the researcher to identify the project, panellist ID and unique password that is protecting the survey (in this case project no. 1839, ID no 2345 and the randomly created password 39fg46464hj respectively). This makes http links as convenient to researchers as to the respondents, who are only a click of the mouse away from the survey they have been invited to. There is also the added advantage that the interview can be interrupted at any point and resumed later on, with the link being disabled and never again used in relation to a survey after the questionnaire has been completed.

As to the individual panellist website page, panellists should be allowed to create their own password. Upon request, forgotten passwords should be automatically sent to the panellist's email address reported as active in the database.

Para Data Analysis

In terms of safety, para data or log-file analysis is the ultimate guarantee of quality with online panels. Unfortunately, a one hundred percent competitor-proof panel of respondents is not conceivable today. However carefully recruited, any panel runs the risk of counting competitors among its members – if not the competitor market research company itself, then at least its clients. If it is not feasible to recognise and reject competitors registered under pseudo identities and multiple aliases etc., then identifying and keeping these *would-be respondents* under control is simply a matter of panel management. The better the analysis of the para data, the higher the chances the market research company will be able to identify *would-be respondents* of any kind among its panel members.

Analysing log-files and para data requires a high level of IT expertise. Once this has been performed, the para data analysis is used to draw up black lists of all the IP addresses identified as contaminated, i.e. belonging to either competitors or clients. For example, as soon as smith@yahoo.com enters a survey from a competitor market research company IP network, Smith is removed from the panel automatically.

What remains is pure Internet detective work, where experience counts almost as much as intuition. A good tactician knows that anticipating your competitors is ultimately a matter of understanding their logic, which supposes intuition as well as experience. A good insight into the logic of *would-be respondents* can only be gained by studying where such respondents enter the survey, how much time they spend in the questionnaire etc. All such variables are valuable indexes of our respondents' psychology. Having a repeatedly short time interval between the accessing and closing of a survey, especially when associated with frequently nonsensical answers, could indicate that the panellist is only participating in order to collect incentives. Likewise, multiple-personality respondents can be identified by the time interval between ending a survey and starting another. An experienced detective-researcher knows that such respondents are inclined to err by throwing themselves at surveys: scarcely have they submitted a completed questionnaire before they start filling in another. For example, where respondent A finishes a survey at 6:01 pm and respondent B starts completing it also at 6:01 pm, both using the same IP address, this could be a case of multiple personality. This is where the use of para data analysis is crucial.

Attrition & Purge

Attrition is an index of panel mortality. Even where the new recruitment process has already been started, measuring attrition is crucial. Keeping continuous track of attrition rates is an inherent part of panel management procedures.

Purging is a cleaning procedure in which panellists defined as bad respondents are removed from the panel. Each market research company has its own purging rules involving different definitions of bad respondents and different levels of tolerance with inactive panellists. A possible definition of a bad responder could be *a panellist who does not answer five consecutive surveys in a period of at least three months*. However, this does not mean that a panellist that does not respond to eight surveys in a row in a seven-week period is a bad responder and should be purged. Each panel holding company is free to decide what is and what is not acceptable as a panel vacation and set panel rules accordingly. Whether the non-response limit is set to five consecutive surveys including vacations or ten consecutive surveys without vacations, the established panel rules should never be broken.

Response Rate & Response Control

Keeping track of response rates is like taking the pulse of a panel. As a basic panel management procedure, response rate analysis should be made on a continuous basis and accompanied by completion rate analysis per project. This enables the market research company that holds the panel to take action when results do not meet established targets.

It is crucial that permanently updated information should be available at panel as well as project level regarding:

- Number of mails sent to members
- Number of panel members who opened the questionnaire
- Number of panel members who were screened out
- Number of panel members who dropped out
- Number of panel members who completed the survey

By constantly measuring these indicators at the same time as evaluating the opportunities to constantly improve the system, response rates can be efficiently improved in the long run.

Generally, 50-60% is a wished-for response rate for an average study. Figures may vary, however, according to the topic of the survey, interview length and field period. Generally, the summer holiday period is the least favourable to online surveys.

Response rates also vary according to panel membership age. While generally higher at the beginning of a panellist's "panel lifetime", they tend to drop towards the end of the panel membership period. The high novelty coefficient may explain the interest in surveys shown by newly-recruited panellists as translated into response rates, which during the first five months of panel membership can reach levels as high as 75-85%.

Sampling

Essentially, the quality of market research can be traced back to the quality of sampling. Though a complex process, sampling today can be turned into a simple equation which uses proper tools. Today's professional sampling tools involve panel rules that take account of panel usage for each individual panellist. In the US, the proficiency of sampling tools may even involve measuring each panellist's likelihood to answer and create a disproportional outgo¹.

The mathematical formulae behind sample algorithms are rather simple. A profile is selected according to the demographics indicated; the algorithm checks the availability of the sample in the database according to the specific panel rules and then performs the randomising according to the final number that needs to be extracted from each cell. Where a disproportional outgo file needs to be created, it also checks each selected target's likelihood to answer. However basic, the ability to draw correct samples is not something that counts among the assets of all market research companies, most of whom insist on doing it using Excel or SPSS, two software programs which are not master in this specific area.

However, performing quality sampling does not hinge entirely on drawing correct samples. Without strict control of the sample, insights into sampling and quota samples would be incomplete:

¹ The disproportional outgo is a method of deliberately skewing the mail-out file according to respondents' likelihood to answer. For instance, previous knowledge that the response rate with male panellists is about 40%, while for female panellists it is 60%, enables you to draw your sample by selecting more male and fewer female panellists in order to achieve the right balance.

Complex sampling + High response rate (> 40%) = Well-balanced quotas

Simple sampling + Low response rate (< 40%) = Fulfilled quotas with bias

A seemingly correct quota can in fact prove to contain wholly wrong data unless all other information about the sampled panellist has been carefully checked. It is necessary that all control variables not used for the quota setting – Internet age, education, work status, etc. – be checked when obtaining the sample file. Fulfilled quotas are not a guarantee of well-balanced samples.

Professional sampling software and experienced sampling executives operating on databases of the most important panellist information are still the safest guarantors of quality sampling and, implicitly, quality market research.

Panel Rules

A well established collection of panel rules is a *sine qua non* of good panel management. Efficient panel management ensures a panel is kept up and running by keeping panellists' interest high and at the same time prevents respondents from becoming professional, after which it is generally acknowledged that the ability to anticipate and control in respondents renders market research useless. Following this line of thought, the discourse in which researchers discard the use of access panels as a methodology of conducting market research has often been grounded in the undermining effect of repeatedly used respondents. These researchers have often used the danger of professional respondents as a core counter-argument to the development of the access panels industry.

Clearly, professionalism in respondents to research surveys is a factor which can compromise the value of research conducted through access panels. As a consequence, panel respondents that specialise in different types of surveys and develop the ability to recognise and provide the "right" answers so as not to be screened out cast doubt over the validity of survey results and jeopardise the whole of the panel research industry. The ability to keep a panel under control is a prerequisite of market researchers using access panels. Beside invitation letters and screening questions, a clear set of panel rules provides the best means of control. Through well set-up panel rules, panel management can become sufficiently efficient to completely discourage the reversal of roles in the panel paradigm.

As a minimum, panel rules should address the areas below. All recommendations are made according to rules of thumb rather than established industry standards.

- Amount of invitations sent to the respondents. As already mentioned, using a panel on a low frequency basis is a prejudice. Between low usage and over usage, five days is an advisable time interval between two invitation letters. Accordingly, four to six invitations per month is a reasonable amount. However, since establishing panel rules is a company-related business, there are no general standards to regulate the time interval a market research company should allow a panellist between two invitations to surveys.
- Amount of completed interviews. Again, a reasonable number here is two completed interviews per month. Applying this rule to a well-balanced panel results in a number of twenty-five interviews per panellist per year. Today, however, a number of ten interviews per panellist per year can already be counted as extremely successful and profitable, making less than one time per month a good number to aim for, especially where the risks of overusing different target groups in the panel are high. As a matter of fact, counting out maintenance interviews, most panels today do not run more than 1-2 interviews per year. The growth potential of the research industry is still extremely big.
- Panellist category. Combating professional panellists starts by avoiding the use of respondents from the same category on a very frequent basis. Once a month is a safe interval based on the rule of thumb that people tend to forget the questions they answered thirteen days after a completed survey.
- Survey category. A period of 3 months between two surveys of the same category and type is an advisable quarantine time. Exceptions to this are very common, however, especially in concept testing, which is not a very sensitive area. Studies where specific techniques have been used to disguise the real purpose of the survey, like the Ipsos-ASI commercial pre-testing techniques for examples, may even require one-time respondents. Such respondents may never again qualify for similar studies.
- Type of survey associated with sensitivity to brand recall and recognition. Online tracking studies require specific rules. Six to twelve months is an advisable quarantine period for panellists taking part in tracking studies, though there may also be tracking studies which require one-time respondents.
- Screening. Screened out respondents are generally not counted as interviewed panellists. However, panel rules related to survey category and type must also be applied to screened-out respondents.

Communication

While a worthy subject for a whole book, here we will tackle panel communication only as one of the core elements that make an online access panel what it is. As a subchapter meant in part to define rather than analyse, it is merely an attempt to define panel communication by limiting it to a number of areas: support communication, direct communication (recruitment and snowballing letters, staging messages, invitations to surveys and letters to winners), unsubscribing membership procedures, terms and conditions, and questionnaire and screening questions.

Support Communication

Promptness in answering support emails is the most prominent indicator of quality in terms of panel maintenance performance. This is an area where each research company is open to establish its own standards and respect the routines as it sees fit.

Some recommend between 24 and 48 hours as a reasonable time interval between received support email and answered support email. Longer intervals may convey a sense of disinterest on the part of the market research company and result in the disinterest of the panellist. Simple though this may sound, it can in fact turn into a complex problem when the market research company owns panels in tens of countries with tens of languages and hundreds of thousands of people. As a result, we can essentially call panel communication a handful of centralised procedures of culture and language-bound response. Answering panellists in any other language than their mother tongue is a practice we strongly discourage while at the same time insisting on the benefits of centralising procedures of support response.

The same principle is advisable to use when it comes to panellist newsletters. Sending constant newsletters to panellists in their local language is a highly recommended practice. As a policy with many benefits, of which some will be discussed in detail in chapter 3 (see chapter 3, subchapter 6: Newsletters and Panellist Homepage), the so-called panellist newsletter involves an excellent strategy of involving panellists: it offers panellists the “results” of some of the surveys they have taken part in. This is easy to achieve by adding some PR questions on the monthly panel maintenance surveys posted on the panellist website; the results to such surveys can be turned into valuable material for use in the monthly panellist newsletters.

Featuring an informative website is also crucial when running a proper online access panel. Discussed as essential panel communication practice

in subchapter 6 (Newsletters and Panellist Homepage), panellist websites use is increasing in the industry. Although a valuable interface between researcher and panellist, care should be taken that panellist websites do not become an interface between panellists. As we will be attempting to show in our book, panellists should clearly be encouraged to feel part of the online access panel community; however, this only addresses the relationship between panellist and researcher. We do not believe it would be worthwhile to start counting the consequences of encouraging panellists to interact with one another.

Direct Communications

Recruitment and snowballing letters, staging messages, invitations to surveys and letters to winners make up the core area to which panel communication is circumscribed. They will be skipped at this point, but will be defined and analysed at length in chapter 3, a section entirely dedicated to the analysis of direct communication between the research company and its panellists.

Unsubscribing Membership

Even well-managed panels can suffer from unsubscribing. A panel is a living organ subject to permanent change. Unsubscribing panellists represent a natural stage in the process of becoming of a panel, which is meant to be joined permanently by some and left by others.

However, it is important to leave unsubscribers with a good impression. Good panel management involves simple unsubscribing procedures and clear rules for handling leaving members. Professionalism in managing the unsubscribing panellist does not only promote the image of the research company to the benefit of both the company and the market research industry in general, it also functions as a trigger for people to return. It is, therefore, always advisable to send a letter to the people who want to leave the panel, informing them straight away that the deletion of their file is in progress and reassuring them that they will never again be contacted for surveys after deletion of their records from the panel database. Including a cancellation opportunity in this informative support letter, however, is a simple but efficient trick to use, along the lines of “If you have meanwhile changed your mind and want to retain your panel membership, please click here”. Loyalty is experienced differently by each person and the number of people who need to be offered a second chance is larger than expected.

Terms & Conditions

As a protection against any possible legal action which might be taken against the company, it is of the utmost importance that a proper contract is signed with the panellist. It is very important that people submit their acceptance of the market research company's terms and conditions and that the market research company store this in their database. In practice, this is the only strategy available to online market research companies that can ensure the legal protection of market research through online panels. For research companies, who are extra sensitive in this respect, a double opt-in procedure, in which panellists are exposed to the Terms & Conditions page on two different occasions and their acceptance click also recorded twice, is advisable.

However general in their content and easy to apply by all representatives of the market research industry, the terms and conditions suggested below should be checked with a local legal advisor and adjusted to address the local legislation of the panel home-country.

The sample contract below includes the so-called basic terms and conditions agreed upon by the market research company and each of its panel members. Given the opportunities the online medium offers researchers in gathering all the information that needs to be communicated on a website, the pages of which can easily be accessed via links, the membership terms and conditions contract can easily be included in a larger context and accompanied by extensive additional information in terms of required references and details. However, while it can be beneficial to provide as much information as possible, doing this upfront may prove to be unwise. The first impression is always important, and it is commonly considered boring, if not downright frightening, to go through an extensive terms and conditions text. With even the idea of reading through long pages of terms and conditions being a possibly tiring exercise, it is advisable to divide the text, something which is easy to do online.

Sample Membership Contract in Panellist Website Context

X is a market research company that carries out Internet-based surveys on behalf of our clients in (INSERT PANEL HOME-COUNTRY) and other countries. We conduct market research in a number of different areas such as new TV commercials and new products.

X guarantees its members that it only takes part in research studies according to the guidelines set by marketing research bodies.

You have been invited by X to become a member of the X Online Panel. You will be able to participate in online studies, express your opinions on new products and services. As you participate in these studies, you collect points that you can exchange for high street vouchers or you can enter the many prize draws.

To become a Member of X Online Panel, you need to be a resident of supportmail@company.com and be 16 years of age or more.

To our members we are offering the chance to participate today in the evolution of the services and products of tomorrow. Your voice represents the voice of thousands!

Data Protection Guarantee

We guarantee that all information you give us will be treated in the strictest confidence and in accordance with the Data Protection Act. As part of this undertaking, we guarantee that we will not try to sell you anything or pass your name on to anyone else, your individual responses to surveys will remain anonymous and only used after grouping with other confidential responses; refusal to answer a particular question will have no consequences with regard to your Panel membership. However, we reserve the right to withdraw you from our panel and erase your points account completely if you do not respond to any survey we send you within a period of 2 months. Please remember that if for any reason you are unable to answer surveys for a longer period you can inform us either by email to supportmail@company.com or telephone. You can ask to be removed from the panel at any time. Once you have submitted your unsubscribe request you have one month to redeem your points and exchange them for high street vouchers or gifts. At the end of this period your points account will be automatically deleted. You are entitled to obtain cancellation or correction of any data we keep on your household.

This data can only be used for statistical or research purposes. You have the right to have access your personal data, modify or delete it.

By completing this membership registration you agree to be bound by our membership terms and conditions. Please read these terms and conditions in advance.

Membership Terms and Conditions

I have read the Terms and Conditions above and I accept them:

Yes

No

Rules for the Participants in the X Online Panel

X is a leading market research company focused on online research and data collection. Our experience in online research and close work with our clients entitles us label our solutions as among the most creative available in the field.

Some of our surveys are performed by using a panel made up of people (hereafter called panellists) who answer questionnaires on the Internet by accessing the links that X or the research institute sends to members of the panel via email.

Entrance to the Panel

Everybody is free to subscribe to the X Online Panel and apply for entrance. We still reserve the right to deny any person entrance to the panel without being in any way bound to justify any such rejection. Under no circumstances can employees of X enter the panel themselves.

Registering of Background Information

In order to provide the statistical analysis that X or its clients deliver to their clients, X requires certain demographic background information about the panellists, of which some is confidential information regarding, for example, income. Providing X with this background information is a condition of participation in the panel. All panellists must consent to X registering their data in the database.

Exit and Deletion from the Panel

Panellists may at any point express their wish to leave the panel and thereafter will no longer receive emails from X and its clients. Shortly afterwards, this person's background data will be deleted from X's database.

If a panellist has not answered any questionnaires for a period of the 12 months he/she is declared inactive. X reserves the right to delete inactive panellists from the panel.

In order to be able to guarantee the quality of the statistical analysis delivered by X or its clients, they need to be able to change the members of the panel. X expects this process of changing panel members to apply to about 20% of panellists per year. X has the right to delete a panellist from the panel without advance warning or having to justify its decision afterwards.

How Does the Panel Function?

All participants in the X Online panel consent to X or its clients sending them emails with links to questionnaires. There is no obligation for a panellist to answer the questionnaires. The questionnaires are only to be answered once. If X has no phone line for answering a panellist's questions, they are kindly asked to send their questions by email to support-mail@company.com

X has taken high data safety measures. However, should any emails sent to panellists contain viruses, it must be accepted that X or its client are not to be held responsible for any consequences thereof and that no compensation may be claimed for any such reasons.

Neither X nor its clients are bound to send questionnaires to all panellists for each new survey. Nor can X guarantee either a minimum or a maximum number of questionnaires that will be sent out per year.

When a statistically proper number of panellists have answered a questionnaire, X or its clients has the right to end the survey and reject further answers.

Registering of Answers in Surveys

Apart from panellist background information, X or its clients will also gather and have other kinds of data on panellists at their disposal, all of which is inferred from panellist answers. This information can be private information, i.e. political opinions, whereby X respects the personal data law.

Panellists agree to the X registering the answers they have given to X or its clients in relation to the surveys with a view to later use in order to perform statistical analyses, these answers being known to contain private information about the panellist. In this respect, panellists must again observe the right whereby each panellist must give up answering any questionnaire reached by following a link sent by X or its clients.

All panellists are entitled to request to see information held by X about him/herself. If a panellist discovers data held about him/herself to be incorrect, he/she is entitled to demand that the relevant correction be made.

In some surveys, X may require answers from specific target groups made up of respondents picked from among the panellists. In such cases, all panellists must consent to X or its clients using the data on them in order to be able to select the members of the required specific target group.

Rewarding Panellists for Answering Internet Questionnaires

Refusal to answer a question will have no consequences with regard to your panel membership. However, we reserve the right to withdraw you from our panel and erase your points account completely if you do not respond to a survey we send to you within 2 months. Please remember that if for any reason you are unable to answer surveys for a long period, you can inform us of this either by email to supportmail@company.com or telephone.

You can ask to be removed from the panel at any time. Once you have submitted your unsubscribe request, you will have one month to redeem your points and exchange them for high street vouchers or gifts. At the end of this period your points account will be deleted automatically.

Forwarding of Registered Data

All panellists must consent to X forwarding registered background information and answers to another market research institute. However, that market research institute will observe the condition whereby the panel can only be used for statistical purposes and is bound not to forward or further disclose any data such as name, postal address or other personal information that could serve to identify a specific panellist.

Participation Conditions

X reserves the right to change the present “Conditions for participation in X.com panel”.

All panellists will be informed of any alteration to the conditions as soon as possible, i.e. the first time they answer a questionnaire after X or its clients have decided to make the alteration.

Validity Period

The contract is valid until further notice, with a period of notice of 10 days applicable to both parties. Cancellation notices will be sent by email.

Questionnaire

Special attention should always be paid to features that ensure the user-friendly character of the questionnaire. First on the list is the presence of a button which allows the panellist to terminate the survey at any time. This is a must. Technical tricks, whereby Windows buttons are removed and the

respondent forced to answer all questions or reboot the computer, should definitely be avoided in access panels. These types of measures, however appealing in the short term, could have severe consequences in terms of trust, attrition rates and ultimately panel mortality; as such they are not recommended.

It is however highly inadvisable to extend the “freedom” given to respondents in the questionnaire area to include the option of skipping questions, moving backwards and forwards within the questionnaire and changing answers that were already given. Ultimately, allowing respondents to anticipate questions and reconsider first reactions casts doubt on the value of research, not to mention that such “freedom” misses the point of the online access panel: online access panellists have agreed to give their views on the questions asked; when a specific question needs to be answered, it is asked in the context of a survey; when a respondent does not want to answer that question, he/she has the right to terminate the survey.

Allowing respondents complete “freedom” in the questionnaire area would have consequences not only at a theoretical level, where the spontaneity coefficient of the research would be denied and its value jeopardised, but also on a practical level, where brand awareness and screening questions would be rendered useless. How easy would it be for respondents to go back, after seeing the full brand list, to the initial brand awareness question and supply the “right” answers?

Screening Questions

A research study for which the target is *female heads of household who use a Sony Ericsson mobile phone on a daily basis* is clearly a study for which respondents need to be screened. Unfortunately, some researchers still consider the example below to be an adequate screening question:

Q1: Are you a female head of household who uses a Sony Ericsson mobile phone on a daily basis?

1. Yes
2. No

Normally, this screening question should be made in four steps:

Q1: Gender

1. Male
2. Female

Q2: Which of the following best describes you?

1. I am mainly responsible for the grocery shopping of the household
2. I share the responsibility for the grocery shopping of the household
3. I am not responsibility for the grocery shopping of the household

Q3: How often do you use a mobile phone?

1. I do not have a mobile phone
2. I use a mobile phone less than once a week
3. I use a mobile phone 1-6 days a week
4. I use a mobile phone daily
5. Don't know

IF Q1=2 AND Q2=1 AND Q3=4

Q4: Which of the following mobile phone brands do you mainly use?

1. Alcatel
2. Nokia
3. Motorola
4. Samsung
5. Siemens
6. Sony Ericsson
7. Other

In our case, a correctly screened sample can only be defined by four screening questions. On the one hand, this is the only safe way to avoid counting opportunistic panellists among your respondents, where the panel has not been recruited in an entirely orthodox way and is not entirely free of bogus panellists. On the other hand, we should never underestimate the capacity of today's panellists to see through a screening question, not to mention their ability to identify a professional tone on the part of their interlocutor in an area they might be expected to have grown familiar with like market research.

Global Coverage and Size

Size is one of the most controversial issues with online access panels, especially since in recent years most online researchers have concentrated on

size-related rather than quality-related matters. Significant though they may be when compared to quality issues, and despite often being ranked as a top priority on the basis of highly misinterpreted and wholly incorrect information, size matters are in fact of secondary importance. Regardless of this, many panel suppliers on the market, especially mega database companies, claim to be able to offer panels of millions of people. Given what we have said earlier in this subchapter in respect of the mandatory features of what can be called an online access panel, this is not credible. Moreover, panel size itself is a concept which can have three different readings:

1. Household level (counted as one gold member or initial subscriber to the panel for each household).

The data registered on gold members is:

- Unique e-mail address
- Background info available
- Clear opt-in into the panel – these are the people who have confirmed agreement to participate

2. Both households or gold members and registered individuals (individuals not yet recruited as panellists but whose willingness to become panel members has been expressed by already recruited members). As no acceptance has been physically submitted by these people and no direct relationship initiated, the information held about registered individuals is in many cases limited to:

- Name-Gender-Age
- Inactive confirmed agreement to participate

3. Reach (the number of individuals which can theoretically be contacted using the available email addresses). As merely an average of the household size in the given country, in practice this number represents people who have never agreed to take part in surveys. For all its purely theoretical value, this is in fact the number published by most research agencies in an attempt to make the size of their panels seem bigger.

