

# A web of worries

**Online research has been booming but after 12 years of exponential growth, is it losing its lustre?** By Reg Baker

The story of online research is first a tale of stunning growth. Virtually nonexistent in 1995, *Inside Research* estimates the total worldwide spend on online at US \$3.6 billion in 2007 and increasing to US \$4.3 billion in 2008. Two inherent features of online have driven this rapid growth: faster turnaround and lower cost than traditional methods. Online has made it possible to gather feedback from consumers almost in real time. Methodologies such as those to drive new product design or advertising testing, that took weeks and sometimes months with traditional methods, can now be executed online in just days. These advantages seemed especially salient in the late 1990s when respondent co-operation was in steep decline and the costs of traditional methods rising.

If online was to be a reasonable option to traditional methods the problem of respondent access and co-operation had to be solved. That solution was and is online access panels. Beginning in the mid- and late 1990s research companies and entrepreneurs throughout North America and Europe convinced millions of people to sign up to do surveys on demand.

The research industry's long-standing reliance on probability sampling was dismissed as passé. Anders Kiaer's century-old arguments for the 'representative method' were revived. Online evangelists argued that they had the techniques either to create 'representative samples' from their panels or adjust online results to account for the offline population. A number of side-by-side comparisons with traditional methods seemed to prove the point, and large numbers of clients embraced the methodology with open arms.

## Early warning signs

The first bumps in the road probably came in April of 2005 at the ESOMAR Worldwide Panels Research Conference in Budapest. In his opening keynote, Jeff Hunter, consumer insights director at General Mills, described a concept test in which the same survey administered to different samples from the same panel yielded substantially different signals on whether to launch the product. Digging deeper he discovered that the two samples, while both drawn to be representative, differed in their levels of survey-taking experience. The sample with the greater proportion of respondents with longer tenure on the panel and more surveys taken generally was less positive about the product concept than newer panel members who had done fewer surveys. Researchers from Survey Sampling International presented results from a similar study with a similar outcome. Other presenters expressed concerns about multiple panel membership and

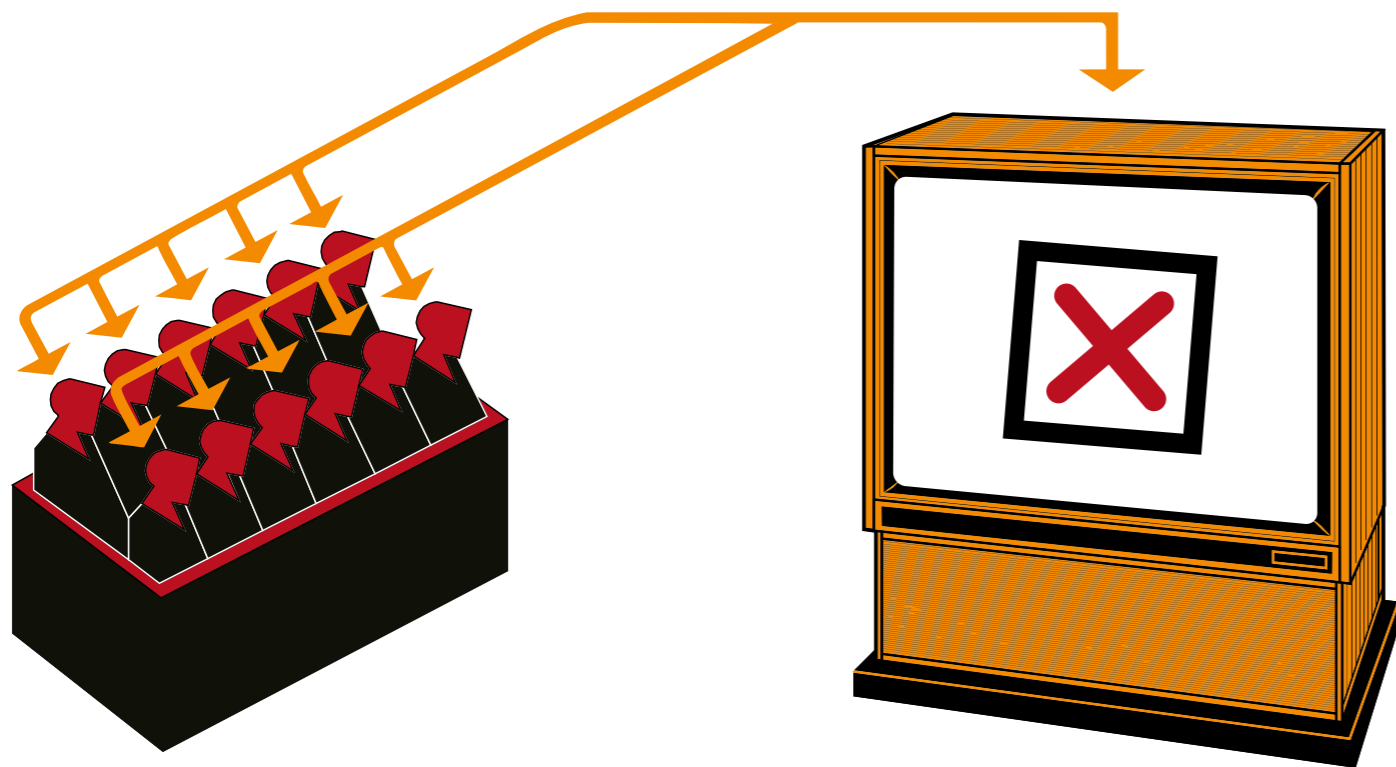
the first signs of unacceptable levels of satisficing by panel respondents were described.

