

Pay it forward

How respect for respondents improves marketing research for all

If you have ever been contacted to be a respondent in a survey, you may have been eliminated because you were a market research professional. That's too bad because you have missed the eye-opening experience of being a respondent. If you weren't eliminated, you probably tried to be helpful and maybe it was a great experience. On the other hand, you may have found the process intrusive, frustrating and annoying.

The most common complaints that I hear about surveys are: the questions were confusing, the multiple choices available did not include the answer the respondent wanted to give and the interview seemed interminable and boring. People do not like receiving a telephone call at home in the middle of dinner and they most particularly do not like it when an interview takes longer than promised. If the caller said the questionnaire would take five minutes and it took 20 minutes, the respondent gets irritated and will probably refuse the next request to participate. Research faux pas such as these indicate a lack of respect for the respondent.

Respondents' value to the market research process is critical. They have the information and opinions we need. Without respondents, we would be out of business. According to a report by the National Science Foundation (NSF), response rates for surveys have been declining. People are increasingly refusing to participate in legitimate surveys. Some of the reasons for refusing include: more demands on their time; suspicion that a survey may be a sales pitch in disguise; daunting, long questionnaires; and increased volume of junk mail and spam. The NSF says, "The future of surveys as a reliable means to measure trends is in doubt."

To ensure that respondents continue to participate in the market research process, market researchers need to understand the process from the respondents' point of view and we need to show respect and appreciation.

Combination of factors

Respondents who agree to participate in surveys are motivated by a combination of factors. They may participate because of interest in the topic, realization that their opinions are important, the opportunity to talk about themselves and their opinions, a desire to be helpful, the chance to voice their satisfaction or dissatisfaction and a chance to influ-



By Bonnie Eisenfeld

snapshot

Without respondents, there would be no research. Bonnie Eisenfeld explains ways to make sure you keep their needs in mind during the interviewing process.

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ence a product or service in some way. They may be curious about the topic or curious to know what their peers have to say. From a more self-serving perspective, respondents may believe that ultimately the findings will benefit them. Time availability is a big issue, but busy respondents will often make time if they are offered an incentive they value in return for their participation.

Researchers have the opportunity to demonstrate respect for respondents in at least four stages of the research process: creating the questionnaire, choosing the data collection method, recruiting respondents and follow-up communications. Here's how to do it right.

Design a questionnaire to allow respondents to express themselves.

Respondents want to express their thoughts and opinions, they really do. If a questionnaire containing tightly-constructed multiple-choice or scaled responses does not capture respondents' real thoughts, they feel frustrated. So even if your questionnaire is mostly closed-ended, you should allow for open-ended responses also.

Many times, the open-ended portion of the questionnaire yields the most important findings. I have worked on satisfaction surveys in which respondents rated a product or service high on numerical scales but responses to open-ended questions revealed many areas for improvement. If ratings are low, respondents' comments will enlighten you about their reasons, motivations and concerns - all helping you to gain insight. Allowing respondents to comment provides more learning - plus you are showing respect for their opinions.

Try to avoid questions that have long lists of multiple choices, as respondents will get bored and may terminate early. At best, their responses will be perfunctory and without thought.

Pre-test the questionnaire for logic and clarity and revise it until you have eliminated any confusing questions. Also test for how long the questionnaire takes to com-

plete. It may look short on paper, but if you want thoughtful answers, you need to allow time for each respondent to think. Keep the questionnaire as short as possible to meet your research objectives. If you have a large number of objectives, consider splitting the research into two parts administered to two matched samples.

Choose a data collection method respondents will like.

Live interviews are most successful when they are based on short, open-ended, unstructured questionnaires, allowing respondents to express their thoughts and opinions fully and providing the opportunity for the interviewer to probe.

In a live interview, interviewers should be briefed thoroughly about the topic and sound interested in the responses. Interviewers should not be judgmental or defensive. To the extent possible, interviewers should stick to the time promised. In a good interview, respondents talk a lot and become interested in what they are saying; subsequently, the interview may run over the estimated time. Respondents usually don't mind overtime if they were excited about telling you their thoughts and feelings. Some respondents have told interviewers they have actually enjoyed the process.