Size is a feature which does not or should not sell a panel. As any good practitioner knows, when dealing with panels, size is almost irrelevant if judged alone; it is panel quality which helps size sell the panel. However, given the threefold reading of the concept of panel size, all negotiations and debates dealing with panel size issues should first make clear the meaning of the word in the discussion

context. The first figures to be laid on the table are far from representing the real size of a panel and even further from indicating its quality. The first thing to check is whether the size referred to points to the number of people recruited initially or to the household size of the initially recruited people. Another way is to check the household size against the number of interviews conducted on the panel per year or the company's turnover on the panel. Either way, a clear image of the real size of a panel can only be gathered after a thorough checking of the figures.

Incentive Policies

Panellists should not be panel members for the sake of incentives and if they are, this does not make them interesting as panel members. A panellist who is recruited and remains a panellist for extrinsic reasons can hardly be relied on, if only due to their focusing on the benefits of completing a survey rather than on the survey itself. Instead, panellists recruited by intrinsic motivation are expected to focus on the survey. Consequently, incentives should never be more than simple appreciation of the effort put into to answering surveys, especially since there is hardly ever a proper reward for the time spent filling in.

It is important, however, that this appreciation be given in terms that mix panellist-oriented criteria with criteria convenient to the market research company. Retention levels with online access panels can easily be raised by refining the incentive strategies applied to each individual panel. Although difficult at first sight, this is not an impossible task to achieve when taking into account the preferences already noticed by experienced researchers in terms of different social and age groups for certain incentive policies. Older females, for instance, are more likely to be positive about donations to charity than young men, while highly-educated high-income groups tend to be more positive about receiving a top line report on surveys they have answered than about a lottery ticket. Even where the researcher is not sufficiently experienced to make such observations, it is always possible to ask and find out your panellists' preferences and interests and then target incentives towards their areas of interest. Admittedly, this strategy could considerably increase panel stability and panellist loyalty.

Where experience has proven that different social groups are stimulated by different incentive methodologies, favouring one methodology or the other involves the risk of attracting just one particular social class and

thereby missing the opportunity of balancing the panel. A better understanding of the incentive types which are most likely to address the different target groups within an access panel can be expected to contribute to balancing the panel.

Clearly, the incentive policy mentioned in the recruitment letter is very important in panellist expectations of each of the research studies they are invited to. It is therefore recommended to base the recruitment letter on a multi-incentive policy that appeals to as many target categories as possible. Of course, if the recruitment process itself only targets a certain category, it is then only natural that the incentive policy mentioned in the recruitment letter is that which is considered most appealing to the respective target group according to preliminary research conducted before launching the recruitment campaign.

All in all, a good panel should be supported by a complex incentive policy comprising all possible methodologies: points, incentives per complete questionnaire, prize draws, gifts, donations to charity, shopping vouchers, feedback, top line reports about the main findings etc.

Background Information

As already mentioned, there are two ways of approaching a recruitment questionnaire: (1) using first a short recruitment questionnaire and gathering further data about the panellists at some later point; and (2) directly employing a longer, thirty or forty-question questionnaire. While the first approach is a sure-fire way of quickly increasing panel size, the second has lower recruitment rates but compensates for this with much richer background data pertaining to the panellist and a higher stability of the response rates over the long run.

Where the first approach is chosen, the minimum information that needs to be collected is:

- Full Name
- Gender
- Region
- Age (day/year of birth)
- Postal code + house number (for validity checks and removal of duplicates)
- Household size

All information collected must be kept up to date, making a yearly updating procedure necessary. This is easy to accomplish with monthly or quarterly panel maintenance surveys.

Where additional background information is gathered, the range of panellists to which this applies should be made clear. There have been many incidents where endless lists of so-called additional data about the panel have turned out to contain information applicable only to small numbers of panel members.

Therefore no statement about additional background data should be taken as valid unless it indicates both the panel range to which the data applies and the accuracy coefficient of the information collected.

What Doesn't Make an Online Access Panel?

The same nine criteria applied in the previous subchapter to discover what makes an online access panel will be applied here to investigate the way mega databases respond to the standards of conducting good primary research as compared to online access panels. We need therefore only give an overview rather than a thorough analysis of the universe of access panels and mega databases in terms of recruitment, management, sampling, panel rules, communication, global coverage, size, costs and incentive policy, and, last but not least, available information.

Recruitment

Before jumping to further speculation, the recruitment area supports a clear-cut distinction. As shown in practice, access panels allow for recruitment via a number of means (offline and online) including email lists, pop-up surveys, telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, omnibus and snowball; companies using mega databases are left with the rather controversial method of self-recruitment. Beside the consequences of self-recruitment for the quality of research in terms of both sample and honesty, self-recruitment is far from being a competitor-proof method, and that, we are forced to admit, can have huge consequences.

We believe the following grids will make it easier to understand a number of other striking differences between access panels and mega databases:

Access Panels

- Target: build a REP panel according to national statistics
- Standard variables for all panellists
- Harmonisation of the variables and classifications for all countries
- Not submitted to ads, banners, etc.
- Information at household AND individual level
- Using access panels enables building of sub-panels
- Access panels offer response rates of 40 to 60%

Mega Databases

- Target: be as big as possible
- Only the main demos are sometimes standard. Most variables are not qualified for all addresses.
- Data are not harmonised (occupation, market size, social level etc.) and vary by country
- Can be submitted to ads during the recruitment process and on the mega DB website
- Information at individual level only
- Since the mega DBs have very limited if any updated information on their members, they can not be used to build sub-panels.
- Mega DBs offer response rates of only 2 to 10% and no correct drop out analysis.

Management

The management area is also not favourable to mega databases. The management of access panels vs. mega databases raises first of all the question of IT security. While the IT security of a panel allows for strict control through use of DMZ, firewalls, protection against hackers and backups etc., a mega database allows for no strict control of IT security whatsoever. We can gain a better perspective on other such differences by means of a similar grid:

Access Panels

- Maintenance variables are created to analyse the return and attrition rate in order to ensure coherence and consistency of the data

Mega Databases

- Maintenance variables not available

- Check and cleaning of the main data used for sampling – coherence analysis
- Standard DB model applied worldwide: coherence of the data stored
- Hundreds of variables screened for the clients
- All variables are updated regularly
- DB is held centrally in Europe. By applying the same methods and tools, the quality is the same in all countries
- Control of the age of the data
- Ongoing purging of bad respondents (every 5 studies)
- Calculation of the REP part of the panel used to calculate quotas for all studies
- Assessment of panel structure against the national demo structures and online structures in order to minimise biases
- No checking and cleaning of the main data available
- DB can be stored in any DB format
- No screening of variables available – no back tracking data stored
- Only some variables are updated, and usually not for the whole DB
- Commercial agreements with local suppliers, meaning different recruitments, methods and tools
- No control of the age of the data
- No purging of bad respondents available
- No calculation of the REP part of the respondents available
- No assessment of the DB structure available

Sampling

Thanks endless discussions, books, articles and seminar papers, the role of sampling in research does not need to be covered, least of all here. Briefly, however, there are more than a few points that speak in favour of the superiority of access panels over mega databases:

Access Panels

- Powerful tools for sampling
- Ability to calculate multi-cell crossed balanced samples
- Very detailed reports on the sample: variables used in calculating the sample plus any other control variable in the DB
- ALL panellists can be selected for a sample since the variables are completed for the whole panel
- Selection of REP populations for small groups
- Very clearly defined usage policy rules
- Samples can eliminate panellists who have RECEIVED or ANSWERED a questionnaire
- Ability to calculate representative QUOTAS for the general population
- Possibility to create complex rules to prioritise the selected panellists, depending on their usage policy, response rates, etc.
- Ability to eliminate responses to previous studies
- Response rate differences per group can be considered in the sample, disproportional outgo

Mega Databases

- Basic selection of the DB using criteria
- Marginal quotas only
- No reports on the sample available
- Only a part of the DB is selected depending on the criteria needed for the sample
- Selection of groups based on the client websites, allowing for strong biases
- No policy rules available
- No elimination policy available
- The client needs to know the quotas they are looking for; no balance algorithm used to generate the sample
- No possibility to create rules available
- No ability to eliminate responses to previous studies available – study results are not stored.
- No response rate differences per group available – no analysis per response rate

Rules

As an organised universe, a panel of respondents is defined by a set of rules that members agree to abide by and which protects them from a number of factors that can affect members of mega databases, for example commercial offers, ads, high frequency of studies due to complete lack of contact control or sending of their addresses to other competitors etc. Furthermore, researchers who use mega databases have no control over the participants in their studies, being unable to identify competitors among email addresses used and to provide active recruitment or keep panellist history (only panels can be used for longitudinal/loyalty studies).

Communication

Communication is one of the subtlest and most sensitive areas, while at the same time being extremely prolific when it comes to discussing the differences between access panels and mega databases.

It has been said that the access panel is a database of respondents to which effective communication is applied. We will leave all related psychological issues for the subsequent three chapters of the book; suffice it to say here that communication provides access panels with at least four main advantages over mega databases:

- Access panels accurately reflect the demographic or regional image requested by the client.
- Access panels are more effective in reaching the target requested by the client.
- Access panels provide assistance, thus ensuring the quality of the answers.
- Access panels have longer life expectancy, allowing for the tracking of behavioural changes over longer periods of time.

In fact it is with communication where the dramatic difference between access panels and mega databases reaches its highest level of transparency.

Assistance is a key word in relation to access panels but impossible to apply to mega databases. Panellists, as opposed to respondents selected from mega databases, are assisted throughout the process of participation, completing the survey, and feedback and information updating.

Global Coverage and Size

In terms of global coverage the distinction is more than clear: access panels target a representative population (through the specific recruitment of non-Internet groups: old people, rural etc.), while mega databases target core Internet users.

In terms of size there are four differences:

Access Panels	Mega Databases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size depends on clients' needs and panellist usage rules • Try to be REP or partly REP on demos AND Internet usage criteria • Medium size: the goal is to be able to target small populations • Size is defined at household and individual level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximise the size, according to the principle: "Ours is the biggest!" • No attempt to be REP available • Large size: can target very small populations, less than 5% • Size is defined at individual level only

Incentive Policies and Prices

Panels offer a mix of incentives: points, lotteries, charities and vouchers. Mega databases mainly use lotteries, though they sometimes use points. This should be viewed in terms of the goals of the two methods: mega database users target low cost rather than longitudinal info and good response rates. The price of panels is not low. On average it is the same as the traditional market research price, commonly 15-25% lower than CATI, due to the costs of panel maintenance. Studies that use mega databases, however, cost on average the same as online business prices.

Available Information

Access Panels	Mega Databases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance variables • Consistency of the data • Only panel sources: national statistical institutes data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No maintenance variables available – they are not double-checked • Large variations in the data • Can be linked to other sources' DBs with agreement of the DB owners and their clients: postal sectors, socio types etc.

Conclusions – EFAMRO Quality Standards for Access Panels (QSAP)

A methodology of increasing use in the field of market research, access panels have turned from a field under construction into one under formulation. Setting standards of quality in this area is therefore a question of prime necessity, meant not just to urge the market research industry toward new standards of professionalism but also to protect it from dangers inherent to any phenomenon exposed to a rapid growth.

The contribution of a working party which has involved some of the most important actors in the field, *The Quality Standards for Access Panels* issued by EFAMRO² is an officially recognized ISO quality standard for market research worldwide. In the context where ESOMAR³ has almost finished its third version of guidelines for conducting research on the Internet, this implementable guideline is expected to regulate the use of

² Established in 1992, EFAMRO is a federation representing the largest research agencies in Europe. It was formed in response to the growth of International Research urging the Market Research Industry to follow, apart from the data protection legislation, a European set of Quality Standards. In contrast to ESOMAR, which can only formulate guidelines, EFAMRO can, upon acceptance by the local industry organizations, impose guidelines on its members.

³ ESOMAR is the world's leading market research association and is recognised as the premier international industry advocate. Founded in 1948 as the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research, ESOMAR now unites 4,000 members, both clients and providers of market research, in over 100 countries, making it the only organisation that unites market research professionals on a worldwide level. ESOMAR members come from a wide range of industry sectors, including advertising, media, government, consumer, environmental, educational and social bodies.

ESOMAR endeavours to facilitate the exchange of insights and experiences between providers and users of market research to optimise use of research data into the decision making process.

Through its codes and guidelines, ESOMAR pioneers for the protection of research respondents' privacy, irrespective of the techniques or technology used to carry out the research.

All ESOMAR members, as well as their company contact details, are listed in the ESOMAR Directory and undertake to comply with the ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice. The Code has been jointly drafted by ESOMAR and the International Chamber of Commerce and is endorsed by the major national professional bodies around the world.

access panels as a methodology of conducting market research. Annexing it to our book (see Appendix 4) is less a question of confirmation of the standards we have been attempting to infer all along the present chapter and more one of synthesis of the minimum quality an online access panel is supposed to have to be taken into account as such and used for market research. The same standards of quality will be recognized in the Access Panel Quality Checklist annexed before (see Appendix 2) and in the Checklist of Procedures (see Appendix 3). The Access Panel Quality Checklist basically is a list of questions which might help assess the quality of an online access panel, being therefore handy to use by market research companies buying or using other companies' online access panels.

CHAPTER 2:

Bottling Communication: The Rhetoric of Online Interviewing

Prologue

When John and Thomas, for instance, are talking together, it is natural enough that among the six there should be more or less confusion and misapprehension [...]

[...] there are at least six personalities distinctly to be recognised as taking part in that dialogue between John and Thomas.

Three Johns

- 1. The real John; known only to his Maker.*
- 2. John's ideal John; never the real one, and often very unlike him.*
- 3. Thomas's ideal John; never the real John, nor John's John, but often very unlike either.*

Three Thomas

- 1. The real Thomas*
- 2. Thomas's ideal Thomas*
- 3. John's ideal Thomas*

From *Autocrat at the Dinner Table*, by Oliver Wendell Holmes

From Linguistic Behaviour to Social Roles

Intended as a brief outline of the theoretical background to the following subchapter, this subchapter adopts a sociological approach to communication while tackling sociological problems with the aid of the pragmatist philosophy.

By avoiding a pretend exhaustive venturing into the world of communication theories, it directly attributes *meaning* a functionalist reading. If it

does so, it is because questioning *meaning* to address an analysis of communication in terms of relation and psychology is neither a matter of *what* nor an issue of *why*. Rather it is a problem of ***how meaning arises out of the interaction between people***. The following subchapter will transfer issues of *meaning* and communication to the world of computer-mediated interaction. The question posed in subchapter two will therefore become more precise: **how does meaning arise from computer-mediated interaction and, more precisely, from the interaction between researcher and panellist in online market research?**

If there is a language of online panel research, as we have also concluded in the three subchapters of this section, the following two sections of the book will examine that language, investigating the relations that arise from it.

G.H. Mead's Sociology

Mead⁴ is a pragmatist who decodes meaning in terms of action. Inspired by Charles H. Cooley's line of thought (the imaginings people have of each

⁴ Overtly pragmatic in his theories, Mead conceives of mind as arising from within the social process of communication. Mind is a form of participation in an interpersonal process; it is through participation in the social act of communication that the individual realises his or her (psychological and neurological) potential for significantly symbolic behaviour (i.e. thought). To use Mead's terms, mind is the individualised focus of the communication process, so it is linguistic behaviour on the part of the individual. There is no "mind or thought without language" and language (the content of mind) "is only a development and product of social interaction". (Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 191-192)

Language is also the birthplace of the self.

With language being communication via "significant symbols" and the individual being able to take the attitudes of others towards himself through significant communication, language is not only a "necessary mechanism" of mind, but also the primary social foundation of the self. "I know of no other form of behaviour than the linguistic in which the individual is an object to himself". (Ibidem, 142)

The *me* and the *I* are both phases of the self. The *me* is the social phase, "the organised set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (Ibidem, 175), while the *I* is a response to the *me*, the *novel reply* of the individual to the *generalised other*. (Ibidem, 197)

With Mead, the macro-sociological issue of the dialectic relation between society and the individual finds its echo in a similarly dialectic micro-sociological space; the "creative response" given by the *I* to the roles derived from the symbolic process of language interaction and internalised through the *me* enacts at a psychic level the vast pattern of social relations.

other are the solid facts of society) and elaborated on the basis of Charles Peirce's semiotic triad of meaning (there is always a gesture – a sound, say – made by one organism and directed at another; a response by the other; and the resulting act in response to the original gesture), Mead's sociology of thinking is father to a multi-version sociological theory: **symbolic interactionism**. (Collins 1994: 256-260)

The School of Symbolic Interactionism (SI)

Genuine enough to boast of a high impact on sociology, George Herbert Mead's line of thought gave birth to a sociological school acknowledged as the most enduring and important in North America: Symbolic Interactionism.

Symbolic interactionists have based a coherent view of the interactions between people on the use of symbols in communication and interaction, as well as on interpretation seen as part of action. They conceive of the self as constructed by others through communication and interaction, endowing social processes with complete flexibility. Shaped by the actual and anticipated response of others, meanings are a dynamic part of any action through this self-interactive process. "To indicate to another what he is to do, one has to make the indication from the standpoint of that other (...) Such mutual role taking is the *sine qua non* of communication and effective symbolic interaction." (Blumer 1969: 9)

All in all, the focus of symbolic interactionists lies on the subjective, micro-structural aspects of social life.

Herbert Blumer's Model

In effect, it is the very peculiarity of interaction as it takes place between human beings that the term "symbolic interaction" coined by Herbert Blumer addresses. As defined by Mead, this peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or "define" each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their "response" is not made directly to the actions of others; rather it is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of each other's actions. Viewed simplistically, this mediation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the case of hu-

man behaviour. Blumer's interpretive model essentially follows a "stimulus-interpretation-response" pattern⁵. (Collins 1994: 260-266)

Ervin Goffman's Theory of Roles

Goffman sees interaction as performance. His sociology deals with interaction order as a distinct unit of analysis. Although "face-to-face" is the only pattern taken into account in his analysis, Goffman argues for the essential part played by situational expectations in interactions, stressing the influence of these expectations on the conduct of the individual "actors" participating in the communicative exchange. As a consequence of this pressure, every situation involving communication supposes that all participants assume roles, and hence Goffman's view of human interaction as performance⁶. (Goffman 1959)

⁵ Transparent though it may seem, the "stimulus-interpretation-response" interpretive model is by no means simplistic.

In putting forward his theory, Blumer confronted two traditional approaches to meaning and its derivation: the first holds that meaning is innate to the object being considered (i.e. it inheres in the objective characteristics of the object), with no process involved in forming an understanding of it other than recognition; while the second identifies meaning with the cumulative "psychical accretion" of perceptions carried by the perceiver for whom the object has meaning.

Clearly distinctive, Social Interactionism sees meaning as arising, by a process of interpretation, from the process of interaction between people (the meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the way in which other persons act towards the person with regard to that thing).

There are two steps in the process of interpretation, starting with a process of self-interaction or, rather, communication with oneself (the subject indicates to himself the things towards which he is acting), and ending with a process of handling meanings. The subject selects, checks, suspends, regroupes and transforms meanings, deriving them not by application of previously integrated meanings but by an active process of formulation, reconsideration and revision.

In relation to other schools of sociological thought, the interactionist theory appears utterly pragmatic. Objects retain empirical reality outside the process of social interaction but the significance of their relationship to human conduct is nonetheless a by-product of interaction with others. Humans are pragmatic actors continuously adjusting their behaviour to the actions of other actors, a process enabled by interpretation, or the ability of denoting actions symbolically. Additionally, the ability to think about and react to our own actions and even our selves as symbolic objects further supports this adjustment process in which context humans are active, creative participants and not passive, conforming objects of socialisation.

Mediated Identities

People used what they called a telephone because they hated being close together and they were scared of being alone.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Following the previous subchapter, we see that context or, rather, frame is a basic concept among symbolic interactionists. At any rate, all frames discussed by Goffman refer to face-to-face encounters. In recent years, however, attempts have also been made to apply symbolic interactionism to mediated interaction. It seems that discussing the electronic medium and its effects upon communication automatically involved rediscovering problems of negotiation, frame/transaction and space. In the “grammar” of communication developed by the theorists of the Palo Alto school, *transaction* is the basic unit of analysis of interpersonal communication as well as the building of relationships; although the participants need not necessarily be face-to-face in the same physical space, there must be mutual awareness of each other for a *transaction* to take place. It is therefore possible to engage in interpersonal *transactions* via mediated channels as long as each party is aware that they are being perceived by the other. **In each transaction there is a simultaneous assignment of roles based on three factors: (1) one communicator’s imagination or expectation of the other’s role; (2) the context; and, (3) behavioural cues during the transaction.** (Watzlawick 1967 in Thomlison)

How this applies to the electronic medium is clearly an issue that ranks among the most important discussions on communication today.

⁶ In his analysis of interaction in a physical context, Goffman introduces quite a number of concepts and thereby attempts to decode the techniques developed by humans in their tendency to present themselves as acceptable persons. Embarrassment, for instance, would be one of the regulating and controlling forces in human interaction. This is expressed, like all others, through both verbal and non-verbal cues, as Goffman distinguishes between information ‘given’ and information ‘given off’, arguing that much information about the self is communicated in ways incidental to the ‘main business’ of the encounter.

The study and theory behind these concepts is referred to as dramaturgy and is measured by observation and frame analysis.

The Myth of World Wide Web and the Networked World

In a book on the mythologies of the 20th century published a couple of years ago, the Internet is ranked among the most challenging myths of our century in the sense that the myth critic is faced with all the difficulties associated with the study of a subject which is still under construction. (Brunel 1999)

Propagated though a medium that is continually exceeding its own limits, this dream of complete communication is a bundled concept, a floating signifier that covers practices from talking *viva voce* to chatting, exchanging email, creating web pages, providing databases, films, books and articles etc.

The ever-changing frontier of the virtual space could entitle us to call the Internet the myth par excellence, in which time fully replaces space. It is a world in which the availability of a product is not measured in terms of its distance from the buyer, but rather by the time it takes to download the product on the buyer's computer. In the Internet, *framing* is conceptualised differently. This concerns not only the time-space relation, but also the so-called awareness of the network. As argued by Barry Wellman and Keith Hampton, we are living in a paradigm shift, in which the Internet reflects the trend toward a networked world and at the same time reinforces the turning of modern times towards networks and away from groups. (Wellman 1999)

Without doubt, electronic communication has established a new range of frames of interaction. With the potential to overcome physical barriers (by overcoming space and time-dependencies), the Internet has the potential to challenge and overcome barriers of race, nationality, language and ideology. Therefore, while essentially different from physically-anchored communication and also diverging from other forms of mediated communication, computer-mediated communication (CMC)⁶ challenges all sociological views on the presentation of self and offers a new context of investigation.

Indeed, with the Internet becoming an ever more common means of communication, the question most frequently asked relates to its neutrality as a medium: is this new sort of interaction "neutral" in that it leaves communication and social relations unaffected? In general, researchers agree that the electronic medium can influence communication patterns

⁶ CMC is the transmission and reception of messages using computers as input, storage, output and routing devices. (Paulsen 1997)

and social networks, engendering changes in the way people communicate with one another. While some of the changes mentioned are unpredictable and produce variable social effects, many others have already been more or less successfully theorised. Many theories have been suggested in recent years and the number of identified characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is just as big.