The Budapest conference also hosted a broad-ranging discussion of the need for stronger industry-wide standards or at least guidelines for access panels. ESOMAR introduced its "25 Questions to Help Research Buyers" – a set of questions designed to create the transparency that buyers need to effectively compare and choose among different access panel offerings.

## More problems

Soon online researchers were talking about a number of problematic behaviors that seemed to threaten the basic underpinnings of online research. These included concerns about 'professional respondents' who had signed up to multiple panels and were taking large numbers of surveys. There also was compelling evidence of people who signed up multiple times with different identities and others who were giving false answers to survey-qualifying questions, presumably to earn the incentive. Finally, as surveys grew longer and became more complex, alarming numbers of respondents seemed to be thoughtlessly clicking answers just to finish.

In September 2006 at the Respondent Cooperation Summit in Chicago, Kim Dedeker, then vice president market and



consumer knowledge at Proctor and Gamble, told a story much like Hunter had told 18 months earlier in Budapest and openly questioned “the integrity and methodology” of online research. It became hard to go to an industry conference without hearing discussion of the ‘panel data quality crisis’.

### Some solutions

The industry’s response has come at three levels.

First, there now is a great deal of ongoing research on research aimed at understanding the extent of problematic panellist behaviors and their likely impact on survey estimates. While this research has yet to achieve an industry-wide consensus, most access panel providers have taken significant steps to reduce fraudulent and/or multiple registrations by adopting a variety of methods to verify that panel members are who they say they are. In addition, there is the increasingly widespread use of post-survey cleaning techniques that identify and delete ‘bad respondents’ prior to analysis.

Second, many researchers have somewhat begrudgingly admitted that some portion of the problem is due to poor online survey design. Long, boring, or overly complex surveys can encourage satisficing and speeding. There is a growing emphasis on respondent engagement through better survey design, although again there is considerable debate as to what works and what does not work.

Third, industry associations worldwide have launched initiatives to set standards or issue new guidelines to help buyers make informed decisions. For example, ESOMAR has revised and expanded the original 25 Questions. There are

now 26 questions on access panels and online samples (see sidebar) along with a brief rationale for each that includes some advice to buyers as to why a specific question is important. The Technical Committee that developed ISO 20252: Market, Opinion, and Social Research has created a working group to develop a standard for access panels. Building on the 20252 theme of transparency, this standard establishes a common vocabulary of terms and definitions, sets some minimal standards, and creates an auditing mechanism to ensure that procedures claimed by panel providers are indeed followed. The working group expects to complete its work by mid-2008. In the US, the Advertising Research Foundation has created an Online Quality Research Council to set standards for research buyers and sellers.

### A maturing market

Given all of the hubbub it should not surprise us that client confidence in online has been shaken. One key reflection of this concern is the slowing growth in online spend. In the heady years from about 2000 to 2004 growth in online in the US was averaging over 60% a year. In the period from 2005 to 2007 it fell to just 19%. The forecast for 2008 is 15%. In Europe the high water marks were reached in 2005 and 2006 at 50% and 56% respectively. In 2007 growth was half those levels. Roughly the same growth is forecast for 2008.