Longer surveys with closed-end response choices can be self-administered effectively online. If you use a grid, the respondent should be able to see the choices on one screen-page. Respondents are willing to spend more time online than on the phone and perceive online surveys to be convenient, easy and confidential.

Recruit respondents with their needs in mind.

Time is a valuable commodity to most people. Researchers should allow enough project time so that willing respondents can do the interview or complete a questionnaire when it's best for them. It is particularly important if you have a small sample to build in the time for multiple callbacks and referrals. The people you are targeting have

jobs, families, obligations, meetings, hobbies, vacations and other parts of their lives that are more important to them than your research project. You are lucky if they take the time to respond to your questions.

To recruit respondents, create a pre-call communication message that includes a detailed explanation of the project, the purpose of the research, the importance of the selected respondents' participation and the type of organization sponsoring the study. It is customary to promise anonymity and confidentiality to respondents.

Offering an incentive shows respect for respondent's time even though they may not need the money, as in the case of highly-paid executives. In those instances, you can give them two options: get paid directly or have a check sent to a charitable organization. Affluent individuals will respond to incentives more frequently than one might guess. Offering to send a summary of findings will often motivate people to participate because they are interested in what their peers have to say.

Use a combination of channels of communication to recruit respondents - telephone, e-mail, fax, voicemail and yes, sometimes U.S. mail or courier. If you are sending a letter by mail or fax, use company letterhead and have the highest-level executive sign the letter. Make multiple contacts over a period of time at different times of day. If you are referred to a different person, start all over again with the communications process. These recruiting communications efforts take time and effort but they pay off in the end with more and better respondents.

If the project includes live interviews, interviewers should be available from early morning to late evening, covering multiple time zones and recruiters should schedule appointments with respondents to meet their time needs.

In B2B projects, be courteous to the administrative assistants who will often act as go-betweens for you with the target respondents. Persistence pays off. Business execu-

tives need to be convinced that you are interested in their specific participation and that their information and opinions are highly valued.

Respondents like knowing who is sponsoring the research, but often research objectives prevent revealing the sponsor. Sponsors may be named in certain cases. If you can reveal the sponsor without sacrificing objectivity, you will most likely get a higher response rate. A compromise is to promise to reveal the sponsor at the end of the interview. In cases where sponsors cannot be disclosed, a trusted market research company name is important.

Deliver what you promised.

A researcher should take responsibility to give positive feedback and keep promises to every respondent every time. At the end of each interview or questionnaire completed, researchers should sincerely thank the respondent for the time spent. Verify the address for the incentive and tell the respondent when, realistically, to expect to receive it.

Research companies should pay the incentive promptly, not two months later. Also, send the summary report promptly. If you promised confidentiality and anonymity, don't reveal respondents' names or individual responses to the client. If you promised to reveal the sponsor to the respondent, then reveal it.

Keeping promises and commitments and giving positive reinforcement leads to trust in your company name and trust in the market research industry as a whole. Doing things right on every project will help all researchers in the future. Doing things wrong will irritate respondents and make them less likely to participate in the future. Respondents who do not receive a prompt payment will be skeptical next time they are asked to participate in research. Respondents who were promised anonymity and confidentiality and later found that their names and responses were revealed to a sponsor will not believe future claims of anonymity and confidentiality.

Market researchers cannot control whether clients use the findings of a survey in strategies, decisions or actions. But you should be aware that when respondents have poured out their needs, wants and opinions in a survey about satisfaction or new-product development and think the findings were not used, they may be reluctant to invest their time again. So encourage sponsors of surveys to issue reports on survey findings to customers and to the public including information on how they used the findings to make improvements.

Understand the respondents' viewpoint

Instead of excluding market researchers from surveys even though they qualify as eligible on other characteristics, I recommend that we start including market researchers as respondents to help us understand the respondents' viewpoint. Walk in the respondents' shoes more often and you might not put so many bumps in their path. | Q