Once acknowledged, these characteristics, such as its apparent enhancing of connectivity though seeming advocacy of lower commitment relationships, have inspired utopians and dystopians in equal measure. More significantly, they have been sources of inspiration to a great many articles on identity and presentation of the self in CMC, setting new trends in the field of psychology and leading to the establishment of cyber psychology.

Negotiating the Self in Mediated Contact – Web Pages

To go back to the school of Palo Alto, in each transaction there is a simultaneous assignment of roles based on three factors: (1) one communicator's imagination or expectation of the other's role; (2) the context; and (3) behavioural cues during the transaction.

Web Pages are clearly a good place to start when discussing "electronic transactions". This is a peripheral aspect of our direct investigation of communication with online panels; however, web pages have long been the typical computer-mediated site of negotiating identity.

In a paper that explores how the presentation of self takes place in personal homepages, Hugh Miller and Jill Arnold compare electronic interaction with Ervin Goffman's face-to-face communication and argue that, though poorer and more superficial, electronic interaction still faces the problem of establishing and maintaining an acceptable self. (Miller 1995)

Electronic communication (EC) is a system which is instantaneous but asynchronous, can be one-to-one but may be one-to-many, one-to-anyone or one-to-no-one. In light of this, it could be argued that EC is not interaction in Goffman's sense, especially where the Web fails to qualify in terms of all the system requirements for interaction mentioned by Goffman (such as signals that inform the sender that reception is taking place or signals that announce that a channel is being sought or that a channel is open). Still, web pages are part of an interactive system, albeit a pretty restricted one, being intended to be read by others and often inviting comment and requesting email addresses to initiate contact.

Homepage communication is basically a way of putting oneself up for some kind of interaction which is at the same time limited and liberating.

With all the difficulties involved in establishing face-to-face contact, the Web enables people to put themselves up for interaction almost without risk.

Hugh Miller's position has its opponents, though at least as many adepts; to us, however, it introduces a more far-reaching question: **How do we actually engage in communication/transactions outside any social context cues – two of the three factors counted by Palo Alto theorists as fundamental to the assignment of roles in communication?**

Social Context Cues

Social context cues are factors that engender cognitive interpretations and thereby adjust the content of communication. They have been discussed in terms of *static* and *dynamic* coordinates, where *static* gives the physical setting and *dynamic* non-verbal behaviour; and under different criteria in terms of *geographic*, *organisational* and *situation* variables, where *organisational* describes social hierarchy and *situational* can include the demographic characteristics of the communicators: age, gender, race, socio-economic status, residence and personal characteristics such as appearance, dress, accent, tone, mood, size and attitude.

In brief, all such cues are behavioural – verbal or non-verbal – or situational, i.e. context-related. Since our analysis would not benefit significantly from differentiating between them, we will use *social context cues* to refer both to context and behavioural cues.

There is already a vast amount of literature concerning email and other forms of CMC; research has also been carried out and theories have been put forward on the relational and interpersonal effects in CMC. Most of these draw comparisons between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication: written communication for the most part being considered to retain the norms of face-to-face communication, while email correspondence has the illusion of ephemerality (Sproul 1991: 39). Email correspondence appears and disappears from the screen. By contrast, the mystique and relative permanence of norms remaining attached to written communications can restrain grossly uninhibited verbal behaviour with the thought that someone else might read or save the correspondence (Collins 1992)

Nevertheless, the most recurrent conclusion throughout CMC literature is that **relationally-rich nonverbal cues are absent in CMC**, the most extreme reaction to this being the “cues-filtered-out” perspective as it is dubbed by Culnan and Markus. (Culnan 1987)

Looking at the logical consequences of the “cues-filtered-out” theory six years later, Walter comments: “the lack of nonverbal cues in CMC

has caused several researchers to suggest that the social cognitive process may differ between CMC and face-to-face (FtF) interaction". (Walther. 1993: 381)

The same Walter identifies **chronemics** as the only non-verbal code retained by computer-mediated communication. From the seven classes of non-verbal signals classified by Burgoon (Burgoon 1994: 232) as codes – kinesics, vocalics or paralangue, physical appearance, haptics, proxemics, chronemics and artefacts – only **chronemics** or the use of time as a message system (including such code elements as punctuality, waiting time, lead time, and amount of time spent with someone), is able to be incorporated to study human communication in a computer-mediated context. (Walther 1994)

However, let us leave chronemics for the moment and start by reviewing the three major lines of approach along which the issue of **social anonymity and its disinhibiting effect** has so far been discussed as the dominant characteristic of communication lacking social cues. We will also purposely skip a number of other theories according to which the effects of the electronic medium are not determined by its characteristics, but in the ongoing interaction between the technology and the social context. In doing so, we do not doubt their value, but by lending themselves to discussion of the importance of not reducing the social effects of technology to person perception, they skip the very identification of these immediate effects of technology. "Sadly, neither constructionist approaches nor AST lend themselves to making any concrete predictions about this." (Tanis 2003: 10)

Flaming and the Task-Oriented Research Model in Computer-Mediated Communication

Many supporters of the cues-filtered-out perspective stress the **depersonalising implications** of social anonymity and its disinhibiting effect with CMC. Yuliang Liu identifies three theories here: Social Presence Theory, Media/Information Richness Theory, and Social Context Cues Theory. (Liu 2002)

Social presence as a term refers to a communicator's awareness of the presence of an interaction partner. According to the **Social Presence Theory** put forward in 1976, the social effects of a medium depend on the degree of social presence it affords its users. Increased presence leads to a "better" (richer, less ambiguous) person perception. Therefore, the fewer channels or codes available within a medium, the less attention will be paid by users to the presence of other social participants. Since the different types of media vary in their "capacity to transmit information about facial expres-

sion, direction of looking, posture, dress and non-verbal, vocal cues” and the computer-mediated communication environment is lacking in non-verbal cues, it is bound to lack emotions. (Short 1976: 65)

According to the **Media/Information Richness Theory** developed in 1984, the communication effect is influenced by the extent to which a medium or information is perceived as rich or lean by the communicators. An approach less concerned with interpersonal relations, and more with the transmission and comprehension of messages in an organisational context, Daft’s and Lengel’s theory identifies the potential information-carrying capacity of a medium as the key to understanding the capacities of the medium. In terms of perceived richness of the media or information, the computer-mediated communication environment is the least rich, compared with face-to-face environments. (Daft 1984)

The **Social Context Cues Theory (The Cuelessness Model)** rates communication environments according to their richness in providing social context cues to communicators and inevitably favours the face-to-face environment over the CMC environment, which is perceived as the least advantaged in this respect. “Cuelessness leads to psychological distance, psychological distance leads to task-oriented and depersonalised content, and task-oriented depersonalised content leads in turn to a deliberate, unspontaneous style and particular types of outcomes.” (Tanis 2003: 8) Interaction deprived of cues is therefore less personal, allowing for no subtleties of self-presentation.

In practice, the three theories presented above share the same perspective on the hierarchy of communication environments in which the FtF medium is rated highest and the CMC environment lowest. Related in more than one respect, they share the theoretical responsibility for the filtered-out perspective, according to which the filtered-out cues affect the communicators in three ways: regulation of social interaction; perception and impression formation; and awareness of the social context of communication. Lacking social presence due to the constraints of perceived cues in the interaction, the CMC environment – as perceived by the supporters of the filtered-out perspective – is less personal and less socially emotional. The stronger the feelings of anonymity, the weaker the constraints of etiquette and social differentiation and the more extreme, self-centred and unregulated people’s behaviour becomes. All in all, where strong social context cues generally trigger a relatively focussed, controlled and socially differentiated behaviour, weak social cues will discourage awareness of others, encouraging anti-normative, aggressive, uninhibited behaviour termed *flaming* through a corresponding reduction in self-focus. (Kiesler 1984)

The Social-Emotion-Oriented Model

Advocators of the opposite approach, the supporters of the Social-Emotion-Oriented Model argue that CMC systems can support socio-emotional communication and the communication reflects the inherent communication traits of the users. Recalling that people have even been known to fall in love through online communication, Gladys We believes that people become highly emotionally involved in their on-line interaction. (We 1993)

Though predicted by earlier sources, the Social-Emotion-Oriented Model rests heavily on Walther's Social Information Procession Model (1992). As early as 1984, for instance, Baron imagined the computer as a force in language change, wondering if CMC "had evolved (or could evolve) some way of compensating for the lack of physical presence or non-linguistic context". (Baron 1984: 125)

According to Walther, communicators process relational and social identity cues using various media, while communicators who use any medium experience similar needs for affinity and uncertainty reduction. It is these needs which also cause CMC participants to adjust their linguistic behaviour to the solicitations of relational behaviour. Given CMC's limited cues, however, the amount of time necessary to convey all the social-emotion-related information will be much higher with CMC than with FtF environments. What Walther suggests by his interpretation is therefore a switch in perspective. Its novelty relies on its rewriting of the difference between FtF and CMC as communication environments. This is no longer a difference of quality, but one of quantity; not a matter of capability, but a matter of rate. Users of the CMC environment can achieve just as much as those of the FtF medium in terms of personal information exchange, the only difference being that they need more time to exchange the same amount of social-emotion-related information.

Thus, according to Walther, users adapt existing communicative cues within the constraints of language and textual display to serve processes of relational management. For example, CMC users have developed an electronic "paralanguage" to express affective and socio-emotional information. These informal codes, which range from grammatical markers and purposeful capitalisations to intentional misspellings, are best represented by *emoticons* (combinations of textual characters which, if turned clockwise, resemble facial expressions). (Walther 1992)

In a later paper published in 1996, Walther goes as far as to advance the idea that CMC is even more desirable than FtF interaction in that it is hyper-

personal. According to Walther, CMC users, though reduced to minimal, text-based interaction, know how to exploit the features of CMC to foster exceedingly intimate and affectionate interaction on levels higher than those common to parallel offline FtF interaction.

“What is markedly different in this approach to earlier (determinist) theories is that users are theoretically “empowered”, having agency in their social use of the technology and in shaping its outcomes (at least to a certain extent.)” (Tanis 2003: 11)

The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE)

Grouped with the “optimistic” approaches to computer-mediated communication, SIDE is another model that questions the view of CMC as “socially impoverished”. Developed in 1995, SIDE has its roots in two theories put forward by Tajfel and Turner: the Social Identity Theory and the Self-Categorisation Theory. (Tajfel 1982, 1986)

These theories make the distinction between personal and social identity, envisaging a person not just as an individual with idiosyncratic personality characteristics, but also as an entity deriving certain identities from various groups to which he or she belongs. Whether we perceive ourselves as unique individuals or as members of groups, these two are equally valid expressions of the self. Our social identities (deriving from the groups we perceive ourselves to be members of) and personal identity (derived from views of ourselves as unique individuals) are equally true. The extent to which we define ourselves on either the personal or social level is both flexible and functionally antagonistic.

According to studies conducted by Tajfel, when people know they are members of a group, they automatically develop a group-based behaviour which distinguishes between “us” and “them”. This is the person’s social identity, different from his personal identity, which encompasses unique attributes such as idiosyncratic personality traits, physical appearances etc.

Thus for somebody belonging to a group and aware of it, the ingroup is likely to be seen in ingroup stereotypical terms and the outgroup in the stereotypical terms considered “appropriate” for them. It is actually these assumptions that enable the formulation of SIDE. Basically, the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects is a theory of identity shift. In contrast to classical deindividuation theory, SIDE argues that anonymity and immersion in the group do not result in a loss of the self; rather they enhance the salience of social identity at the expense of personal identity. Consequently, conformity to group norms is enhanced rather than diminished.

Since social presence is not necessary for attributing characteristics based on the group, the relative anonymity specific to CMC, accompanied by knowledge of relevant social identities, will automatically generate attribution of group characteristics to individuals using CMC. (Reicher 1995). Further research conducted by Postmes, Spears and Lea has confirmed that under depersonalised conditions individual differences are less salient, while group memberships are more salient. (Postmes 2002)

In one respect, SIDE is a theory that is quite related to the others in the same domain, sharing the assumption that cues accentuate the interpersonal dimension of interaction and that the CMC environment is one of cuelessness. Referred to by Turner as *depersonalisation* (of social perceptions of others and the self), this effect of CMC environments is nonetheless discussed by SIDE theoreticians as a rather positive effect in terms of group membership. Simplistically, the novelty of SIDE lies in this positive switch in discussing the effects the lack of personal information has upon human perception. Where the group is known and its characteristics can be inferred, the lack of personal information can simply accentuate the unity of the group. In fact, SIDE is itself a switching of focus, in that – in analysing a medium's effects – it shifts the focus away from its capacity to convey cues. Arguing that a medium which leaves its user *cueless* does not mean the user will be *clueless* (Spears 2001), SIDE differentiates the effects that social cues have in the interpersonal sphere from effects of cues on the dimension of social aspects of identity.

Steps Towards a Synthetic Model

Already a first step towards creating a synthetic model with which to approach better and more clearly identify the nature of computer-mediated communication, Yuliang Liu's comparison of the first two research models presented above concludes that they are not dichotomous, but rather lie at opposing ends of a continuum. Therefore, future CMC research should integrate the *Cues-Filtered-Out Theory* and the *Social Information Processing Model*. (Liu 2002) This is also the drive behind our attempt to integrate the major findings of the two models as they have been summarised by Yuliang Liu with the new dimension proposed by SIDE.

As will become clear, our initiative is solely justified by practical concerns, meant to serve the pragmatic analysis of the specific communication in market research by online panels. In our view, the three models are complementary rather than contradictory in their discussion of the effects of computer-mediated communication. If the *Cues-Filtered-Out Theory*

and the *Social Information Processing Model* have already been discussed by Yuliang Liu as lying “at opposing ends of a continuum”, it could be argued that the *Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects* adds a new dimension to this continuum. SIDE basically shares the assumption of the former two theories that cues accentuate the inter-personal dimension of interaction but at the same time goes a step further in distinguishing between cuelessness and cluelessness in CMC.

However, it is not our intention to see how well the three models can be joined in theory, forming a consistent synthetic model. Instead we are interested in retaining the findings that might prove relevant and possible to integrate and apply in our specific analysis of communication in online panel research. It is this specificity that also justifies our retaining of more of the findings from the model using asynchronous communication technology. As it appears, where the task-oriented model tends to involve synchronous communication technology (Interactive Converse Program, Computer Conferencing, Electronic Brainstorming System, Electronic Information Exchange System, Electronic Meeting Technology, Group Decision Support Systems etc.), the Social-Emotion-Oriented Model tends to involve asynchronous communication technology (Instructional Computer Conferencing System, Public Electronic Network, Electronic Messaging Systems, Bulletin Board System, MUD, Internet etc.) – the former being subject to research over a shorter period of experimental duration, while the latter means dealing with a longer period of experimental duration. This helps us eliminate findings that do not apply to our case. Communication practices in market research by online panels involve asynchronous communication technology and a clearly longer period of experimental duration. We will therefore retain from the task-oriented model, which involves synchronous communication technology, only those findings that apply to our case of asynchronous communication. As to the *Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects*, with its finding being of a different range, it will be retained and applied as such.

Major Findings Retained from the Task-Oriented Model

Democratizing effect (equal participation). As proved by research, status and expertise inequalities in participation were strikingly reduced in CMC discussions. (Dubrovsky 1991)

Uninhibited behaviour. Research conducted by Kiesler et al. (Kiesler 1984) reported more uninhibited remarks in CMC than in FtF conferences, and more uninhibited remarks in anonymous CMC environments than in non-anonymous CMC environments. As a consequence, derived on the

basis of further research on CMC environments' disinhibitory effect, **lower social desirability and social anxiety scores** were reported by Adam Joinson in a study comparing pen and paper and online environments. (Joinson 1999)

Increased self-disclosure. As a consequence of anonymity and its disinhibiting effects, users of CMC generally experience increased self-disclosure. (Kiesler 1984)

Major Findings Retained from the Social-Emotion-Oriented Model

Individuation. According to a study conducted by Matheson and Zanna (Matheson 1989), participants in the online interaction condition reported significantly higher levels of private self-awareness and minimally lower levels of public self-awareness than those in the face-to-face condition – where private self-awareness was defined as personal attitudes, beliefs, and feelings, and public self-awareness as a focus on one's own awareness of oneself from the view of others including self-presentational concerns. In contrast to earlier de-individuation theories, Matheson and Zanna's finding stresses the effect of online environments in stimulating people to reveal their true selves: while reducing self-presentation concerns, it enhances self-regulation and focus on internal states and standards. We will use this finding as adjusted by SIDE, according to which it is the social, not the personal identity that is activated.

Major Finding from SIDE

In brief, the major contribution of SIDE to the investigation of the electronic environment's effects upon the communication of the self is communicated by the name of the model itself: the *Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects*. Basically, SIDE argues that anonymity and immersion in the group do not result in a loss of the self, but rather enhance the salience of social identity at the expense of personal identity. Consequently, conformity to group norms is enhanced rather than diminished. In other words, computer-mediated communication environments accentuate one's awareness of the other's social identity where social identity of the group is salient. Therefore, the anonymity and lack of identifiability inherent in most CMC when a social identity is salient serves to **strengthen the impact of social norms, and hence normative influence.**

To put it plainly, where the group is known and its characteristics can be inferred, the lack of personal information can **simply increase awareness of social identity and accentuate the unity of the group.**

Bottling Communication: Applying Symbolic Interactionism to Computer-Mediated Communication

Returning to symbolic interactionists, it is the ability of humans to see themselves as others do that enables communication building identity. This awareness allows an individual to adjust personal behaviour until the person perceives it as appropriate. As concluded by Matheson and Zanna (Matheson 1989), computer-mediated environments reduce public self-awareness but only to a very limited extent. The difference is not one of quality/range/kind, but one of quantity/rank/degree. To Walther as well (Walther 1992), the difference between FtF and CM environments is one of quantity/rank/degree rather than quality/range/kind: users of the CMC environment can get just as far as users of the FtF medium in terms of personal information exchange, they only need more time to exchange the same amount of social-emotion-related information. All in all, in summary of the major findings of the big CMC theories, there is hardly any difference identified between the two environments other than of quantity/rank/degree: the level of self-disclosure is **higher** and behaviour is **more** uninhibited in CMC than in FtF; CMC involves **increased** time to make a decision but **increased** quality of decision making; CMC environments are **more** democratic; CMC groups show **greater** intimacy and social-orientation; the development of impressions take **longer** in CMC; CMC **favours** awareness of social identity etc.

As long as the difference is not one of quality/range/kind but one of quantity/rank/degree between different environments of communication and since the logic informing its grammar remains the same, irrespective of the paradigm of communication practices, applying a model to a communication situation it did not take into account when first issued is fully justified. Applying assumptions of symbolic interactionism about the birth of meaning in communication to mediated communication is affordable insofar as it involves no changes in the theoretical apparatus; the only discussions it may give rise to involve observations of degree. In other words, the major lines of Blumer's interpretive model and Goffman's situational expectations are not subject to change in computer-mediated communication; they are simply added a sense of delay, for which the pragmatics of bottled messages would make a good comparison.

With mediated communication through writing, meaning and identity are no longer negotiated through direct, immediate and progressive communication. Writing, as Ong remarks, has produced a shift in consciousness. "As a time-obviating, context-free mechanism, writing separates the known from the knower more definitely than the original orally grounded

manoeuvre of naming does, but it also unites the knower and the known more consciously and more articulately.” (Ong 1986: 38)

From the symbolic-interactionist perspective, the whole process is somehow delayed, since it hinges on recalling past interactions with the person addressed or projecting future ones with the imaginary target person of the message. Writing-mediated interaction can not alter the model of the communicative act, though it prompts increased reflexivity, introducing a further objectifying factor. More inward looking than any subject of direct communication, the writer is a product of double objectivation. In writing, all negotiations and transactions at the intra-psychic level are made on the basis of past interactions, which already contain an objectified image of the self. Writing is distance. But distance through words is still communication through the memory of past interactions or the projection of future ones.

Belonging to the paradigm of writing-mediated communication, computer-mediated communication shares this sense of delay with messages in bottles. Putting a note in a bottle involves, by definition, dealing with long-term prospects. Its pragmatics as a communicative gesture speak of a psychology of hope (revealing communicative intentions strong enough to bridge two fully isolated subjects) as well as uncertainty as to predicting the time it will reach its target and the way it will be received/decoded by this. Thus, in one sense emails are messages in a bottle.

Social Roles in Panel Communication

According to Goffman, every situation involving communication supposes all participants’ assuming roles. This simultaneous assignment of roles is based, according to Palo Alto theorists, on three factors: **(1) one communicator's imagination or expectation of the other's role, (2) the context, and (3) behavioural cues during the transaction.**

How does assignment of roles occur with interlocutors in online panel communication? As inferred from the symbolic interactionist model amended by mentions of the effects the nature of computer-mediated communication environments has upon panel communication, the answer involves that:

1. The mutual roletaking is the sine qua non of communication and effective symbolic interaction.
2. Contextual and behavioural cues are not available in computer-mediated communication and the dialogue between researcher and panellist is a dialogue between their social selves.

3. As per SIDE, online environments accentuate one's awareness of the other's social identity where social identity of the group is salient.

In this view it is important that participants in online panel interaction be provided – from the very first contact – with salient information on the social identity of the group to be created. As it will be shown, the first invitation letter addressed by the market research company to the future panellist should invest as much space as possible in creating a sense of belonging to an elected group which has the power to influence the future market/the world of tomorrow – power resulted from the joined work of the market researcher and respondent. The panel offer should be as explicitly as possible introduced as the offer of such a group, where the market researcher *statistically advocates* the panellist's opinions and preferences in matters related to the market of tomorrow. The social identity of the two kinds of members making up this group should thus be made as salient as possible from the researcher's very introductory discourse. Contextual and behavioural cues are lacking in computer-mediated communication. The dialogue between panellist and researcher is a dialogue between their social selves. As mentioned when dealing with theories of social identity and self-categorisation, our social identities (deriving from the groups we perceive ourselves to be members of) and personal identity (derived from views of oneself as a unique individual) are equally true. The extent to which we define ourselves at either the personal or social level is both flexible and functionally antagonistic. Communication with online panels is not one stressing the communicators' personal identity. Panellist and researcher hardly define themselves at personal level. This is however as true of offline panellist and researcher where the contact is established by post. Only that the effect of this dialogue between social selves is increased in online environments, even though the difference is not one of quality/range/kind but one of quantity/rank/degree.

According to SIDE, where social identity is salient, lacking social presence results in increased focus on social identity. The relative anonymity specific to CMC, accompanied by knowledge of relevant social identities, will automatically generate attribution of group characteristics to individuals using CMC. Given the nature of the online environment, the relation online panellists develop with researchers is one of an even less personal nature than that between offline respondents and researchers. There is increased awareness of social roles in panel communication by online environments.

Analysing communication with online panels is dealing with a complex paradigm of practices. From the random interaction and first invitation let-

ter establishing the contact to the assistance policy to panel communication, everything falls within *online panel communication*.