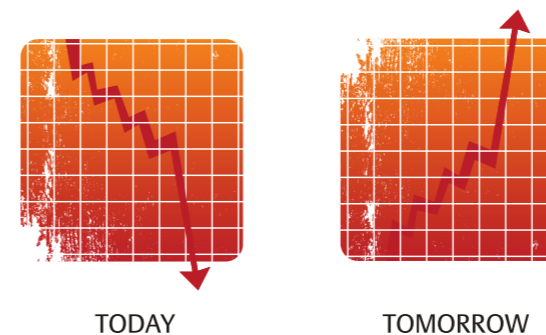
Ominous as all of this may seem, no-one expects a full repudiation of online and a return to the traditional methods. While growth has slowed, online continues to expand at a substantially faster rate than the market research industry as a whole. Still, there is widespread agreement that our execution of online must improve. We can expect that over the next couple of years the research now being done on the dynamics of panel data quality will

lead us to something approaching a consensus on best practices for panel development and management. As that consensus emerges, the transparency created by initiatives such as the emerging ISO standard and the ESOMAR 26 questions will enable buyers to make more informed decisions about the panels they choose. At the same time, we will continue to develop the art and science of online survey design, to create a better survey experience and reduce the impacts of bad design.

### The hard truth

There also is no shortage of researchers who hope that as the frenzy cools the industry will take another look at the underlying premise that ‘representative samples’ can be drawn from large groups of volunteers and that the estimates derived from those samples will be just as accurate as those from a probability-based sample drawn from the entire population. The hard truth is that the underlying science of the panel paradigm is, at best, loosely defined.

The draft ISO standard on access panels requires that reports to clients at the conclusion of research study include “evidence that leads to limitations in the projectability to the defined target population / universe.” Put another way, we need to be sure to establish what David Smith, director of DVL Smith Group, UK calls “the interpretation boundary” for our online studies, especially in the context of the research topic. Have the panel’s recruiting methods biased the frame toward certain attitudes, behaviours or personal



characteristics that might correlate positively or negatively with the study topic? Is it safe to exclude the offline population? What specific steps have been taken to ensure that the sample drawn from the panel is truly representative of the target population?

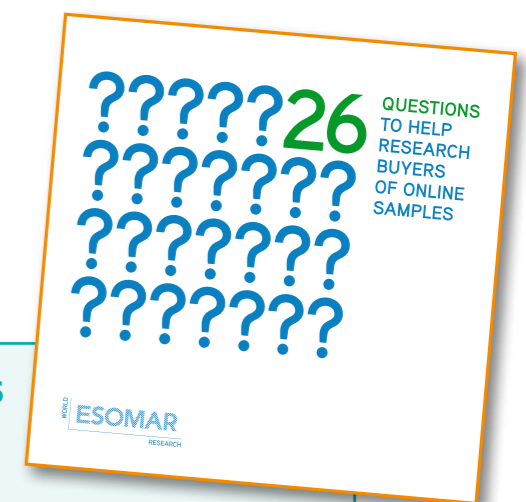
### Pressing ahead

Regardless of how all of this gets sorted out we can be sure that the industry’s relentless drive to innovate with new technologies will go on. Where once we talked about proprietary panels we now are talking about online communities. The new age of the interactive web and user-generated content offers clients an unprecedented opportunity to interact with their customers, to gather feedback in real time, and to share it effortlessly across the

enterprise. Companies can easily create conversations with their customers as well as among those customers about current products, about satisfaction, about competing products, and about unmet needs. These conversations can be structured (surveys and focus groups) and unstructured (customer driven).

As the industry moves to the next phase we must be sure to absorb the lessons from online thus far. One of those lessons would seem to be to think through carefully how the dynamics of communities might eventually lead to unintended consequences, much as the dynamics of access panels have created the current panel data quality crisis, be it real or imagined. A second lesson might be to stay clear of extravagant claims, especially those that position it as a replacement methodology rather than as still another valuable tool in the kit. Researchers today have available an enormous range of methods and techniques capable of delivering unprecedented insights to our clients. The challenge is to use them wisely. ■

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### 26 questions

The ESOMAR Guide to Conducting Research on the Internet, as published in 2005, contained a section with 25 questions. These questions were designed to help researchers discuss online access panel research methodology by creating a framework and language for dialogue.

Much has changed since 2005, and so ESOMAR has revised the questions to reflect current issues and to provide an explanation of the reasons why each question should be asked.

The new revised 26 Questions to help research buyers of samples on Access Panels and Online Samples, in combination with other information, will help researchers consider those issues that influence whether an online sampling approach is fit for purpose in relation to a particular set of research objectives. The questions are posted on ESOMAR’s website, go to [www.esomar.org](http://www.esomar.org).