Since the easiest and most captivating method for providing details on each of these practices in turn would be to *enact* them (simulate their chaining up to what could be called a complete panel interaction process), the next two chapters of the book will house as much as possible of this process hovering on each step in turn. The specific, asynchronous quality of the electronically mediated communication, which – in our case – is also shifting in character from one-to-anyone to one-to-many and finally one-to-one, allows us to split our performance, giving it the appearance of two monologues. Whether appearances will prove to be more than an appearance and a monologic argument more of an *implicit dialogue between writer and imaginary foe*, this remains to be seen. (Eemeren 1992)

The first enacted will be the researcher's role. It will be the first section of the book where the researcher launches its bottle, establishes the first contact, finds ways to turn it into a closer one, invites to surveys, announces prizes, answers assistance mails, sends out newsletters and puts up the FAQ corner while sometimes also answering the assistance telephone.

Enacting the role of the online respondent is a far more daring enterprise. At first sight, given the increased awareness of social roles informing panel communication in online environments, this is a role on the verge to challenging the principles of market research. Surprisingly though, a second look may discover that it is a role of completely different consequences.

CHAPTER 3:

Launching the Bottle: The Rhetoric of the Online Researcher

If you want to build a ship, then don't drum up men to gather wood, give orders, and divide the work. Rather, teach them to yearn for the far and endless sea.

(Antoine de Saint-Exupery)

Recruitment Practices and Introductory Discourse

Online Access Panels Recruitment Practices

From the variety of recruitment strategies currently in use, the strategy preferred by each market research company tends to depend firstly on the demographics of the target participants or the turnaround time requirement; in addition it can also depend on the number of recruits needed, budget-related constraints, security and sample requirements etc. or the way the participants themselves relate to the client, as customers or not as the case may be. Irrespective of all these factors, however, the first choice made by every market research company relates to the question: *is self-recruitment to be counted in or not?*

A Matter of Principle

Recruitment in online market research bundles together quite a number of practices, all of which are equally informed by the “opt-in”⁷ principle though still essentially divergent in the way the “opt-in” is performed. It is here where the choice is made between counting in and denying self-

⁷ Some may obey a *double opt-in* or even *triple opt-in* principle, where the *opt-in* status of the email holders enlisted is reinforced by a secondary or third confirmation. Typically, *double*, *triple* or simply *confirmed opt-in* means active confirmation of subscription on the part of the subscribers. *Double* or *triple opt-in* lists run a lower risk of being tagged as SPAM but take longer time to make.

recruitment as a principle of recruitment. As a difference in terms of principle, this self-recruitment or active vs. passive recruitment issue⁸, for it has also been expressed as one between *actively recruited panels* with a closed circle of participants and *passively recruited panels* with an open circle of participants, can have huge consequences for the image of access panels as a valuable methodology in the field of market research.

On to On vs. Off to On

In general, recruitment methods for subject acquisition in online market research studies are either online to online or offline to online. Their efficacy in yielding members for online panels, however, differs greatly from method to method. In the *International Journal of Market Research*, an article published at the end of 2004 describes a German study in which eight recruitment methods were analysed and their efficacy compared in yielding members for online panels. Both offline and online methods were used on a sample of 2,000 respondents in an attempt to study the efficacy of recruitment via email, fax, flier and letter. The findings of the study show that online panels favour recruitment via email, while fax and fliers were ranked equal second, with letters proving the least efficient of all. (Goeritz 2004)

However advisable to use in terms of representativity, off to on methods are prohibitively expensive and definitely less practicable for market research companies that operate mostly or solely online, not to mention that the quality of the access panel can be influenced when the recruitment mode is different from the response mode. In an article published in *The Journal of Medical Internet Research*, Matthias Schonlau analyses two in-

⁸ Used to define the recruitment process in terms of involvement on the part of the market research company, *active* and *passive* do not refer to any initiative other than that of the researcher. People who express willingness to sign in with their own initiative will not be taken into account and granted membership. *Active* and *passive* are actually used to differentiate between recruitment methods. When it is the MR agency which enlists the respondents using a variety of sampling techniques, the panel is actively recruited. When people are invited to take part by means of a variety of online and/or offline techniques referring them to a registration site on the Internet, the online panel is passively recruited. Roughly speaking, actively recruited panels are panels created the way one draws a sample, while passively recruited panels are auto-selected panels. The consequence of this difference in terms of representativity is that only actively selected panels are representative of the overall population or a defined subgroup of Internet users.

interesting papers on web survey methodology, both of which draw different conclusions as to the potential of web surveys, and concludes that respondents recruited on the Web are more likely to respond to a web survey than the general population. This implies that an online study whose respondents are online panellists that were recruited online will achieve a higher response rate than an online study whose respondents are online panellists who were recruited through offline methods. (Schonlau 2004)

Among on to on practices there are not many that obey representativity principles. The most familiar and largely used recruitment method among market research companies, that of *email marketing* (mass emailing), involves dealing with Internet providers of opt-in email lists. The provider sends an email to its members inviting them to enter the recruitment questionnaire of the market research company (the author of the email). Many a seminar has been held on email marketing theory at which particular attention was paid to the do's and don'ts of email marketing as a practice, its efficiency as a tool in marketing, the software that makes it available etc. More recently, however, the focus has shifted to issues of legislation in the field of online marketing. Consequently, market research companies must pay double attention to the bulk mail brokers contacted and their following of the opt-in principle in collecting email lists. Since the discourse involved by this method is of high pragmatic relevance to the communication it initiates between researcher and panellist, we will make it the subject of analysis for the next section.

One method that makes special use of the transitive nature of the Internet, *snowballing*, functions as recruitment by recommendation. In effect, any recruitment questionnaire containing a question about possible friends who might also be interested in becoming panellists can turn the recruitment of one panellist into that of several. Since it can be counted among the active recruitment strategies that alone can guarantee the representativeness of online market research but at the same involves a discourse on the part of the researcher which is differently constructed than email marketing – the most prominent active recruitment strategy – the snowballing recruitment method will also be part of the analysis in the next section.

Different as they are in terms of yielded representativity, efficacy and costs involved, online access panel recruitment methods account for much of the differences in quality between online access panels. And given that quality and self-recruitment are terms which can scarcely coexist in the online access panel recruitment paradigm, our attempt at applying discourse analysis to the researcher's introductory discourse will be confined exclusively to email marketing and snowballing recruitment letters.

Introductory Discourse

Email Marketing – The Rhetoric of the Online Researcher’s Introductory Discourse

*They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how
you made them feel.*

(Carl W. Buechner)

Dear Sir/Madam,

You have been invited by (FILL IN COMPANY NAME), one of the leading market research companies in Europe to become a member of the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel – a group of people who choose to express their opinions by completing online questionnaires. You will be able to participate in many attractive studies and give your opinions on new products and services to people who really have a say in these matters! You can shape the future!

Why not sign up today?

Once you have signed up, your name will be entered into a fabulous prize draw for (FILL IN VALUE)! So hurry, before we come to our senses! And don’t forget that new surprises are on the way with every new survey you receive an invitation for.

And don’t worry: (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) is a market research company, which means we fully respect data privacy laws in line with European rules and legislation!

To join the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Panel all you need to do is click on the link below and fill in a registration form. Our recruitment survey will take less than (FILL IN NO.) minutes to complete.

Yes, I want to join the panel.

If you do not want to take part in our market research studies simply click on the unsubscribe link or send a letter to (PROVIDE EMAIL ADDRESS)

Thank you for your time!

Unsubscribe link

You have received this email through our partner who has access to your email address. Your email has been confirmed by our partner as opt-in. For more information about the way your email address was obtained, please feel free to contact us.

ANY QUESTIONS?

Please feel free to contact our hotline by EMAIL to (PROVIDE EMAIL ADDRESS)

Best Regards,

(FILL IN PROJECT MANAGER NAME),

and the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Research Team

The importance of the recruitment letter lies with its potential for establishing the grounds for long-term communication, one of the main keys to recruitment efficacy. If the effectiveness of recruitment partially relies on the ability to write recruitment letters, then attaining proficiency in writing such letters involves mastering introductory discourse. Thus when attempting to increase recruitment effectiveness, online market research companies which choose to build their own panels of respondents cannot avoid certain issues of communication and discourse: ***How to improve introductory discourse? How to better use introductory discourse in order to improve recruitment efficacy?***

Having said this, given the influence of computer environments on communication and especially its contribution to the assignment of roles in online market research, no recommendation can be given without first acknowledging the principles that form the basis of the rhetoric of the researcher's introductory discourse. Before making any practical recommendations of how to better master introductory discourse, two less practical questions need to be answered: ***(1) what is the influence of online environments on the market researcher's rhetoric as mirrored by their introductory discourse? (2) What is the general pragmatics of the online recruitment letter and what are the parameters of the communication it is meant to give rise to by the introductory discourse employed?***

When analysing the influence of online environments on the market researcher's rhetoric in their recruitment/introductory discourse, we must first note that all researchers who use email marketing as their main recruitment method – with which extra attention must be paid in respect of the double opt-in quality of purchased email lists – share an important cue:

the people they are trying to recruit are opt-in people. Arguably, our awareness of the fact that our future interaction partner expects to be addressed for matters related to market research is crucial.

Of the three factors considered by Palo Alto theorists as essential for mutual role-taking in a transaction to take place, *one communicator's imagination or expectation of the other's role* is the first and most important. Its importance is highlighted in online communication by dint of the fact that the other two factors become rather blurred. It is here where *one communicator's awareness of the other's expectation to be addressed for matters related to market research* makes a huge difference.

Let us recall Goffman's roles and their simultaneous assignment in communication by what Palo Alto theorists called: (1) one communicator's imagination or expectation of the other's role, (2) the context and (3) behavioural cues during the transaction. As inferred from the symbolic interactionist model amended by the effects the nature of computer-mediated communication environments has upon panel communication,

1. Mutual role-taking is the *sine qua non* of communication and effective symbolic interaction.
2. Contextual and behavioural cues are not available in computer-mediated communication and the dialogue between researcher and panellist is a dialogue between their social selves.
3. As per SIDE, online environments accentuate one's awareness of the other's social identity where social identity of the group is salient.

If the simultaneous assignment of roles in online panel communication follows the findings above, *one communicator's awareness of the other's expectation to be addressed for matters related to market research* has an obvious influence upon the *communicator's imagination or expectation of the other's role*. The awareness that their email has reached a subject who expects to be contacted for market research purposes contributes to the online researcher's expectation to be perceived as such.

In a world of mass-mediated messages and unwanted advertising, the reassuring effect of such awareness can hardly be overlooked given that one of the effects of online environments on communication is individuation, i.e. higher levels of private self-awareness (the way you see yourself) and lower levels of public self-awareness (the way you think the others see you). Despite the fact that anyone on the net can become part of an online panel, recruitment letters are not messages addressed by market research companies to anyone. Whereas most offline recruitment letters are in effect

sent into the unknown, online recruitment through email marketing is done through messages addressed to people who expect to be addressed for market research purposes.

In practice the email list broker functions as a mediator, though it is not uncommon for the two roles to be reversed chronologically: the invitation letter starts with the market research company introducing itself and ends by briefly mentioning the email list provider-mediator. **Introducing the author as if already expected is a basic of the rhetoric of the market researcher's online introductory discourse. Typically, the mediator is mentioned in the concluding lines.**

Ex: *"You have received this email through our partner who has access to your email address. Your email has been confirmed by our partner as opt-in. For more information about the way your email address was obtained, please feel free to contact us."*

In itself, a recruitment letter anticipates the recruitment of panellists: its expectations are in no way ambiguous. A market researcher's recruitment letter clearly expects the Other, the subject addressed to become a panellist. The only qualification here is that, being an opt-in, the Other, the subject addressed, already expects to be addressed for market research purposes. Significantly, the expectation horizon of access panellists is more stratified with online than with offline market research.

The awareness of the Other's expectation functions as a psychological trigger in conceiving the introductory discourse. It is a parameter that incurs a social identity both the market researcher and online respondent will acquire, communicate with one another and develop with particular commitment, in part due to the specific character of their online communication.

At this point, however, there is no dialogue between the future researcher and panellist. Since an invitation to dialogue is not yet dialogue, the recruitment letter is no more than a monologue in disguise. Much like a message in a bottle, the online researcher's first email is more monologue than a dialogue, though it clearly expects a reply – that of the addressee signing up for a long-term dialogue. It is for this reason that the project manager who signs the recruitment letter is of tremendous importance, bidding for a form of communication which – albeit developed for technical rather than personal purposes – remains a dialogue. Furthermore, the signature is an important psychological factor and as such contributes to the receiver's acceptance of the collaboration with the market research company in a form they are familiar with – that of a dialogue. While

evolving at the level of a dialogue between social selves, a dialogue still supposes two human interlocutors: signing the recruitment letter means acknowledging the dialogue between two human interlocutors as the only functioning equation and has a comforting effect on the subject addressed by the market research company.

Despite the interlocutors of the market research dialogue remaining unknown to each other at the personal level, it is their names that guarantee the possibility that their dialogue exists. Signing with the name of the company introduces a sense of disequilibrium to the equation of the dialogue, which can have negative effects on the psychology of the panellist.

However, online panellists tend to develop an increased awareness of their social role in so far as panel communication in online environments – where all other communication cues are lacking – supposes an increased focus on the social identity of the interlocutor and therefore an increased awareness of the social role the panellist is expected to play in communicating with this. As shown in chapter 2, in online communication, the importance of information on the way the market research paradigm functions, coupled with a complete lack of information as to the researcher's personal identity, results in increased awareness of the researcher's social role and ultimately the social role the panellist is expected to play as interlocutor in the online market researcher. **Making the social identity of the market researcher salient is an important principle of the researcher's rhetoric all through the panel communication activity.** We believe it is important to acknowledge and employ it more efficiently starting with the recruitment letter.

The recruitment letter par excellence is aimed at stimulating engagement in a dialogue through which personal opinions can surface and influence the surrounding world. The fact that it is propagated online may in fact bring it even closer to achieving its purpose if the influence of the online medium on its distribution is well-acknowledged and turned to its advantage. **If (1) the mutual role-taking is the *sine qua non* of all communication, (2) contextual and behavioural cues are not available in computer-mediated communication and the dialogue between researcher and panellist is a dialogue between their social selves and (3) there is increased awareness of social roles in online communication when information about the social identity of the interlocutor is salient, then the online audience needs to be acknowledged as capable of turning the salience of information into better commitment.**

However, all information provided by the researcher to the potential future panellist should reinforce one of the basic principles that the rhetoric

of the researcher's introductory discourse obeys, whether delivered offline or online: the presenting of market research as a unique opportunity. The aim of the introductory discourse is to engage social selves in a dialogue which is at the same time bound to remain at a social level and aims to help personal voices surface and influence the world. **Presenting market research as a unique empowering opportunity is a basic feature of the rhetoric of the researcher's introductory discourse, whether delivered offline or online.**

Ex: *"You have been invited to become a Member of the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel – a group of people who choose to express their opinions by completing online questionnaires. You will be able to participate in many attractive studies and give your opinions on new products and services to people who really have a say in these matters! You can Shape the future!"*

Ex: *"Our panel is a select group of consumers who have been selected to take part in surveys and represent the opinions of households across (FILL IN COUNTRY). Today we would like to give you the opportunity to give your opinions to **manufacturers** and **service providers** about important products and services that affect everyday life. **NOW IS YOUR CHANCE TO INFLUENCE THEIR DECISIONS.**"*

Put simply, recruiters need to make market research sound like special offers: people are given a special chance to develop a new social identity (defined by the new group they consider themselves to be members of, i.e. the online access panel) through which their personal identity (based on viewing themselves as unique individuals) can surface in a way that can influence the world around them. A panel is a select group, becoming a panellist means being selected.

Following this basic logic of persuasion, incentives are the next step in any recruitment letter. Treating incentive matters as issues of secondary importance is another basic feature in the rhetoric of the researcher's introductory discourse, whether delivered offline or online.

Ex: *"Once you have signed up, your name will be entered into a fabulous prize draw for (FILL IN VALUE)! So hurry, before we come to our senses! And don't forget that new surprises are on the way with every new survey you receive an invitation for."*

How much an online market research company should reward its respondents is still a matter of debate. Later on we will take up this issue and dis-

cuss different recommendations, both from our perspective (see subchapter 4 in this chapter of the book) and from the panellist's perspective (see subchapter 5 in the next chapter to the book). Suffice it to say that, however much a market research company is prepared to reward its respondents, however detailed, well set-up and how little subject to change the rewards system, such issues must always remain of secondary importance in the economy of recruitment letters. The rhetoric of recruitment for access panels has its own, completely different logic than that of mass-mediated messages and advertising. The principles it obeys have a point of focus as different as the philosophy it mirrors. It is not incentives that are supposed to raise people's interest in market research, but people's openness for social involvement. At the same time, panel membership is a commitment that supposes long-term involvement and a number of time-consuming activities which need to be rewarded more directly as well, both in terms of preferences and time. On the one hand, a segmentation of the incentivising scheme according to panellists' different ranges of preferences is highly beneficial (as shown in chapter 1, subchapter 4.1.). On the other hand, there is a psychology of immediate compensation which the researcher needs to be well-aware of when setting up the rewards system and which the introductory discourse of the recruitment letter should highlight by giving respondents the chance to gain/receive something not only for each survey completed but also on recruitment.

In order to give a summary of the principles behind the rhetoric of the online researcher's introductory discourse and in an attempt to make some recommendations as to the way introductory discourse and recruitment efficacy can be improved, we would like to stress the importance of:

- **Having the letter signed by the project manager as a reinforcement of the sense of (social) dialogue it is meant to give rise to in the panellist and introducing the author as if already expected.** As shown, this is a basic feature of the rhetoric the researcher's introductory discourse has developed online. Typically, the mediator is mentioned in the concluding lines.
- **Making the social identity of the market researcher salient.** This is an important principle of the researcher's rhetoric throughout the panel communication activity. While especially suitable to embedding salient information about the social identity of the researcher, the recruitment letter should contain as much detail as possible about the market research company and its activity. The online audience needs to be acknowledged as one capable of turning the salience of information into better commitment.

- **Presenting market research as a unique opportunity as a basic feature of the rhetoric of the researcher’s introductory discourse, whether delivered offline or online.** Introductory discourse represents a challenge to market researchers, testing their ability to make participation in market research studies look as if it is offering people the chance to be among those people whose opinions and choices can influence a whole market.
- **Treating incentive matters as issues of secondary importance, while at the same time not losing sight of the differences between respondents and their psychology of immediateness in respect of rewards.** This is another basic feature of the rhetoric of the researcher’s introductory discourse, whether delivered offline or online.

Transitivity in Computer-Mediated Communication: Snowballing

Dear (FILL IN NAME),

One of your friends, (FILL IN PANELLIST NAME), recently told us of your interest in participating in online studies and has provided us with your email address so that we can invite you to join the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel.

You will have the opportunity to tell us your opinions, express your criticism and make suggestions about new products before they reach the market, as well as tell us of your habits as a consumer and many other things that affect your daily life.

Your involvement in the panel is very simple: you will be invited to take part in online surveys; you will receive an invitation email for each survey; when you take part in a survey you earn points, which you can exchange for gifts or vouchers.

To join the Online Panel all you need to do is complete a registration form about yourself and your household. To access the form simply click on the link below:

(PROVIDE LINK TO SURVEY)

Your temporary panel number is: (FILL IN PANEL NUMBER)

Your password is: (FILL IN PASSWORD)

We guarantee that all information you give us will be treated in strict confidence and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act. We will not try to sell you anything or sell your name on to anyone else. You can cancel your involvement at any time.

Thank you in advance for participating in this exciting venture.

Yours sincerely,

(FILL IN PROJECT MANAGER NAME),

and the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel Team

~~~~~  
*How to contact us*

*Please feel free to contact us by email at (PROVIDE EMAIL ADDRESS) if you have any questions about your membership with (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Access Panels. Please mention your temporary panel number when sending this email (FILL IN PANEL NUMBER). This will help us reply quickly to your email.*

Similar to forwarded communications, snowballing letters allow indirect ties to become direct relationships. Recruiting by snowballing messages means acknowledging the increased transitivity of computer-mediated communication. Researchers<sup>9</sup> who have looked at the positive side of CMC, rather than at how CMC degrades communication, count the increased transitivity among the affordances made available by the online medium.

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<sup>9</sup> As early as 1992, Hollan and Stornetta published an article that argued that information and communication technologies need not be used as 'crutches' for existing models of communication and interaction. (Hollan 1992) Extending this argument, other researchers later attempted to sum up the features of computer-mediated communication, counting among others its asynchronous character, peripheral participation, large Fan-Out, anonymity, archiving, increased velocity of changes, increased transitivity (i.e. forwarded messages, links and so forth), the fact that it fosters the creation of weak ties and glues in place spatially-distant stronger ties and that it allows access to either entirely CMC based interactions or those that are mix modal. (Wellman 1999)

In network terms, the meaning of transitivity points to a node through which communication travels. Imbued, however, with an additional sense of connectivity when used to characterise social behaviour (we are all nodes in a network of communication), it becomes a key concept upon which social phenomena depend almost entirely in an asynchronous medium such as the Internet, especially with the fight against spam<sup>10</sup> becoming ever more difficult.

What makes the role of transitivity in online communication easiest to acknowledge is the probably least discussed parameter of communication: context. It was Roman Jakobson who first introduced context as an element of communication as determining a particular function. His classic account of language functions, despite being developed through a communication model that deals only with verbal communication, is general enough to fully retain its explanatory value when applied to mediated environments. According to Jakobson, the six particular linguistic functions – emotive or expressive, conative, referential, phatic, metalinguistic and poetic – are each determined by one of the six elements of communication: the addresser (sender), the addressee (receiver), the message to be shared, the context of the sharing, the channel through which the message is shared and the code which makes the sharing possible. Where any communication contains all six functions, each communication involves a particular hierarchy of the six functions<sup>11</sup>. (Jakobson 1960)

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<sup>10</sup> Where the real world uses “ads” or “fliers”, the virtual one has coined “spam”. Just as its etymology, the definition of spam is purposely vague. With all the laws passed against it (<http://www.spamlaws.com/>), as it currently stands spam is in the eye of the beholder. In a recent judicial decision by the Supreme Court of the State of Washington, the judges in that state's highest court formally endorsed the view that the term 'spam' refers broadly to unsolicited bulk EMAIL (or 'junk' EMAIL), which 'can be either commercial (such as an advertisement) or non-commercial (such as a joke or chain letter).' In the absence of a proper definition, however, its two key aspects enjoy the largest recognition: spam is duplicative and has an unsolicited nature.)

<sup>11</sup> The emotive or expressive function relates to the addresser (i.e. how the addresser experiences the message), the conative function relates to the addressee (i.e. what the addresser wants the addressee to notice or do), the referential function relates to the context (i.e. what is being spoken of), the phatic function relates to the channel (i.e. whether the channel works or not, especially where a social relation is maintained through ritualised formulas), the metalinguistic function relates to the code (i.e. whether the addresser and addressee use the same code) and the poetic function relates to the message (i.e. the message for its own sake).

If sender, receiver, message, channel and code are as easy to identify in online communication as they are offline, context can be a more problematic parameter in online environments. Needless to say, the Internet is hardly a homogenous medium. With hyperlinks, for instance, the referential function of language in online environments is overtly enhanced. With web pages, on the other hand, channel and context fully overlap. In creating a personal homepage to make yourself available for interaction, the page is at the same time your communicating self, the channel of communication and its context. This is, however, not the case with the electronic post. You do not simply make yourself available for interaction through email; emailing rejects intrusions: here the virtual world is even stricter than the real one; most unknown addresses in an inbox are deleted without being opened. Furthermore, with the increasing development of spam filters, most “un-introduced” letters are filtered out even before being delivered to the targeted inbox.

With online environments, the referential function of communication is either enhanced, as in the case of hyperlinks, or lacking, as with spam emails, which are deprived the element that determines it (context). Spam is ultimately a measure of the difficulty of approaching unknown people due to the lack of a proper context for the encounter. The increased transitivity of online mediums, on the other hand, is a measure of the way online environments can restore the referential function of language by forwarded messages, hyperlinks etc. Snowballing messages are just another example of e-text in which the referential function is the most prominent:

Ex: “Dear (FILL IN NAME),  
One of your friends, (FILL IN PANELIST NAME), recently told us about your interest in participating in online studies and has provided us with your email address so that we can invite you to join the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel.”

Once a context of the communication is established, the rhetoric of the market researcher’s discourse follows the principles analysed in the section on recruitment through email marketing.

Ex: “You will have the opportunity to tell us your opinions, express your criticism and make suggestions about new products before they reach the market, as well as tell us of your habits as a consumer and many other things that affect your daily life.”

The hierarchically most prominent function of the language used in snowballing letters is the referential one, a function supported by the increased transitivity of online environments. Snowballing letters are just one example of the way the rhetoric of the online researcher is directly influenced by the increased transitivity of online environments.

From this point of view, similarities with recruitment letters through email marketing make it pointless to continue analysing snowballing letters. Since snowballing letters are basically recruitment messages, they will necessarily be compiled by following the principles analysed in the previous subchapter.

## Staging Letters and the Use of Hyperlinks in Panel Communication

*Subject: Welcome to the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel!*

*Dear (FILL IN NAME),*

*Thank you for your decision to join the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel! You are now just a click away from dozens of interesting surveys on the most varied of topics. We hope you will enjoy them! Below you will find some very important information about your membership in the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel:*

### *Your Panel Number*

*Your panel number, or panellist ID as we also call it, is your own personal identification code as a panel member. You will need this number to access certain surveys as well as check your points balance on the Panellist Website (HYPERLINK TO WEBSITE). To ensure a quick response from the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Support Team, please remember to mention your panel number when submitting a query.*

*Your panel number is: (FILL IN PANEL NUMBER) (you may wish to write it down in a convenient place).*

### *Your Password*

*Upon registration you are assigned a personal 4-digit password that you may use to access the Gift Area. This password is assigned to you randomly by our system and you can change it on the Panellist Website*

*at any time. We have access to your panel number and password at all times, so please write to us if you need to retrieve them.*

*Your Email Address*

*You have registered for the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel using the email address (FILL IN EMAIL ADDRESS). Should you change your address or decide to use another email account for receiving surveys please notify us at (PROVIDE EMAIL ADDRESS) and we will be happy to perform the changes for you.*

*The Panellist Website*

*You can read more about the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Panel on the panellist website at (HYPERLINK TO WEBSITE)*

*Newsletter*

*As a member of the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel, you will receive a monthly newsletter focusing on specific research/Internet topics.*

*Online Support*

*If you have any questions or problems with a survey please write to us at (PROVIDE EMAIL ADDRESS) and we will be happy to assist you. You may also use the Contact form on our website for quicker feedback.*

*We are happy to welcome you to the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Panel and as a participant in our surveys!*

*Kind regards,*

*(FILL IN PROJECT MANAGER NAME)*

*and the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Support Team*

According to Jakobson, any text involves a coexistence of the six functions of language: the emotive (oriented toward the addresser), conative (oriented toward the addressee), phatic (oriented toward the channel), metalingual (oriented toward the code), referential (oriented toward the context) and poetic (oriented toward the message for its own sake); with each text involving a hierarchy of these functions. As with snowballing letters, the hierarchy of language functions in staging messages favours the context-



oriented function, although, as opposed to snowballing letters, online transitivity manifests itself here in the form of hyperlinks.

While essentially intended to be reassuring and informative, staging letters are messages with a discourse that is mainly anticipatory. More than all other stages in panel communication, staging messages are in fact attempts by the market research company to anticipate the possible needs/curiosity of the addressed Other, i.e. the recently enrolled panellist. **Therefore their anticipatory rhetoric is basically the result of the market researcher's reassuring intentions supported by the particularly transitive nature of online environments manifested through hyperlinks. Staging letters have an anticipatory discourse with an emphasised referential function.**

Apart from the overtly informative purposes (assigning the panellist a panel number and a password), the purpose of staging letters is to reassure (recent panellists of their role in the panel they have joined) and reinforce (the parameters of a social identity already introduced in the recruitment message). They are most often introduced by a few lines of thanks, which at the same time encourage participation in future surveys for which a panel number and password are provided, and go on to broach issues of providing a support email address, the panellist website and receiving the panellist newsletter.

Staging messages basically mark a point of transition in panel interaction: they are a potential node of communication that anticipates all the specific forms of researcher-panellist communication. In setting parameters for future encounters between market researcher and panellist, it reinforces the social character of the communication, where the monologic type is open to "technical" dialogue. Accordingly, the panellist is equipped for all the necessary "eventualities" in the form of a support email address to which to send particular queries and submit specific suggestions and hyperlinks which lead to further information on panel membership and activity and the panel in general; the market research company and the field of market research itself; the data protection policy and confidential treatment of panellist data by the market research company, the codes it abides by in this respect and the associations it belongs to; the reward system it has established and the opportunities it offers to win prizes or donate money to charity; and information on other frequently asked questions and news considered to be of interest to panellists.

That staging messages can make all this information available thanks to the particularly transitive nature of online environments and the opportunities the Internet offers through its extensively referential potential. With

online environments the referential function of language has arrived at the stage of creating a new concept of communication: networked communication. In essence, the Web is the product of Jakobson's referential function of language and hyperlinks are just one of the associational tools of the Internet currently available.

Loosely defined as branching mechanisms that reference other web pages both inside and outside the web page, hyperlinks have been long discussed in fairly enthusiastic terms. While praised by some authors for allowing users to gain depth and perspective, they are denounced by others for encouraging delusional speculation, provoking attention dilution through the switching of information sources and making it hard to distinguish between fact and advertising.

While advocates of such divergent perspectives appear, behind the debate on hyperlinks, to be tackling the far more serious issue of uncontrolled dissemination of information through the Internet, we only wish to stress one fact: it is precisely the extensive use of these interconnections between web pages that gives the medium its name of "web". Similarly, it is the referential function of language which is highlighted in any communication using hyperlinks, the influence of which on the rhetoric of online staging messages being therefore direct and fundamental. **Reference through hyperlinks to web pages containing further information on panel issues and other matters anticipated to be of interest to the panellist is a basic feature of staging messages: it is precisely the use of hyperlink reference which grounds the rhetoric of online staging discourse.**

In fact, the entire anticipatory character of the market researcher's discourse is proof of the influence online environments have on communication. If staging messages share information by anticipating the major problems panellists may encounter while performing their role as panel members, then it relies on the affordance of online environments to segment the information and introduce it through hyperlinks.

The dynamics of staging letters essentially comes under the influence of the online environment. It is the online medium that on the one hand gives the informative discourse its anticipatory component, while on the other making it possible for the anticipatory discourse to fulfill its informative purpose through segmentation and hyperlinks.

The market researcher basically intends their staging letter to reinforce panel membership. Consequently, it is necessary that salient information be provided about the way things are supposed to function and communication meant to evolve. However, sharing such information online (where the online medium favours individuation, i.e. higher levels of private self-

awareness and lower levels of public self-awareness) has at least three drawbacks: (1) the quantity of undifferentiated information to share is too large for an ordinary letter; (2) each panellist might be interested in a different share of the information; and (3) the online medium prevents you from acknowledging reactions to the information shared and thereby differentiating it. **Thus anticipating, segmenting and providing links arises as a consequence of the limitations of Internet as much as it is a solution made possible by its transitivity. It is under the influence of the online medium that the dynamics of staging letters involves anticipating, segmenting and providing information by hyperlinks.**

As a recommendation we would like to stress the importance of:

- **Using staging letters in panel communication in order to reassure recent panellists of their panel membership, reinforce social identity parameters introduced by recruitment message and generally provide all the information panellists might find of use about the functioning of the panel paradigm**
- **Anticipating and segmenting as much as possible the information to be provided to panellists so as to address as many areas of interest as possible**
- **Using to the full the transitivity of online environments (by the use of hyperlinks to website or other information sources) to introduce as much information as necessary about the functioning of the panel paradigm**

## Invitation to Surveys

### Invitations to Research Surveys

*Subject line: Welcome to this survey on (FILL IN TOPIC)!*

*Dear (FILL IN NAME),*

*(FILL IN COMPANY NAME) is conducting new research and is inviting you to take part in a survey about (FILL IN TOPIC)!*

*All information will be treated as confidential and used for statistical purposes only.*

*You will have the chance to win a prize of (FILL IN VALUE).*

*Please click here to access the survey:*

*(PROVIDE LINK TO SURVEY)*

*The survey you have been invited to participate in will take a maximum of (FILL IN NO.) minutes. We are grateful that you have given us your time.*

*The survey will be open till (FILL IN DATE).*

*If you don't find this interesting and don't want to participate in this survey, please **click here** and accept our apologies for disturbing you.*

*Thank you in advance for participating in this new research!*

*Should you have any questions or problems with the survey please write to us at (PROVIDE EMAIL ADDRESS) and we will be happy to assist you*

*Best regards,*

*(FILL IN PROJECT MANAGER NAME)*

*and the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Research Team*

Invitations to surveys are the most common technical messages in online panel communication. Chronologically, they come at a point where the identity of the communicators has already been established within its exclusively social parameters and for which the message contains plenty of pragmatic evidence. The panellist is invited to take part in a new survey having only briefly been given details of the study in question along already familiar lines: they are informed what the reward will be, notified how long the study will be available, reassured of the confidentiality of the data, thanked in advance for their participation and provided with a participation and unsubscribe link.

In a sense, an invitation to a survey remains monologic, the reply to the invitation coming in the form of a completed/denied survey and/or that of support messages. Viewed from a different angle, however, the reply can mean communication, and communication involves a sense of dialogue. According to the symbolic interactionists and the Palo Alto school, communication involves anticipation. *One communicator's imagination or expectation of the Other's role* is essential for the mutual role-taking in any transaction to take place. As a result, the survey invitation contains the expected minimum required information to whet the panellist's appetite for

the survey and reassure them of a role already inferred from previous communication. The panellist is already treated as an old acquaintance, a familiar communication partner. Their social identity, measured by their involvement in the panel (of which answers to recruitment questions provide sufficient proof) is a guarantee of the dialogue between social selves supposed by market research activity developed through online panels.

**Treating panellists as long-term communication partners with whom a dialogue between social selves has already been established is therefore a basic feature in the rhetoric of the market researcher's invitation messages to surveys. This is usually accomplished by:**

- **Keeping invitations to surveys small.** Unless screening questions are used, invitations should provide the minimum amount of information about a survey necessary for a panellist to decide whether they wish to (feel concerned) and are able to (have the necessary time and knowledge) participate in the study. Besides giving the theme of the survey, we don't recommend giving further hints about the study in the invitation letters: apart from its immediate effects on completion rates, this would have far-reaching consequences, making the market researcher's job of managing the panel more difficult, not to mention the implications of being able to choose the preferred studies/subjects based on the value of the research findings. Similarly, reassurances about the confidentiality of data and information about rewards should also be kept to a minimum, appearing merely as a reminder of matters already settled.
- **Always providing both a participation and an unsubscribe link.** As more than a token of respect from the market researcher for each panellist's choice to participate in a new survey, the unsubscribe link is an index for the communicators acknowledgement of the dialogic sense of their interaction. Both approval and denial indicate interaction of the dialogic type and can be measured as an index of interest in the ongoing communication, while lack of response confines the survey invitation to the monologic condition. Panellists should be given the chance to reject invitations by active reaction. On the other hand, the unsubscribe link is meant to spare them from receiving reminders for a survey they have no interest in.
- **Addressing the letter with the name of the panellist and signing it with the name of the project manager of the study.** As already shown, this reinforces the sense of dialogue and strengthens, in the long run, the communication between the market research company and panellist.

### Invitation to Screening Surveys

*Subject line: Welcome to a new survey!*

*Dear (FILL IN NAME),*

*XXXX is conducting new research and would like to invite you to participate in a survey!*

*All data collected will be treated as confidential and used for statistical purposes only.*

*When you and other panellists fill in the survey, we will donate (FILL IN VALUE) to (PROVIDE LINK TO CHARITY ORGANISATION)*

*\* Click here to access the survey:  
(PROVIDE LINK TO SURVEY)*

*The survey you have been invited to participate in will take a maximum of (FILL IN NO.) minutes. We are grateful that you have given us your time.*

*The survey will be open till (FILL IN DATE AND HOUR).*

*If you have no interest in participating in this survey, please **click here** and accept our apologies for disturbing you.*

*Thank you in advance for participating in this new research!*

*Should you have any questions or problems with the survey, please write to us at*

*(PROVIDE EMAIL ADDRESS) and we will be happy to assist you*

*Best regards,*

*(FILL IN PROJECT MANAGER NAME),  
and the (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Research Team*

Designed as an exploratory tool based on a standard questionnaire of a maximum of 15 questions relating to business and panel management needs applied on a monthly basis, a screening survey features an innovative three-fold support strategy. Its clever design offers support to the market research company, its clients and panellists.

By asking two standard demographic questions, three panel management questions and three panel communication questions alongside the range of three to twenty-one questions from the client, screening surveys enable the market research company that owns the panel to screen and collect data by refreshing, adding variables and enriching existing panel databases.

Screening surveys are also meant to help clients gain access to information about various markets in all countries and contribute to the creation of uniform category data. They can give clients an accurate idea of the capacity of online panels and represent the perfect tool for identifying rare or difficult targets at very competitive prices.

An equally useful feature to panel members is that screening surveys maintain online panel quality and activity by allowing all active panel members the opportunity to take part in surveys on a regular basis. It has been generally acknowledged that regular participation in surveys is the best policy to keep a panel alive and is therefore one of the most important panel management principles.

Screening surveys do not have a particular theme. The questionnaire is a collection of questions on different issues, which are most often unrelated. Demographic questions meant to complete/reinforce the data stored for each panellist and their household in the database are most often mixed with questions on membership satisfaction, completion habits, experience of the support area and other panel management issues together with any other questions of interest to the clients of the market research company.

Consequently, invitations to screening surveys, which are not supposed to be different from invitations to research surveys, nonetheless share a feature which serves to divorce them from regular invitations to research surveys: they mention the study without mentioning its theme. Significantly, judging by the higher response rates for screening studies than for regular surveys, this tends to have the effect of raising panellist interest to a higher degree than is achieved by the usual stating of the theme of the study in the invitation message.

## Letter to Winner

*Subject: You Are a Winner!*

*Dear (FILL IN NAME),*

*Congratulations! You are the lucky winner of a prize for the best slogan. This means you can choose a prize from our new incentive scheme!*

*You have won our (FILL IN NO.) prize.*

*Please make one selection only from the following list. Your chosen gift will be delivered to you in the coming weeks.*

*(PROVIDE LIST OF PRIZES)*

*Once your choice has been made we will need your full postal address so we can deliver your prize.*

*Please choose your gift and send your full postal address to:  
(PROVIDE EMAIL ADDRESS)*

*We reserve the right to replace any prizes with an equivalent model due to lack of availability.*

*A big THANK YOU once again for participating in our panel surveys and we hope you enjoy your prize!*

*Yours sincerely,*

*(FILL IN PROJECT MANAGER NAME),*

*and (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Online Research Team*

***\*Delivery time\****

*Shipping and delivery times to your address can vary depending on your order & stock availability.*

*We thank you in advance for your patience and understanding.*

Apart from in recruitment letters and invitations to surveys, the incentive issue is mentioned and even clearly approached in nearly all other messages from market researcher to access panellist in online panel communication. Among these, we have the letters to winners, which represent an act communication dedicated solely to the incentives issue and as such associated with two particular moments of the incentivising procedure: (1) when prizes are awarded by jury to one or several panellists as a reward for their participation in a given survey or a range of surveys offering prizes for slogan creation; and (2) when prizes are awarded through the drawing of lots to one or several panellists as a reward for their participation in a given survey or range of surveys



More than many other area of online panel research, the issue of incentives is very much alive and a stimulating topic of discussion. As already emphasised in the first part of the book and reinforced in the subchapter on the discourse of recruitment letters, it is not the incentives themselves that are supposed to stimulate people's interest in market research, rather people's openness toward social involvement. Wished-for panellists do not become panel members for the sake of the incentives; they focus on surveys rather than rewards. Consequently, incentives should never be more than a mere appreciation of the effort made in answering a survey, especially since they will hardly ever be proper rewards in terms of the time spent filling in.

At the same time panel membership is a commitment which supposes long-term involvement and a number of time-consuming activities which need to be rewarded. As shown in the first chapter of the book, it is important that this appreciation be made in terms which mix panellist-oriented criteria with criteria convenient to the market research company. Furthermore, the researcher needs to be aware of the existence of a psychology of immediate compensation when setting up the rewards system, something both the recruitment letter and each invitation to a survey must recognise by giving respondents the chance to gain/receive something both on recruitment and for each survey completed.

**In summary, the first principle that the rhetoric of all communication on incentives should follow is that however prepared a market research company is to reward its respondents, these issues should always remain of secondary importance in panel membership and activity, which should primarily focus on the empowering opportunity it offers to people by giving them a say in matters.**

As discussed, retention levels with online access panels could easily be raised by refining the incentive strategies applied to each individual panel. Even where the researcher lacks the necessary experience to observe the preferences of different social and age groups, it is always possible to enquire as to your panellists' preferences and interests and then target incentives towards their area of interest. This strategy could considerably increase panel stability and panellist loyalty, while at the same time lowering the risk associated with employing a sole incentive policy to attract just one particular social class. Admittedly, a better understanding of the incentive types most likely to address different target groups within an access panel can be expected to contribute to balancing the panel.

**The rhetoric of messages that communicate incentive issues is therefore only a development of the incentivising discourse contained by the message itself – the invitation to a survey, which in its turn can be op-**

**timised by implementing the segmentation principle of the most appealing incentive to the target group.**

As already emphasised, a good panel should be supported by a complex incentive policy comprising all possible methodologies: points, incentives per completion, prize draws, gifts, donations, shopping vouchers, feedback, top line reports on the main findings etc.

## **Support Messages – The True Social Dialogue**

*Dear (FILL IN NAME),*

*Thank you for your message and please accept our apologies for the inconvenience you suffered.*

*Please be advised that once the message “Movie loaded” appears, you need to click the “next” arrow before being able to see the movie.*

*If this does not solve the problem please send us the link you received in the invitation letter together with your panel number and we will check your personalised access and get back to you. We kindly ask you to send us additional information as to the browser you are using and the type of Internet connection you have.*

*Should you have any more questions or comments please don't hesitate to contact us. We will be contacting you for future surveys.*

*Kind regards,  
The (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Support Team*



*Dear (FILL IN NAME),*

*Thank you for your message. We have now updated your contact details as requested.*

*We will be contacting you for future surveys.*

*Kind regards,  
The (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Support Team*



*Dear (FILL IN NAME),*

*Thank you for your message. At the moment we are installing a new and more powerful server for our current website. This involves moving a lot of information and as a result you may find our page to be unavailable from time to time (as has already happened). We hope that this issue, which also affects us, will shortly be resolved and you will be able to access the Gift Area as usual. We apologise for this delay in using your points. Thank you for your understanding!*

*Kind regards,*

*The (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Support Team*



*Dear (FILL IN NAME),*

*We are very sorry about the situation that has arisen. It is not and has never been our policy to interfere with panel members' privacy. However, in the first form you completed in order to be granted admission to the panel, it was stated that "sometimes we might want to invite other members of your household to participate in online surveys using this email address". By submitting that form together with the names of your household members you implicitly agreed to have them participate in our surveys.*

*Following your request, we will withdraw your family members from our records. You will no longer receive surveys addressed to anyone other than yourself.*

*Kind regards,*

*The (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Support Team*



*Dear (FILL IN NAME),*

*Thank you for your message.*

*Please be advised that the problem you encountered could be being caused by the high privacy settings of your browser, which do not allow*

*temporary Internet files to be stored on your computer. If possible, we suggest you temporarily change your privacy settings to low, medium or medium-high, so as to be able to access the members' area. If you are using Internet Explorer you should click on "Tools" and then "Internet options" where you can change your privacy options.*

*Please also note that after selecting your country by clicking on the (FILL IN COUNTRY) flag, you will need to click on "member centre" and from there you will be able to log into your personal account. The Gift Area will open in a pop-up window so we suggest you disable your pop-up blocker (where applicable) before accessing the Gift Area.*

*We hope this is useful.*

*Kind regards,*

*The (FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Support Team*

Support emails are basically the only true form of dialogue in online panel communication. Despite this it is still far from what people generally understand by dialogue in that it seemingly shares very little of the nature of dialogue between personal selves. Current perception of dialogue is usually that of a dialogue between personal selves. A real dialogue involves the personal self more than the social one, or at least evolves at a level where the social self is subordinated to the personal one.

Explorers of human communication have already identified a vast range of types of monologues and dialogues, often defining one by means of another, as did both Eemeren and Grootendorst, who discovered an "implicit dialogue" behind all monologic argument, and Martin Buber, who identified a "monologue in disguise" behind all dialogue in which participants don't have the other or others in mind in their present and particular being. In his account of human relations developed on the two axes of I-Thou (subject-to-subject) and I-It (subject-to-object) reporting, Martin Buber identified three types of dialogue which have remained referential in the field: genuine dialogue, based on mutual relationships; technical dialogue, which maintains the goal of achieving objective understanding; and monologue, a self-centered relationship with the other. I-Thou relationships are dialogic while I-It relationships are monologic. Somewhere in between resides technical dialogue as a by-product of modern society, engendered solely by the need for objective understanding. Technical dialogue is

driven by the need to understand something and does not need to engage the soul. (Buber 1947: 19 as cited by Smith 2000)

**To what extent are support letters dialogic?** The answer is again informed by factors derived from the specific character of computer-mediated communication.

Being a space of asynchronous mediated encounters, computers appear to favour monologue rather than dialogue. There is still scope, however, for the opposite conclusion when thinking of the synchronous possibilities of computer-mediated communication and its sometimes hyperpersonal effects.

We have already called communication in online market research by access panels one between social selves, where personal aspects are overshadowed by the statement of social identity. And despite being what Martin Buber calls a technical dialogue, this *social dialogue* shares some of its parameters: it is not driven by the urge to develop a personal relationship between researcher and panellist and it arises out of the need for objective understanding.

The online medium, however, gives the dialogue between researcher and panellist an even deeper social character. A major feature of communication in online market research, and one which is derived from precisely its online character, is given by the increased awareness of the social roles played by panellist and researcher when communicating with each other. The lack of personal cues inherent in online environments engenders an increased focus on the social cues that form an integral part of the communication between researcher and panellist, from recruitment to the support letters. Although support letters represent the only communication practice of the market researcher that follows the principles of dialogue – where the recruitment, staging, survey invitation and winner announcement letters take on an overtly monologic form, prompting reaction of another form – the support area is in no way meant for developing personal relationships. On the contrary, given its potential for highlighting the general social character acquired through online panels, it is meant to emphasise the social character of the relationship it fosters.

The support area is an essential part of the panel management. The inclusion of an email address to which questions, comments and complaints can be sent in respect of a particular survey or the entire panel activity is a must for all letters from the market research company to the panellist, from the recruitment email to the support letter itself. Its necessity is implied precisely by the monologic form of the recruitment, staging, survey invitation and winner announcement letters. And while the purpose of communication be-

tween market researcher and panellist is not one that necessarily requires the presence of a dialogue, the possibility of its existing is a crucial psychological factor and, similarly, an important catalyst in the two communicators' acknowledgement of their social roles in relation to the other.

Support communication procedures are at the very heart of access panel activity as one of its founding principles. Availability of support dialogue is ultimately one of the basic elements which helps differentiate between online respondents who are members of access panels and those that come from email lists and mega databases.

Consequently, it is important that these procedures be well-established and support communication optimised by adhering to a number of principles. Before making any recommendations, however, we will look into the rhetoric of support letters, acknowledging the way this is influenced by the fact that support letters are propagated online and thus share the specific character of computer-mediated communication.

First of all, common practice requires that a researcher's support letters be as standardised as possible. As a rule, the development of personal relations is discouraged in a field dealing with statistics, where the validity of findings relies heavily on the honesty of opinions, which in its turn depends on the lack of biases. Consequently, even where the particular nature of the issue raised by the panellist cannot be addressed with a fully standardised formula, it should nonetheless be approached as far as possible using a formula derived from or similar to a standard letter, be it only in the structure of its composition. Telephone support with offline panels (so-called hot lines) generally follows the same pattern, although a fully standardised approach is not a possibility with this form of support.

If the rhetoric of support communication generally obeys principles of standardisation and impersonality in an attempt to prevent support communication from acquiring a personal character and make it as bias-free as possible, then online environments can only serve to enhance its effects. Pragmatically speaking, online support messages reveal a dialogue between social selves. The lack of personal involvement specific to support communication in general is reinforced in practice by the lack of personal cues specific to online environments, thereby adding to the sense of social rather than personal dialogue which informs support communication with online panels.

**Introducing the panellist to a standard formula meant to highlight the social character of the researcher-panellist dialogue at the expense of the personal one is a basic feature of the rhetoric developed online by the researcher's support discourse.**

Each market research company develops its own routines in the panel support communication area. A standard is first established and respected by the panel controller team in terms of addressing and introducing support answers, which in most cases also takes account of cultural parameters. As with offline addressing formulas, online addressing formulas are culture-bound and therefore it can be difficult to apply exactly the same words and standards in emails addressed to panellists of different cultural backgrounds. Producing support answers in order to introduce a routine in handling panel support communication is, therefore, more a question of adjusting than translating. Thanking the panellist for their message/concern/interest etc. and following all the rules of etiquette in introducing and ending the letter are, however, common practice.

Standardisation is nonetheless both an effect and a condition imposed by the online medium through which support communication is propagated. On the one hand, it is an effect of the lack of personal cues specific to online environments, which reinforces the lack of personal cues inherent to support communication in general. On the other hand, it is a condition imposed by the online mediums' favouring of individuation and uninhibited behaviour. As three features inherent to online environments which can easily lead to the development of personal relations and even hyperpersonal communication, individuation, increased self-awareness and uninhibited behaviour only serve to enhance the importance of featuring and obeying standard routines when it comes to support communication.

From chapter 2 we know that individuation involves higher levels of private self-awareness and lower levels of public self-awareness. Consequently, the online medium prevents the author of the support e-letter from assessing the way they are perceived by the email receiver. Left without any cue as to the way they are being perceived, the author does not have the objectivity to adjust their tone to fit the social role they are meant to play. This role – in the case of most support letters – has already been established by a communication activity already initiated through other communication practices. As a consequence, the market research company uses standard support letters, designed so as to reinforce the social identity the author is supposed to share as part of the panel communication.

A similar effect to individuation can be seen in that of uninhibited behaviour, which is another feature of the computer-mediated communication. As already discussed, online environments have been found to yield lower social desirability scores and lower social anxiety scores. They also seem to favour increased self-disclosure. All of these, catalysed by flaming support emails from the panellists, can turn the support area into one of flaming communication if it is not given a firm character of social dialogue.

Standardisation, therefore, is on the one hand a condition for online support letters and on the other an effect of the online environment. It is quite essential for market research companies to acknowledge the importance of featuring a number of standard procedures which regulate support communication with online panels.

Support letters represent a particularly good opportunity to increase participation in surveys. Panellists use the support area for technical problems related to their survey participation, to cancel their membership or that of other members of the household, to make changes to the data stored in the database about themselves or their household, to complain or show appreciation for prizes or ask specific questions related to the incentive system, but also to submit suggestions for improvements, enquire about market research procedures or results of their activity, communicate opinions relating to their collaboration with the market research company or their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their membership in the access panel.

Theoretically the market research company cannot afford to let any panellist support letters go unanswered, though the suggestions they make are not always practicable, their comments and proposals not always in keeping with the principles of market research and not all complaints can be solved in a timely fashion owing to external factors. The more panellists see that their opinions are valued, the more they will get involved in the panel activity. Panellists may take the way their panel-related opinions are valued as an indicator of the way their survey-related opinions can make a difference. **Giving feedback to show that each opinion communicated to the support address is valued is therefore a basic principle of the rhetoric the market research company has developed with online support letters.**

To go even further, feedback is not only a question of how but also one of when. In online-mediated communication, where questions of how are difficult to solve owing to the lack of modality cues accompanying the communication, the issue of when is even more important.

Chronemics has already been discussed as an instance of nonverbal cues in computer-mediated communication.

As defined by Hans-Peter Krüger in his article “Speech chronemics – a hidden dimension of speech. Theoretical background, measurement and clinical validity”, the term “speech chronemics” characterises a research strategy which extracts from the physical qualities of the speech signal only the pattern of ons (“speaking”) and offs (“pausing”). (Krüger 1989)

As early as 1995, in an article published in the *Journal of Organizational Computing* Walther and Tidwell acknowledged that although computer-



mediated communication (CMC) can be described as lacking in nonverbal cues, affecting the nature of interpersonal interaction via the medium, much CMC conveys nonverbal cues in terms of chronemics, or time-related messages. On describing and analysing an experiment to assess two time variations (the time of day a message was sent, and the time until a reply was received), Walther and Tidwell conclude there to have been significant interaction between these variables and the task-orientation or socio-emotional orientation of the verbal messages, which affected perceptions of the communicators' intimacy/liking or dominance/submissiveness. (Walther 1995)

Applying chronemics to panel communication in online market research would probably be most fruitful in the support area. It is here that the time interval between emails can make a visible difference. Experience shows that delayed answers from the support team can result in flaming or loss of interest. On the other hand, too quick an answer may function as a stimulus for panellists to continue the dialogue and attempt to turn it into a personal one. **Therefore, establishing and respecting a proper routine interval for answering support emails is another basic principle of online panel management.**

As a summary of the principles behind the rhetoric of market research company support emails and as recommendations for the way support communication practices and routines can be improved for researcher, we would like to emphasise the importance of:

- **Introducing the panellist to a standard formula.** Standardisation is an effect of the online environment, given the latter's complete lack of cues, but also a condition of online support letters, considering how easily they could otherwise turn into personal, even flaming dialogue. Standardisation is the only guaranteed way of preventing individuation, increased self-disclosure and uninhibited behaviour, derived from the very nature of computer-mediated communication, from turning the support area into personal, even flaming communication. In order to ensure the dialogue preserves a firm social character it is essential for market research companies to acknowledge the importance of featuring a number of standard procedures to regulate support communication with online panels.
- **Giving feedback to all support emails from panellists, including messages that announce changes to recorded data, complaints that cannot be dealt with immediately, suggestions that cannot be put into practice and enquiries which cannot be answered in full according to the principles of market research.** While it is

not always possible to meet panellists' expectations when answering their emails, showing panellists that the opinions they communicate to the support address are valued is a basic principle of the rhetoric the market research company has developed with online support letters. It is therefore important that the market research company establish a number of routines through which to answer all emails received from panellists, even if it only means reassuring them that their suggestions have been taken into account.

- **Establishing and respecting a proper routine interval for answering support emails.** Setting up support handling time routines is another basic principle of online panel management. Where chronemics is one of the few, if not the only, social context cue available to participants in online panel communication, any unpredictable behaviour in terms of feedback promptness runs a higher risk of being interpreted as lack of involvement than it does with offline, where there are plenty of other cues to compensate. Consequently, panel management routines should not include overly large time variations when answering support letters.

## Panellist Website and Newsletters

### Panellist Web Page

Among panel communication practices, the panellist web page is the closest to the concept of interface between market researcher and panellist. As a minimum, a panellist website should contain five pages:

- ABOUT US
- DATA PROTECTION
- INCENTIVES/GIFT AREA
- FAQ
- CONTACT

As a background page, ABOUT US is basically a source of information about the online panel in the context of other panels belonging to the market research company and about the market research company itself in the context of the market research world. Figures can be provided, together with the current standing of the company in relation to other market research companies. It can even contain details of the principles governing market research activities worldwide.

The DATA PROTECTION page is essentially for reference. All market research companies are supposed to be members of organisations that regulate conduct in the industry. As it is supposed to reinforce the confidentiality of personal data and the use of survey-related data for statistical purposes only, the DATA PROTECTION page necessarily refers to market research associations and societies whose codes of conduct govern the activity of the market research company. Using market research examples and by citing data protection codes, the market research company reassures the panellist of its compliance with the strictest rules of data privacy.

The INCENTIVES/GIFT AREA page has a practical rather than reassuring function. According to the incentivising system adopted by the company, the INCENTIVES/GIFT AREA page is there to serve practical purposes, such as listing winners or objects won in different prize draws; providing updated records of panellist points according survey participation; displaying lists of items that can be purchased with points earned; explaining bonuses and other actions through which panellists can receive gifts or earn points; stating the charity organisations to which the market research company makes donations for different surveys; not to mention providing detailed descriptions of the incentives policy of the company relative to each of its panels.

The FAQ corner is “default” feature of any website. Setting up the FAQ corner on a panellist web page is a simple exercise given the availability of support area experience. The support area itself is a depository of frequently asked questions. We know from experience that these questions can include a wide range of topics, such as membership inquiries, completion habits and rules, types of research surveys and questionnaires, survey results and even the interpretation of results, technical issues, data privacy and enquiries related to the rewards policy.

The CONTACT page is another “default” of any website. The support address provided here is usually the same as the email address provided in the market researcher’s messages to its panellists.

**It is the Internet which makes the existence of panellist websites possible. Panellist websites are fully confined to online environments. Using them both for practical purposes and to strengthen panel communication and enhance the cohesion of panel activity is, however, an element which is fully subordinated to the socially-oriented communication between market researcher and panellist. Panellist web pages can only serve to enrich a paradigm of communication practices more socially-oriented in online than offline mediums.**

We recommend that the market researcher:

- **Make the panellist website as informative as possible.**
- **Constantly update the panellist website, and especially the Gift Area page.**
- **Constantly update the FAQ section with questions received from the support area.** FAQ should reflect changes in panellists' perception of their membership.
- **Make the DATA PROTECTION page a reference page.** This can include hyperlinks to organisations and associations the market research company is a member of and to principles of market research activity the company abides by; it can also include some brief information on the codes of conduct complied with and links to further information.
- **Feature small polls on the site.** These can either be on topics of panel management and membership satisfaction, thereby helping the company evaluate its own procedures; or they can relate to issues considered of interest for later inclusion in newsletters.

## Newsletter

### *EDITORIAL*

*Dear Panel Member,*

*As we are reaching the end of another fantastic year, we have decided to offer you a special edition of the newsletter focused on the season's celebrations.*

*To get you into the festive spirit, we have prepared an article on Christmas shopping, which most of you seem to have started – well, at least according to the poll on our website. On a more serious note, more and more of the British population are going online, as can be read in our article ... and surely even more (if not all of us!) will make (and break) New Year's resolutions!*

*Last but not least, on behalf of everybody at (FILL IN COMPANY NAME), I wish to thank all of you for your co-operation during 2004 and wish you a very happy and prosperous new year!*

*Kind regards,  
(FILL IN NAME)*

### *Online Panel News/Surveys*

#### *Top 6 New Year's Resolutions*

*Here's the 6 most popular New Year's Resolutions the British will make next year; the question is, just how many of them will be broken within the first 6 weeks of 2005?*

- *Give up smoking*
- *Start going to the gym regularly*
- *Start looking for a new job or start your own business*
- *Start a new relationship*
- *Start going for a promotion*
- *Start eating a healthier diet*

#### *23 Million English Surfers in 2004*

*In the past 12 months, the number of people actively surfing the Web from home each month in the UK has grown by 15% to 23 million, according to Nielsen//Net Ratings. According to the research, the use of high-speed Internet connections has also risen dramatically. In the 12 months to October 2004, the number of households in the UK surfing the Internet at high speed rose from 5.3 million people to 11.5 million people, an increase of 117%. High-speed connections are most popular with households of five or more people, while the research shows that smaller households tend to favour slower connection speeds of 56k.*

*Over 50% of the 22.8 million UK surfers regularly accessing the Web from home each month are accessing at high speed. Those with fast connections spend twice as long online each month at over 32hrs than their lower speed counterparts. They also view an average of 1,444 pages per month, more than three times as many as those accessing at low speed.*

*(FILL IN COMPANY NAME) Panel is a monthly newsletter addressed to participants in online surveys. Your opinions and feedback are important to us. To send your comments and suggestions for the (FILL IN COUNTRY) version or to unsubscribe, kindly write to (FILL IN NAME AND ADDRESS).*

Panellist newsletters are for the most part a collection of survey results, with a part of the polls being home-made, i.e. conducted among the same panellists that the newsletter is addressed to. These polls are normally conducted for the sake of entertainment, being placed as such on the same panellist website. Seldom (if at all) acquainted with the results of the surveys they normally take part in, this can encourage panellist curiosity in these matters. The panellist newsletter is an excellent tool for satisfying panellist curiosity about interpretations of statistical data.

Essentially, the newsletter is meant to be both entertaining and informative, while at the same time demonstrative of the way the survey activity functions. Wherever possible, it should be used strategically to convey top line reports about the main findings of different research studies for which the panel was used, turning the newsletter itself into an important component of the incentivising policy of the company. Although the results of particular surveys they have taken part in are not available for public display, interpreted results of small polls placed on the panellist website can make for a good low-scale demonstration of the research activity. These can be accompanied by other statistical data considered entertaining or interesting.

**Panellist newsletters are a communicative tool that is at the same time powerful and convenient for use by market research companies in their communication with the panellists. While at times even used to support the incentivising policy of the market research company, they are a result of the opportunities presented by online environments and should be used extensively to strengthen panel communication. Newsletter subscription, however, is not mandatory for panel subscription and all newsletters should contain links for unsubscribing from newsletter membership.**

## Conclusions

The market researcher communications are elements of an interaction paradigm fully circumscribed to the specific influence of online environments. The pragmatic analysis applied to them has enabled the formulation of a number of recommendations.

To summarise, it is advisable that:

### Online Recruitment Letters

- contain the project manager's signature as a reinforcement of the sense of (social) dialogue it is meant to foster in the panellist, while introducing the author as if already expected, mentioning the email address of the provider-mediator in the final lines.

- make the social identity of the market researcher salient.
- present market research as a unique opportunity.
- treat incentive matters as issues of secondary importance while at the same time not losing sight of panellists' segmented preferences and their psychology of immediate compensation when speaking of rewards.

### **Online Staging Letter**

- are used in panel communication in order to reassure recent panellists of their panel membership, reinforce social identity parameters introduced by recruitment message and generally provide all the information panellists might find of use about the functioning of the panel paradigm.
- anticipate and segment as much as possible the information to be provided to panellists in order to address as many areas of interest as possible.
- use to the full the transitivity of online environments (by use of hyperlinks to websites or other information sources) in order to introduce as much information as necessary about the functioning of the panel paradigm.

### **Online Invitations to Surveys**

- be kept to a minimum.
- always provide both a participating and an unsubscribing link.
- be addressed with the name of the panellist and signed with the name of the project manager conducting the study.

### **Online Support Messages**

- introduce the panellist to a standard formula.
- give feedback on all support emails sent by panellists, including messages announcing changes in recorded data, complaints which cannot be dealt with immediately, suggestions which are not practicable and enquiries which cannot be answered fully in view of the principles of market research.
- establish and respect a proper routine interval for answering support emails.

### Panellist Websites

- be as informative as possible.
- be updated constantly, especially the Gift Area page.
- constantly update the FAQ section with questions received from the support area.
- make the DATA PROTECTION page a reference page, with possible inclusion of hyperlinks.
- contain small polls, the results of which can be used as subjects for **regular panellist newsletters** to strengthen the communication between the market research company and its panellists.

In order to further reinforce the logic of these recommendations, the market research company should explicitly assist the panellists in finding intrinsic social motivations for their membership. The pragmatic analysis above shows that the online medium strongly supports this dimension, which, in its way, is typical of any market researcher's communication with respondents in research studies.

More than incentives, curiosity (born of interest-raising topics or procedure) and entertainment, the sense of social involvement – coupled with the view of market research as an empowering opportunity whereby opinions can make a difference on a macro level – is a functioning warranty for an access panel. It guarantees efficient recruitment for the market researcher, the experience of real involvement by the panellist in the social role panel membership supposes and active participation by the panellist in surveys in the long run. The market researcher's discourse is a first proof that the online medium plays a significant role in stressing the social dimension of communication practices in market research through access panels. This being the case, the recommendations given after investigating the influence of the online medium on each of the market researcher's online messages to its panellists serve in effect to emphasise this influence more strongly and also stress the social nature of each panel encounter. As pointed out, the importance of the market researcher's rhetoric is big enough to yield more involved panellists.

For market research companies with expertise in controlling the data yielded by their access panels (according to the standards exposed in chapter 1), conducting research with more involved panellists will increase the quality of research insofar as it guarantees better panel recruitment, main-



tenance and running. Similarly, better recruitment, higher quality maintenance and more efficient running will in turn lead to more professional use of the panel methodology.

CHAPTER 4:

## Finding the Bottle: The Rhetoric of the Online Panellist

*If you ever think you're too small to be effective, you've never been in bed with a mosquito!*

(Wendy Lesko)

### The Online Trend in Market Research Between Collection Method and Perception Stage

On being asked to relate their experiences as members of an online access panel, most participants in an online panellist satisfaction focus group<sup>12</sup> evoked selection and anonymity-related feelings in equal measure. In other words, people feel they have been selected for their views and opinions, while also feeling comfortable about conveying their views and opinions in a more impersonal and anonymous way than with traditional research. Most answers clearly show a positive perception of having been chosen for online surveys mixed strangely with an equally positive perception as to the impersonal character of the online environment as a research medium.

***What is your general impression about being selected for online surveys? How important is your panel membership to you?***

*"I am quite impressed to be chosen – maybe my comments are important after all" (Kevin, UK)*

*"Being chosen isn't the greatest thing in the world. Lots of people fill in surveys so I am not unique but I do like to get my opinion across."*  
(Alan, UK)

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<sup>12</sup> The session of focus groups on panellist satisfaction issues held by Ipsos Interactive Services, the online centre of market research of the Ipsos Group in September 2004 included two-hour group discussions with 8-10 members of IIS' online access panels in U.K., France and Italy.

*"I look forward to carrying out a survey and I feel that I have been selected for a reason i.e. according to my likes and interests." (Gino, UK)*

*"I feel really good when I'm selected for stuff – it makes me think that my opinion is valued" (Jason, UK)*

*"I always read market research studies, I like to be part of the public opinion, to be able to express my opinion" (Chiara, ITALY)*

*"Make interactive use of the Internet worthily" (Rosanna, ITALY)*

*"I like to give my opinions, and once I have undertaken the task, here I am" (Demis, ITALY)*

*"Be part of a group whose opinions are interesting!" (Francois, FRANCE)*

*"Being member of a panel is somehow like paying a service of a certain fashion" (Corinne, FRANCE)*

*"We already accept to give our time for everybody's benefit" (Muriel, FRANCE)*

***What do you think about online surveys' being quite impersonal as compared to telephone or in person surveys?***

*"But that's good in some ways" (Jason, UK)*

*"I sometimes think that it is better to be impersonal as it is more anonymous and more worthwhile for a survey" (Kevin, UK)*

*"You get more truthful data" (Jason, UK)*

*"Also, it is so quick and easy to complete a survey online rather than traditional means via post and telephone." (Gino, UK)*

***Any downsides to the surveys being more impersonal and anonymous?***

*"No" (Lorene, UK)*

*"I think when it's written online you have longer to think about question" (Joanne, UK)*

*"But I must admit, I did like talking to someone" (Jason, UK)*

*“That not to say that the surveys are not valuable, just the method of collection of data lacks charm and wit. But by its very impersonal nature can you rely on the data collected.” (Alan, UK)*

*“If they are long and repetitive you cannot express your annoyance with the survey taker” (Kevin, UK)*

Remembering the theories of computer-mediated communication and the distribution of roles in market research through access panels, the sense of *anonymous elect* which market research panellists tend to develop online is not difficult to account for. On the one hand, the panellists’ sharing a psychology of the elected is an effect of the rhetoric the market researcher has developed with access panels in general. Having joined an access panel for which they have been “selected”, the respondent to surveys has become one of the elected few whose opinions represent a whole market. On the other hand, the sense of anonymity the online panellist shares is simply the result of the cueless character of computer-mediated communication. Although one of the elected few, the online panellist has no chance of coming into contact and establishing personal communication with either other elected individuals or the market researcher. The panellist-respondent to online surveys is at the same time anonymous and one of the elected few – two attributes which appear divergent but whose coexistence is supported by the approach to the self of *The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects*. SIDE argues that anonymity and immersion in the group do not result in a loss of the self; rather they enhance the importance of social identity at the expense of personal identity. Therefore, since conformity to group norms is enhanced rather than diminished, this sense of being elected is even more relevant with online than with offline panellists. If computer-mediated communication environments accentuate awareness of the other’s social identity where social identity of the group is salient, the anonymity and lack of identifiability inherent in most CMC when a social identity is salient serves to strengthen the psychology of the elected shared by members of access panels. In SIDE, where the group is known and its characteristics can be inferred, the lack of personal information can in fact increase awareness of social identity and accentuate the unity of the group. **In online access panels, the anonymity inherent to computer-mediated communication increases the panellists’ awareness of being elected and accentuates the unity of the panel. The online panellists’ increased self-awareness embraces the rather paradoxical form of the anonymous elect.**

Interestingly, despite finding the online collection method to be lacking in charm and wit, panellists nonetheless see the impersonal character of online surveys as a positive factor. The lower the panellist's chances of becoming annoyed with the survey taker, the higher the researcher's ability to rely on the data collected. Of course, what is interesting here is not the existence of the concern for biases but its also being shared by respondents. Having changed from a couple of years ago, panellists themselves now consider anonymity in surveys to be worthwhile and advocate the necessity of features like impersonality and anonymity in collecting truthful data. The characteristics of computer-mediated communication we have retained from the three theories introduced in chapter 2 have all been derived from what panellists call *impersonality* and *anonymity* and relate to the ability to collect more *truthful* and *reliable* data: democratising effect (equal participation), uninhibited behaviour (lower social desirability scores and lower social anxiety scores), increased self-disclosure, social and relational development, individuation (higher level of private self-awareness and lower level of public self-awareness), impression development and increased awareness of social identity, higher impact of norms and increased unity of the group. Intuitively, users who use computer mediums for communication have a fairly clear idea of the effects the online environments have upon their communication with one another. Panellists today have also developed an awareness of the possible biases which could affect the truthfulness of research data.

Without being professional, today's survey respondents are market research-aware. As will be shown, the online stage in market research is not just a stage in the evolution of collection methods used in the field; it is also a stage of maturity and commitment in the respondents' perception of market research as a whole.

## Membership Perception

*What is your main reason for being a panellist?*

*"I would like to have some influence on the world around me." (Kevin, UK)*

*"Because of the rewards and, in the main, I enjoy filling out the surveys – they're fun." (Jason, UK)*

*"Knowing that I have some influence on products and services, no matter how big or small that influence is." (Gino, UK)*

*"I like to be the first to try new things and being a panel member puts me in the line of finding things out first" (Lorene, UK)*

*"Not really sure I just love being involved I enjoy the surveys" (Joanne, UK)*

*"I enjoy filling in surveys (sad really)" (Alan, UK)*

*"I like to know of new products and services before they hit the rest of the public. The rewards are a bonus, in fact, with some survey companies I have enough credits/cash to make a claim, but I haven't gone ahead with that request." (John, UK)*

*"I like to express my opinion." (Rosanna, ITALY)*

*"For the opportunity to win prizes" (Demis, ITALY)*

*"Being part of a panel is important to me. I love being able to make things progress" (Sophie, FRANCE)*

*"The brands find out whether their products are known to the public or not" (Gontran, FRANCE)*

*"For the peace of my mind" (Francois, FRANCE)*

*"It's also knowing of new products or services which are maybe going to exist" (Muriel, FRANCE)*

Seemingly, people choose to become panellists for the sake of fun, curiosity, incentives, the sense of being the first to hear and try new things, the pleasure of influencing the world around them and not least of what could be called social involvement, i.e. the ability to contribute to the improvement of things. Moreover, the findings of a panellist satisfaction study<sup>13</sup> conducted with a panel representative sample of 5,000 online panellists from 5 different countries show that the top reason for being a panellist is social involvement.

<sup>13</sup> The panellist satisfaction study conducted by Ipsos Interactive Services, the online market research center of the Ipsos Group has targeted a panel representative sample of 5,000 panellists. IIS' online access panels count over 200,000 panellists covering the most important markets in Europe, among which Germany, U.K., France, Spain, Italy, Holland, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark and Switzerland. For a more detailed view on the study, please find the charts annexed (Appendix 1).

***What was the main reason you decided to join the Access Panel?***

|                                                                                           |       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| <i>I was curious what it was all about</i>                                                | 15.1% |
| <i>I wanted to contribute with my opinions and improve products and services</i>          | 43.1% |
| <i>A good way to make more money</i>                                                      | 12.6% |
| <i>I like to be the first to try new things</i>                                           | 4.7%  |
| <i>I like to know of new products and services before they hit the rest of the public</i> | 9.5%  |
| <i>Answering surveys is fun</i>                                                           | 13.4% |
| <i>Other</i>                                                                              | 1.6%  |

The chance to hear about new products and services before they become available to the rest of the public, the ability of being the first to try new things, curiosity and potential for enjoyment – all these are reasons which taken separately are rather small, but when put together make up the second most important reason for being a panellist. Different though they may be for those who insist on refining the psychological approach to the driving factors in panel recruitment, all these criteria based on curiosity and entertainment yield panellists whose potential to commit themselves makes their panel membership reliable for market researchers. While sheer curiosity alone may be less of an appealing recruitment criterion for market researchers, reasons like curiosity related to new products or testing abilities and potential for enjoyment offer a guarantee that people will fill in surveys for the sake of it and not for money. The number of panellists who do it purely for money, however, though very small, should normally raise questions and catch the attention of all market research companies who care about the quality of their panel. Nonetheless, if the quality of an access panel is ultimately not difficult to check through panellist satisfaction focus groups and surveys, improving it requires strict panel rules and a cleverly-contrived incentives policy (see chapter 1: subchapter 4, 4.7) especially where the panel recruitment strategy applied does not obey the principles accounted for (see chapter 1: subchapter 4, 4.7 and chapter 3: subchapter 4).

***Which was the most pleasant moment from your overall experience with online surveys?***

*“I feel proud when i see the new products in the shops and know i have help test them or done surveys on them” (Joanne, UK)*

*“I cannot remember when but I did a survey on the packaging design of 'Wrigley's Extra Mints' and later that year they were introduced to the market exactly as I had thought.” (Gino, UK)*

*“I like doing the long surveys that give me a choice of reward – I don't know about any of the others but – the points that you get for some surveys the rewards are quite restrictive (Jason, UK)*

*“Well it all depends what the survey is about, some I find boring some I find pleasing to do, but I feel it's important to complete them all as honestly as possible” (Alan, UK)*

*“Simply the pleasure to be able to express my own opinion. reading the results, I discover I am the average Italian, a part of the index of satisfaction, of the auditel, of the share, therefore a part of the...people” (Rosanna, ITALY)*

Besides being the reason for joining the access panel, the selection of the most pleasant moment from panellists' overall experiences with online surveys can also help in judging their membership perception. Choosing a moment of reassurance that is able to stress the importance of opinion contribution as the most pleasant experience of being a panel member can only serve to reinforce the number of panellists for whom social involvement was the main reason for their panel membership. Interestingly, there are a significant number of panellists whose most pleasant moment from their overall experience with online surveys is the satisfaction of knowing they have helped in the launch of a product that is available on the market. All in all, however, both qualitative and quantitative research shows that membership perception among today's online panellists falls under the sign of social involvement and the satisfaction of contributing and helping improve things in the world around them. Panellists are NOT in it for money. Moreover, membership perception takes shape and gains consistency under the sign of a far more self-aware respondent to market research surveys. There is a relatively high sense of involvement with online



panellists involved in in-depth discussions on panel membership issues, coupled by a high level of self-awareness. As already argued, self-awareness in respondents to online market research surveys is as much a consequence of market research having been established as a field, as it is an effect of online communication as a stage in conducting market research studies.

## Perception of Incentives

*What type of rewards would each of you prefer?*

*“CASH” (Lorene, UK)*

*“Would you have to declare cash to tax man” (Joanne, UK)*

*“To put it bluntly, I think people will want cash or shopping vouchers.” (John, UK)*

*“Yeah cash would be good but companies seem to like giving vouchers because the outlay is more for cash so you'd end up getting a smaller reward.” (Jason, UK)*

*“Then there is those who dont work and are on benifits could they get in trouble getting cash.” (Joanne, UK)*

*“There are some panels that reward you with ipoints ([www.ipoints.co.uk](http://www.ipoints.co.uk)), but the value of these points has dropped dramatically over time.” (John, UK)*

*“I must admit I find the idea of rewards pretty discouraging, if you offer rewards that are too generous the interviewees would then tend to give answers that the survey company wants.” (Alan, UK)*

Among the brief expectations for the future listed in a book on consumer panels, the second edition of which was published a few years ago, the authors also mention an increase in the level of incentives for online panels. In their opinion, the reasons why online panels currently require fewer incentives than offline panels can only be the lower level of representativity of online panels (the members of which are people who might have time that is less valuable or may need the money more desperately) or the initial

novelty of working online being worth the extra effort. “In the long run, both reasons result in unrepresentative results and in turnover after the novelty of the technology wears off”<sup>14</sup>

Three years on, not much seems to have changed. On the contrary, according to our latest findings, incentives are in 87.4% of cases not the reason for panel membership. Thus the overwhelming majority of members of access panels are not in it for the money. That said, incentives are as interesting an issue to panellists as to the market research companies involved in recruiting, maintaining and using access panels.

The online medium raises specific problems, on the one hand limiting the range of incentives the market researcher can afford to offer, while on the other it has great potential for adjusting the rewards system and enables the market research company to refine its incentivising policy. In practice, market research companies today are able to and do reward their online panellists in a variety of ways, with a refined incentivising policy being an index of well established maintenance policy (See chapter 1: subchapter 4, 4.7). How panellists perceive and rank these reward strategies is an issue which the focus groups – source of the verbatim above – have provided interesting feedback on. Their findings, however, are fully confirmed by the findings of the quantitative study: panellists prefer cash.

|                                                                                                |              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| <i>According to your interests, which is the incentive type that is most appealing to you?</i> |              |
| <i>Points</i>                                                                                  | <i>16.7%</i> |
| <i>Prize draw</i>                                                                              | <i>8.9%</i>  |
| <i>Cash</i>                                                                                    | <i>62.9%</i> |
| <i>Donation/Charities</i>                                                                      | <i>3.3%</i>  |
| <i>Receive topline report about some of the surveys you have taken part in</i>                 | <i>5.2%</i>  |
| <i>Other</i>                                                                                   | <i>3.0%</i>  |

<sup>14</sup> Sudman, Seymour, and Brian Wansink (2002), Consumer Panels, 2nd Edition, American Marketing Association, p. 99

Interestingly, online panellists are generally aware of all the problems associated with this incentive strategy. Cash is liable to taxation; choosing cash may involve more difficulties for market research companies and smaller rewards for panellists. Still 62.9% of the panellists surveyed preferred *cash* to any other incentive strategy. To market research companies this is a valuable finding despite *cash* being an incentive strategy avoided by default due to taxation problems and its being an unattractive form of rewarding people who generally share a non-pragmatic perception of their membership. The value of this information, however, can only be revealed by looking at things from the panellist's perspective, which can be easily done by reversing the findings of the chart.

In the market research company's view, *cash* has no place as an incentive strategy. In the panellist's view, it ranks first with an impressive 62.9%. Given that *cash* is a strategy to be avoided by default, the ability to relate these two apparently irreconcilable views to each other and optimise the value of the information contained by each involves a shift of perspective on the part of the market researcher. From the market researcher's perspective, the information is useless: if *cash* has no place in the context of incentive strategies, it can hardly be valued in the context of the incentive strategies that are in place. From the panellist's perspective, however, it can be of some use and leads to a number of valuable conclusions: if *cash* is the strategy most panellists would go for first then all the incentive strategies in place should be reconsidered; while knowing that *cash* is an incentive strategy avoided by default by online market research companies, this preference should be looked at as involving higher or lower levels of dissatisfaction with the incentive strategies currently employed. For instance, where people rank *points* as the number one favourite incentive strategy, the preference for *cash* implies that *points* is the least dissatisfying incentive strategy. Likewise, instead of thinking that *prize draws* are ranked third on the most-wanted list, market research companies should acknowledge *prize draws* as the second least dissatisfying way of rewarding panellists, while *the ability to receive top line reports about some of the surveys* is not number four among preferred incentivising policies, rather it is number four in the hierarchy of the least dissatisfying policies. Finally, *donations/charities* are not the least wanted but the most unwanted rewarding system.

The result of this exercise of shifting perspective and transcribing the findings of the survey from the market researcher's perspective to the panellist's perspective can be expressed as below:

|                                                                                |       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| <i>Points</i>                                                                  | 0.45% |
| <i>Prize draws</i>                                                             | 0.23% |
| <i>Donation/Charities</i>                                                      | 0.08% |
| <i>Receive topline report about some of the surveys you have taken part in</i> | 0.14% |
| <i>Other</i>                                                                   | 0.08% |

Clearly, the above chart brings us closer to the panellist’s reality. The advantages of the suggested perspective shift are quite significant. Essentially, it helps interpret an ideal picture (that of what the panellists would rather have) in the context of reality (of what the market research company can give). Besides offering insight into how what is offered by the market research company corresponds to the expectations and desires of the panellists, it also says a lot to companies for which a panellist satisfaction study does not end with acknowledging findings like those in the chart below:

|                                                                                                                                        |      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| <b><i>Thinking about the Incentives you have received after completing our surveys, how would you rate the following criteria?</i></b> |      |
| <i>The opportunity to earn points</i>                                                                                                  | 6.13 |
| <i>The opportunity to participate in prize draws</i>                                                                                   | 6.10 |
| <i>The opportunity to donate money to charities</i>                                                                                    | 6.23 |
| <i>The opportunity to receive gifts</i>                                                                                                | 6.22 |
| <i>The opportunity to receive shopping vouchers or cash/stamps</i>                                                                     | 6.31 |
| <i>The opportunity to combine each type of incentive</i>                                                                               | 6.27 |
| <i>The overall satisfaction with our general incentive policy</i>                                                                      | 6.20 |

Findings, as those above, are clearly worth using as a first step in identifying the satisfaction of the panel members with the different incentivising strategies applied. They are, however, not of much use when it comes to judging the system as a whole and finding ways to improve it. Admittedly, what panellists first say by opting for *cash* is that each panellist is unique and that, if rewarded, they need to be rewarded individually. The fact that *points* is the least dissatisfying of the incentive strategies in place reinforces this state-

ment of uniqueness and individuality. *Points* offer a certain degree of liberty as they can be exchanged individually. *Prize draws* already introduce an undemocratic principle into the rewarding, making it even less eligible, while *donations* and *top line reports* involve interests of too private a nature to be easily applied to others as well. By considering the field of other incentive strategies envisaged by panellists as desirable, we are left with a varied range of choices from cinema tickets and mobile phone top up cards to discounted travel tickets. Though it may seem difficult to satisfy such differing tastes, the market research company can optimise the use of this information and refine its incentivising policy as much as possible in order to address as many categories of panellists as possible. Where neither individual incentivising nor giving cash is possible, segmenting the panel as much as possible in terms of incentive preferences by age, sex, social class etc. is a good middle way. As already explained (see chapter 1: subchapter 4, 4.7), retention levels with online access panels can easily be raised by refining the incentive strategies applied to each individual panel. This refining and segmenting policy, apart from increasing panel stability and strengthening panellist loyalty, can also contribute greatly to balancing the panel.

## Perception of Hotline

Panel members can contact the hotline for technical difficulties, unsubscribe requests, personal info changes, incentives, comments, observations and suggestions related to the whole surveying activity or parts of it etc. Here are some examples:

*The link doesn't work. Takes me to a screen saying thanks for completing the survey.*

*Cheers,  
Chris*

*Please unsubscribe me from your site, I have tried to use the 'Unsubscribe' option on your website, but I cannot remember the password. I do not have time to fill in the constant surveys. My Panel Number is D02000012291*

*Regards,  
Mat Taylor*

*The survey doesn't work properly.  
On the first page 2 of the items are the same.  
In the 3rd question it asks you to select 3 of the most important but only  
is able to be selected at a time.*

*Misha Gopaul*

*Hi*

*I'm afraid your link does not allow me to complete the 5th survey, I  
haven't yet answered any questions. I opened the link using the Opera  
browser and it all went wrong from there. Can you reset the question-  
naire for me? Thanks*

*Simon Hulse*

Even the support area allows for segmentations. Practitioners know that the problems encountered by panellists are recurrent and can normally be included into a number of categories enabling the panel controllers to standardise their communication with panellists. The hotline, on the other hand, is an area to which technical dialogue belongs by definition. However standardised, the technical communication between panellist and panel controller still shares dialogic features, meaning that people appreciate promptness of reply, interest expressed in their problems, and the politeness and effectiveness of the answer, not to mention the overall pragmatic implications of the language used, including tone, level of politeness, attitude mirrored by formulae of address and ending, and of course the content of the email.

As already emphasised, the dialogue in online panel communication is almost fully evolving between the social selves of the interlocutors, and messages from panellists are not hard to group into a number of categories according to the nature of the problems raised. However unpredictable at the level of expression, where each of us is different and language choices are as unique, as is each and every person, grouping panellist messages to the support area is no more difficult than coding their open answers in surveys. The above samples are simply examples of technical problems and unsubscribing requests, the recurrence of which is not hard to predict. Similarly, panel members can contact the hotline to announce changes to

their personal data, announce other types of technical problems, inquire about incentives or confirm receipt of prizes, comment on the newsletter or website or make observations and suggestions about the quality of surveys, formulation of questions, answer options, layout and design or the ability to move in the survey etc. They may also send emails that cast doubt over the activity or reputation of the company in the market research field – after all, flaming is one of the major effects that the characteristics of the online environment as a communication medium have upon communication.

There are many supporters of the cues-filtered-out perspective who stress the depersonalising implications of social anonymity and its disinhibiting effect with CMC. Some of these – supporters of the so-called filtered-out perspective – have developed real theories of flaming, which is how they termed the uninhibited behaviour that resulted from the CMC environment being less personal and less socially emotional (due to the constraints of perceived cues in the interaction and consequently the lack of “social presence”). The stronger the feelings of anonymity, the weaker the constraints of etiquette and social differentiation and more extreme, self-centred and unregulated people’s behaviour. As a consequence, the lack of social cues in CMC discourages awareness of others, encouraging anti-normative, aggressive, uninhibited behaviour termed “flaming” through a corresponding reduction in self-focus (See chapter 2: subchapter 2).

The dialogue between panellist and panel controller is exposed to flaming as much as any computer-mediated dialogue. However, if we acknowledge flaming as a danger of panel communication using a hotline, then standardisation of answers is surely an effective tool to use as counter measure.

## **Conclusions**

All too often the entire issue of market research-aware respondents has been viewed as one of professional respondents. Professionalism in answering surveys implies the ability to predict the purpose behind each question and use it so as not to be screened out. Professional respondents do not care about honesty when answering surveys; their main concern is to finish the survey and take the incentive. Consequently, professionalism in answering surveys clearly remains a criterion for removing panellists from the panel. At the same time, suspecting professionalism in respondents who have simply developed awareness or can intuitively recognise

some of the biases which affect different methods of data collection in market research is far too reductive an attitude. Market research-aware respondents are not professional respondents; rather their existence is an index of the way market research as a field of activity has come to be perceived in today's world. Today people know perfectly well what a research study is. Furthermore, they perceive themselves as active consumers: "*and the public and the market are not abstract notions, they are made of each of us*" (as a panellist put it)

The pattern of the respondent asking what market research means is – just like that of the researcher going from door to door asking questions and collecting data for market research studies – a question of the past. Initially, market research meant people going from door to door. Later, it came to mean fewer people going from door to door and more people making phone calls. Today, market research means even fewer people going from door to door, even more people making phone calls and some people conducting online market research. People now spend an ever decreasing amount of time at home, pay less attention to their post box, which is most often full of junk mail, and are increasingly less available for long discussions over the phone, especially in the evening and at weekends. People are becoming increasingly connected to the Internet.

Since the findings of market research studies are supposed to mirror today's world, it is today's world itself that stops market research from skipping technological changes. This is why survey methods are exposed to change and why people find it quick and easy to complete a survey online rather than by traditional means – via the postal system or telephone – and, not least, why they are aware of all data collection methods already used in market research and can draw comparisons. **The online stage in market research is not just a stage in the evolution of collection methods used in the field but also a stage of maturity and commitment in the respondents' perception of market research as a whole.** "*What interests me is what the brands are interested in, what they want to know from the average consumer*" (as a panellist put it). People today know what being elected "to represent thousands" means and realise that anonymity is a plus in their playing this role. Therefore, today's online respondents are self-aware as the anonymous elect.



## Conclusions

Although formulated in terms of language, communication and relationship, the questions we have attempted to answer throughout this book have essentially been questions of perception and standards: **Is there a language of online panel communication? If there is a language of online practices in market research based on online access panels, what does it say about the relationship between the online researcher and the online respondent? How does this relationship influence market research conducted through online access panels?** The major advantage of such an enterprise is that it enables the application of the cross-disciplinary approach of linguistic pragmatics, cyber psychology and sociology to a market research segment which stands to benefit highly from such an insight in setting its standards. The support of linguistic pragmatics, cyber psychology and sociology in tracing the mutual perceptions of the two partners in online panel communication has in fact also enabled the formulation of a more far-reaching conclusion: the online stage in market research using access panels is not just a phase in the development of the market research field but also a new stage in the overall perception of market research as a field.

Since according to symbolic interactionism linguistic behaviour involves enacting social roles, panel communication is nothing but a complex performance between researcher and panellist and has its own language. Actually it is by the very language they use in their interaction that all the participants in this performance automatically play either the role of the researcher or that of the panellist, two roles disputed by no less than six characters. As explained in chapter 2, by analysing the communication between online market researcher and online panellist, we have in fact analysed six rather than two characters: the real online market researcher, the online market researcher's ideal market researcher and the online panellist's ideal online market researcher, the real online panellist, the online panellist's ideal online panellist and the online market researcher's ideal online panellist.

However few or many characters involved, if we consider the effects the nature of computer-mediated communication environments has upon it, then online panel performance is seen to be different from offline. The

level of self-disclosure is higher and behaviour is more uninhibited in CMC than in FtF; CMC involves increased time to make a decision but increased quality of decision making; CMC environments are more democratic; CMC groups show greater intimacy and social-orientation; the development of impressions take longer in CMC; CMC favours awareness of social identity etc.

In summary, in contrast to offline, the relationship between researcher and panellist as witnessed by the language of their panel communication is one of:

1. **Reduced inhibition** (a feature which involves lower social desirability and lower social anxiety scores and consequently causes the online respondent to surveys to be more uninhibited than the offline interviewed respondent)
2. **Increased self-disclosure** (as a consequence of the disinhibition in subjects using online environments)
3. **Increased private self-awareness** (awareness of personal attitudes, beliefs, and feelings)
4. **Increased awareness of social identity** (if according to the self-categorisation theory the extent to which we define ourselves at either the personal or social level is both flexible and functionally antagonistic, the anonymity informing computer-mediated communication enhances the salience of social identity at the expense of personal identity)

If the reduced inhibition (triggering lower social desirability and social anxiety scores when online as compared to offline), increased self-disclosure (as a consequence of the engendered disinhibition in online respondents) and increased private self-awareness (the online respondents' increased awareness of personal attitudes, beliefs and feelings) are features of benefit to market research, the online respondent's increased self-awareness as a communicator of market research may also be interpreted as controversial rather than beneficial. To what extent can market researchers admit to having aware respondents? To what extent can market research itself accommodate increased levels of self-awareness in respondents?

Arguably this is the point where the online trend in market research is more than a trend, where the online potential for market research transgresses the expression of it in terms of data collection, processing and interpretation, and where the challenge of online research appears far bigger

than that of a mere methodology adjusted to the technological advancement of the world around us. Though a brand new concept some years ago, the concept of the active consumer is no longer an unfamiliar term to today's consumers and the online stage in market research can only help to speed up the process whereby today's consumers develop an awareness of their role as active consumers. Admittedly, the online phase in market research marks a new stage in the formulation of roles on the consumer market, a stage which is expected to engender changes for the market research industry not only in the way it develops in an operational sense, but also in the way it justifies its existence and relates to other fields. To market researchers, the self-aware, active consumer is possibly more of a challenge than it is for players on the consumer market, i.e. the producers and consumers themselves. Therefore, what to some market researchers may sound like a feature of positive consequences may to others be an issue on the verge of challenging the grounding principle of market research.

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# Appendix 1: Panellist Satisfaction Survey



Nobody's Unpredictable



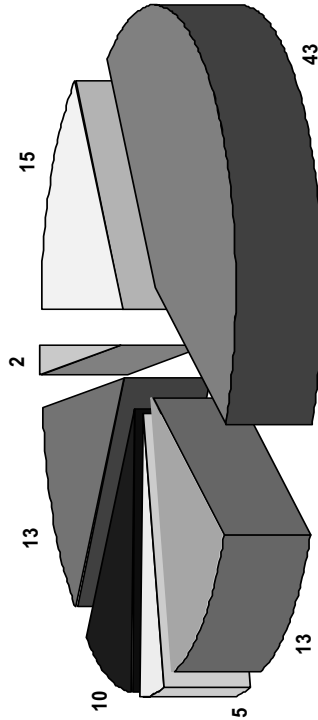
## Panellist Satisfaction

## All countries





### What was the main reason you decided to join the Ipsos Access Panel?

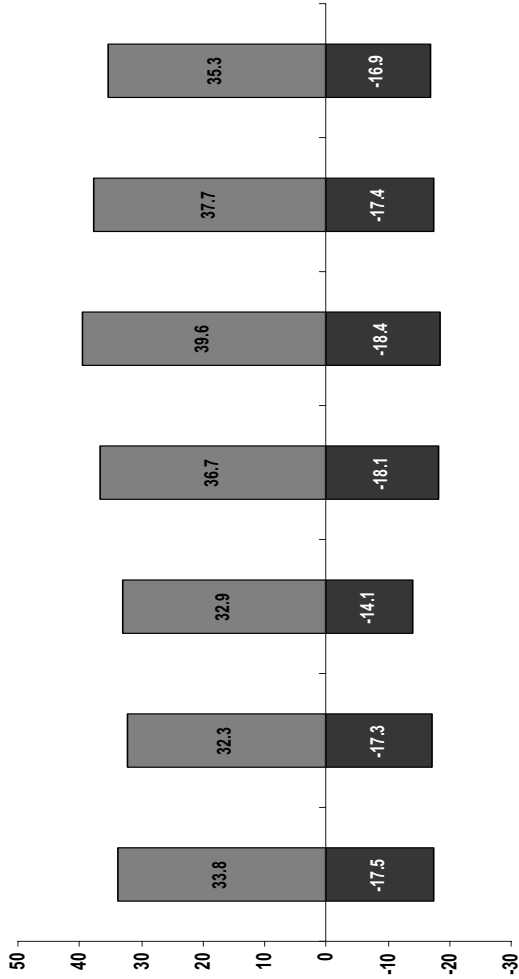


- I was curious what it was all about
- I wanted to contribute with my opinions and improve products
- A good way to make more money
- I like to be the first to try new things
- I like to know of new products and services before they hit
- Answering surveys is fun
- Other



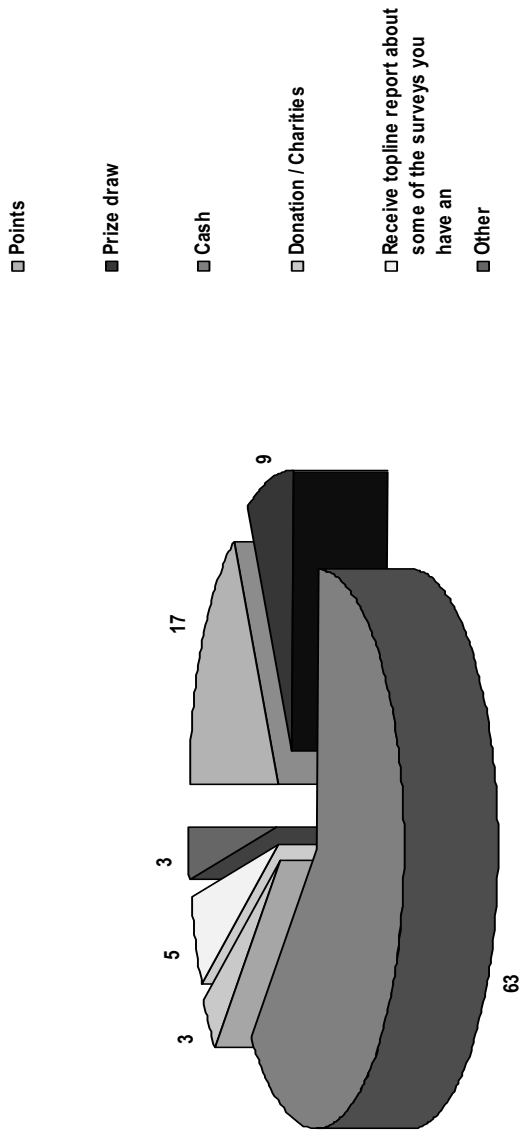


Thinking about the Incentives you have received after completing our surveys, how would you rate the following criteria?





According to your interests, which is the incentive type that is most appealing to you?



# Appendix 2: Access Panels Quality Checklist

## Questions That Define the Quality of an Access Panel

|           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Q1</b> | <b>Is the respondent aware that he/she is a member of an access panel for market research and has he/she voluntarily and actively applied for this?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|           | <p>All the panellists enter to our Access Panels after an email invitation sent on behalf of &lt;MR COMPANY NAME&gt; by one of our suppliers. In the beginning of the questionnaire they can see the Terms &amp; Rules. All the panellists must first accept the Terms &amp; Rules that are mandatory.</p> <p>On the website there is an email address and at any time each panellist can send an email to be unsubscribed.</p> <p>Panel members can communicate with a Panel Controller via email or telephone in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• access their personal data in order to change it or delete it;</li><li>• report any suggestions or complaints they might have.</li></ul> |
| <b>Q2</b> | <b>How are panel members recruited? What source(s) is/are used?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|           | <p>All the recruitment of panellists in &lt;MR COMPANY NAME&gt; is done by invitation. It's not possible to join the panel without invitation (the recruitment link is not even in the Google search engine). Unique IDs are generated for each invited person. The link becomes inactive after the respondent has signed in or after a period of time, in general the time that specific recruitment campaign is active.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

All the panellists must read and accept first the Terms & Conditions. Physically clicking and accepting them.

All the recruitment campaigns are evaluated at the supplier level after each recruitment wave. All the panellists are re-evaluated after 3 months for each supplier in order to understand, among other: Return rate, Attrition, Real cost.

Recruitment is targeted in order to increase the balanced part of the panel, the part of the panel that is national representative.

**Q3 Is the same set of data recorded for each panel member?  
What is the minimum number of existing characteristics?**

<MR COMPANY NAME> recruitment questionnaires are both on the Household and Individual level. All the socio-demographic information is mandatory for the members on the household level and Name, Gender, Age, Occupation and Education are mandatory for all the registered Individuals. All <MR COMPANY NAME> panel members are registered with the minimum set of the following characteristics:

- Full Name
- Gender
- Region
- Age (day/year of birth)
- Postal code + house number (for validity checks and removal of duplicates)
- Household size
- Occupation
- Education
- Income
- Head of the household
- Main shopper

**Q4 Is duplication avoided before the persons concerned are added to the sampling frame as panel members?**

All the panellists receive a unique password on the staging wave (after recruitment). It's not possible to enter any survey without having the password.

There are no duplicates of email address in the panel database. All the duplicates are removed in the cleaning wave (after recruitment).

**Q5 Are requirements made concerning the response of a panel member within a certain period, in order for him/her to be regarded as an 'active' panel member?**

All the panellists are invited each month to at least a survey (screening survey) to update the information or to screen out people. Each panellist must answer at least 1 survey per year in order to be regarded as an active panellist.

**Q6 How frequently are panel members approached for research in a certain time frame?**

There are clear rules and selection mechanisms in the Sampling software that <MR COMPANY NAME> is using regarding the frequency of panellists' selection to be invited to different surveys.

Invitations: Max one invitation every 5th day

Completed interviews: Max one per week (on average less than 1 interview / month)

Completed interviews same category: Max one per month

Completed interviews same category & same type of survey: Max one per quarter

**Q7 How is the sample created? Each panel member must have the same chance to participate in the study. How does the agency set up the survey?**

<MR COMPANY NAME> uses Samplix, one of the most powerful Sampling software specially designed for panel sampling. The Sampling algorithm gives equal chance to be chosen for each panellist. Only the selected panellists in Samplix receive an email invitation letter.

When a sample is pulled certain strict rules must be followed:

- the panellist's occupation/sector of activity must be other than: Market research, Advertising, Media, etc.;
- the panellist should not have participated to a similar survey in the last 3 months;
- the panellist should not have participated to more than 5 surveys in the past quarter, etc.

**Q8 Is there any danger that the answers given by respondents to questions in the survey may be influenced by participation in earlier surveys? How are “professional respondents” excluded from the survey?**

<MR COMPANY NAME> has clear procedure established to discover the “professional respondents”. First set of procedure is applied in the recruitment stage (we are looking to the IP and the time entry). The second set of procedure applies different statistical analysis for the history surveys (check if the answers from the same panellists are consistent). When a survey is launched, the access is allowed only once for the same ID & password.

**Q9 What is the response rate on a project by project level and on the panel in general. How does an agency measure and monitor non-response rates and completion rates?**

<MR COMPANY NAME> have implemented KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) for Access Panels in order to evaluate and keep tracking of Access Panels overall quality.

General indicators are:

- Number of emails send to members
- Number of panel members who opened the questionnaire
- How many panel members Screened out
- How many panel members Dropped out
- How many panel members Completed the survey
- In-depth analysis of completion rate:
- How many panel members Completed the survey / type of survey
- How many panel members Completed the survey / questionnaire length
- How many panel members Completed the survey / value of incentives
- How many panel members Completed the survey by period of the year

<MR COMPANY NAME> offer an average response rate of 45%, and can offer the client a transparent response rate analysis.

**Q10 How often is the panel purged and what purging rules are applied.**

If a panellist have not answered to 5 consecutive surveys in a period of time of 3 months, they are automatically excluded from the panel.

**Q11 How often is the information updated?**

All panellists are updated at least once a year on the main variables that we have for each panel member. For specific panel enrichment questions, such as brand ownership, the freshness of the data is indicated as the date when this information was collected. This due to the reason that the freshness of the data for car ownership can be different compared to FMCG products used.

**Q12 Are panel members rewarded for their participation in the surveys? If yes, how does the panel organization implement the incentives plan and how is the relationship with panel members maintained?**

The panel members are rewarded through a complex incentive plan, built on both a point system, were they can use the points earned to buy products from Amazon.com and through a tailor made and targeted incentive plan based on donations, lottery tickets (where this is legal and suitable), as well as other incentives such as spa weekends, digital cameras etc, based on the need of the survey.



**Q13 How is the relationship with panel members maintained?**

<MR COMPANY NAME> answers to all the panellists within 24 hours in the panellist language. Only exception in Finland, where the answer is given in 48 hours, but an automatically email is sent within 24 hours announcing the panellists that he/she will receive an answer in short term.

A newsletter is sent to the panel every month, among other offering answer to some of the questions they have answered, mainly questions from the screening survey.

**Q14 Does the access panel serve exclusively as a sampling frame for market research or are panel members also deployed for other activities?**

<MR COMPANY NAME> panel is only involved in market research activities.

**Q15 Does the panel adhere to all demands of the applicable legal obligations of governmental and industry bodies?**

- Privacy Legislation
- Tax legislation
- Lottery legislation
- ESOMAR guidelines

<MR COMPANY NAME> adhere to all the previous regulations.

**Q16 Has the panel an ISO Certification?**

The <MR COMPANY NAME> panel has been honoured with the ISO certification since 2003 and is the only ISO certificated panel on the market.

## Appendix 3: Checklist of Procedures

Below comes a suggested checklist of procedures that Online Panel Supplier must have in place:

- Recruited by invitation only.
- Definition of technical terms used available for clients (transparency) – correct and consistent handling of definitions in proposals and marketing material.
- Exclusive for Market Research.
- Panel activity monitoring programme.
- Purging: inactive panel members removal procedure.
- Panel rules – System is in place to monitor the compliance with targeted maximum research burden.
- Sampling algorithms – Sampling procedures enabling same probability sample selection.
- Loyalty/reward system in place and in line with promise.
- Response rates and completion rates are measured and reported to client.
- Participation history per respondent and exclusion procedures on the basis of individual survey participation history.
- Panel communication – questions from the panel members are responded within 24h.
- ISO certification.
- Average amount of interview per panellist per year.

## **Appendix 4: EFAMRO – International Quality Standards for Access Panels (QSAP)**

Access panels are being used more and more often in market research surveys, including Internet surveys as well as those conducted by more traditional means. The advantages of this method of sampling are such that the use of access panels is set to increase considerably in the years ahead. However, the rapid growth of this approach to sampling brings with it a number of potential dangers. At present the market is largely unregulated and it is often difficult to find out exactly what quality standards are being applied in recruiting panel members and how they are maintained. For this reason EFAMRO set itself the objective of developing a quality norm for working with access panels.

The Quality Standards are, to a substantial part derived from the Esomar guidelines with respect to Online surveys and are to be treated as an appendix to, as well as an integral part of the Efamro ISO/TCC 225 Quality Standard after it has been formally approved.

For the purposes of these standards an ‘Active Access Panel Member’ is defined as:

*A natural person who, on a voluntary basis, returns to the panel manager a minimum set of background data, completely filled in, and via a double-active-opt-in approach unequivocally indicates that he/she wishes to become a member of the access panel concerned, on the clear understanding that the panel is solely used for purposes of market research and agrees to participate in panel activities for at least once a year.*

Based on this definition the following discussion points are dealt with in this document:

- The extent to which panel members can be involved in online direct marketing activities.
- The clear and unambiguous definition of what constitutes an Active Panel member.
- The minimum set of background variables, which must be recorded.

In this document we will define the following items for each relevant quality dimension:

- *Minimum Quality* specification of minimum quality, if applicable.
- *Transparency*. The minimum degree of openness and/or the specification of a quality level for a dimension with no specified minimum quality.

ISO/TCC 225 certification as a tool for the compliance check of these guidelines.

## 1 Definition of a Panel Member

### Chapter 1

| <b>Quality Dimension</b>     | <b>Double Active Opt-In/Confirmed Opt-Out</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                     | Is the respondent aware that he/she is a member of an access panel for market research and has he/she voluntarily and actively applied for this?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Minimum Quality              | <p>Panel members have actively indicated that they want to be a panel-member and have actively agreed to the “terms and conditions” before joining.</p> <p>Panel members have confirmed the existence of their email address.</p> <p>Each individual panel member must be given a permanent opportunity to opt-out.</p> <p>An email could be sent to the panel member informing them that their background information will be deleted within 30 days unless they re-confirm that they wish to remain a panel member.</p> |
| Transparency                 | Institutes must describe opt-in and opt-out procedures.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| ISO/TCC 225 Compliance check | <p>Check if minimum “Double – active – opt – in” procedure is in place.</p> <p>Check if minimum “opt – out” procedures are in place.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

## Chapter 2

| <b>Quality Dimension</b>     | <b>Definition of Panel Size</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                     | When a survey is conducted, information about the actual panel size is needed. This is in order to judge if a panel can cope with the estimated incidence rate or with a scheduled tracking setup.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Minimum Quality              | <p>No minimum requirements as long as panel sizes are honestly stated and data about panel members is easily available in accordance with at least one of the following three different definitions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Panel members</i> (natural persons who joined the panel) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Unique email address is known</li> <li>– Background information available</li> <li>– Agreed to participate</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. <i>Households</i> (Individuals who joined the panel as members of recruited households) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Unique email address is known</li> <li>– Background information available</li> <li>– Agreed to participate</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. <i>Registered Individuals</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Minimal background information available (Name-Gender-Age)</li> <li>– Agreed to participate</li> </ul> </li> </ol> |
| Transparency                 | Full, open and consistent information must be given.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| ISO/TCC 225 Compliance check | Check for correct and consistent handling of definitions in proposals and marketing material.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

*Chapter 3*

| <b>Quality Dimension</b>     | <b>Unique Persons/Households</b>                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                     | Is duplication avoided before the persons concerned are added to the sampling frame as panel members?                                                                                                                     |
| Minimum Quality              | Each panel member must have a unique email address that can apply to a full household.<br>Survey participation on the basis of individual invitation only.<br>Password procedure must be in place at an individual level. |
| Transparency                 | Agency must indicate what procedures are in place.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| ISO/TCC 225 Compliance check | Check if “remove duplicates” procedures are in place.<br>Check if password handling procedures are in place.                                                                                                              |

*Chapter 4*

| <b>Quality Dimension</b> | <b>Available Background Information</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                 | Is the same set of data recorded for each panel member?<br>What is the minimum number of existing characteristics?                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Minimum Quality          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full Name</li> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Region</li> <li>• Age (day/year of birth)</li> <li>• Postal code + house number (for validity checks and removal of duplicates)</li> <li>• Household size</li> </ul> <p>Information must be actual, so a consistent update procedure is necessary.</p> |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Transparency                 | <p>Overview of availability of minimum background information must be given /easily available.</p> <p>Additional background information can be added to the list if this is done in combination with the following:</p> <p>The total number of a panel members for which specific additional background information is available, must be stated.</p> <p>An indication about the recency of the data collection must be given.</p> |
| ISO/TCC 225 Compliance check | <p>Check for compliance.</p> <p>Minimum background data must be 100% complete.</p> <p>Check if the data are, systematically and/or periodically, updated.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

## 2. Panel Structure – Panel Management

### *Chapter 5*

| <b>Quality Dimension</b> | <b>Minimal Participation Level</b>                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                 | Are requirements made concerning the response of a panel member within a certain period, in order for him/her to be regarded as an ‘active’ panel member?                                                                 |
| Minimum Quality          | A panel member must participate at least once a year in a survey activity or a panel activity (e.g. background info updates) in order to stay on the panel. If this is not the case, than a panel member must be removed. |
| Transparency             | Agency must be able to supply confirmation of the number of panel members and/or the number of registered individuals which are currently active members of the panel.                                                    |

|                                    |                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ISO/TCC 225<br>Compliance<br>check | A panel activity monitoring programme must be in place.<br>Inactive panel members must be removed from the panel. |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

*Chapter 6*

| <b>Quality Dimension</b>           | <b>Research Burden</b>                                                                         |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                           | How frequently are panel members approached for research in a certain time frame?              |
| Minimum Quality                    | Maximum participation burden in terms of number of completed surveys must be specified.        |
| Transparency                       | Transparency through describing maximum burden.                                                |
| ISO/TCC 225<br>Compliance<br>check | Check if a system is in place to monitor the compliance with targeted maximum research burden. |

*Chapter 7*

| <b>Quality Dimension</b> | <b>Recruitment</b>                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                 | How are panel members recruited?: what source(s) is/are used?                                                                                                                          |
| Minimum Quality          | Potential Panel members must be invited. Unsolicited joining is unacceptable.<br>A Panel recruitment policy must be in place.<br>Recruitment campaign effectiveness must be evaluated. |
| Transparency             | Agency must reveal its recruitment policies in general terms.<br>There is no obligation to reveal the individual identity of recruitment subcontractors.                               |



|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ISO/TCC 225<br>Compliance<br>check | Check for existence of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of recruitment effectiveness</li> <li>• Existence of a formal quality assurance given by recruitment subcontractors.</li> </ul> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

*Chapter 8*

| <b>Quality Dimension</b>           | <b>Exclusively for Market Research</b>                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                           | Does the access panel serve exclusively as a sampling frame for market research or are panel members also deployed for other activities? |
| Minimum Quality                    | A panel member should not be approached for any Direct Marketing activity by the research company.                                       |
| Transparency                       | Clear statement.                                                                                                                         |
| ISO/TCC 225<br>Compliance<br>check | Check if agency uses panels for DM activities and if so if what tools are in place to assure compliance with minimum quality criteria.   |

*Chapter 9*

| <b>Quality Dimension</b> | <b>Panel Relations</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                 | If panel members are rewarded for their participation, how does the panel organization implement this and how is the relationship with panel members maintained?                                                        |
| Minimum Quality          | A question from a consumer must be answered within 24 hours (weekdays).<br>If this is not possible, an acknowledgement of receipt must be given.<br>This acknowledgement will include an ultimate reaction time period. |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Transparency                 | Agency must make its procedures publicly available.                                                                                                                                         |
| ISO/TCC 225 Compliance check | <p>Check if a loyalty/reward system is in place.</p> <p>Check if a loyalty/reward system is in line with promise.</p> <p>Check if employees are available in order to answer questions.</p> |

### 3. Project Management

#### *Chapter 10*

| <b>Quality Dimension</b> | <b>Response Control</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                 | How does an agency measure and monitor non-response rates and completion rates?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Minimum Quality          | <p>The agency must report response rates and completion rates per project and take action when results are not in line with targets.</p> <p>For the following topics information must be available on a project-by-project basis and for the panel in general.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of mails send to members</li> <li>• Number of panel members who opened the questionnaire</li> <li>• How many panel members Screened out</li> <li>• How many panel members Dropped out</li> <li>• How many panel members Completed the survey</li> </ul> <p>Over the year the performance on these indicators must be measured and evaluated.</p> |
| Transparency             | The agency must define clearly quantified targets in terms of response rates and completion rates.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ISO/TCC 225<br>Compliance<br>check | <p>Check if response rates and completion rates are measured.</p> <p>Check if response rates and completion rates are reported to client.</p> <p>Check if actions are undertaken in case of structural non-compliance.</p> |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### Chapter 11

| Quality Dimension                  | Survey Set Up                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                           | <p>Each panel member must have the same chance to participate in the study.</p> <p>How does the agency set up the survey?</p>                                                                                         |
| Minimum Quality                    | <p>All panel members eligible for participation in a study must have an equal chance of participating in the study.</p> <p>Invitation to participate must be based on a pre-defined stratification of the sample.</p> |
| Transparency                       | <p>Information about the sample algorithms and relevant panel management rules must be available.</p>                                                                                                                 |
| ISO/TCC 225<br>Compliance<br>check | <p>Check if a system is in place to monitor compliance with targeted maximum survey burdens of panel members.</p> <p>Check if sampling algorithms are used.</p>                                                       |

### Chapter 12

| Quality Dimension | Survey Bias Control                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question          | <p>Is there any danger that the answers given by respondents to questions in the survey may be influenced by participation in earlier surveys?</p> <p>How are “professional respondents” excluded from the survey?</p> |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Minimum Quality              | Exclusions on the basis of individual survey participation history must be possible.<br>The agency must have procedures in place to prevent a respondent responding to the same questionnaire twice.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Transparency                 | The agency must clearly state how survey histories are tracked and how respondents are excluded from participation, if relevant.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| ISO/TCC 225 Compliance check | Check if a participation history per respondent is available and whether it is actually used.<br>Exclusion procedures on the basis of individual survey participation history must be in place and be a standard sampling requirement.<br>Agency must guarantee one interview per respondent and have verifiable procedures in place.<br>Agency must guarantee absence of unsolicited survey participations and have verifiable procedures in place. |

#### 4. Legal Issues

##### *Chapter 13*

| <b>Quality Dimension</b> | <b>Legal Compliance</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question                 | Does the panel adhere to all demands of the applicable legal obligations of governmental and industry bodies? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privacy Legislation</li> <li>• Tax legislation</li> <li>• Lottery legislation</li> <li>• ESOMAR guidelines</li> </ul> |
| Minimum Quality          | Must adhere.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

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|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Transparency                       | Must publicly announce. |
| ISO/TCC 225<br>Compliance<br>check | Legal Check.            |