

Ways to Improve Online Data Quality

Here are a few methods to improve on the quality of your research data that we've learned through years of experience conducting online research. We hope you find this useful!

1. Brief, conversational surveys yield better results

It's ok to take off the white lab coat and talk to people the way you would in everyday conversation. Use straightforward questions, consumer-friendly language and don't be afraid to have a little bit of fun with how you ask a question. The goal is to elicit the best information possible by keeping respondents interested and engaged. *Example: don't ask a restaurant customer to rate the temperature of your food on a 7 point scale. What does a 3 mean? It's either the right temperature or it's not and that's really what you need to know.*

And, keep it brief. We're asking respondents to share not only their opinions, but their time. Whenever possible, we would advise keeping the length of an online survey to 15 minutes or less. Even when respondents are given an incentive, we see that the quality of response begin to suffer after about the 20 minute mark in a survey and really drop off after 30 minutes. There are exceptions, but for the most part, shorter surveys = better results.

2. Engage respondents with topics they care about

The most insightful and actionable findings come from respondents who are truly engaged in the content of the survey. People who care about the category, product/service or brand enough to have an opinion.

When we look at survey data, there's often a chunk of people who really don't feel too strongly one way or another and this group can sometimes water down the results. As much as possible, create screening questions based on interests, behaviors and attitudes that will help ensure respondents are involved enough in the topic to want to share their thoughts and experiences. Even consider asking a question to see how interested potential respondents would be in sharing their opinions on your topic or category. If they're lukewarm, don't know enough about it or just don't care, let's find someone else who does.

3. Make it a two way conversation

One path to fostering a true dialogue with respondents is with some of the innovative new survey tools at our disposal – in-depth moderated online interviewing, live chats, online focus groups, message/bulletin boards, online ethnography etc. Using online qualitative or hybrid tools most effectively is a different conversation, but anything you can do to make the survey taking experience more of a two-way conversation will help your research yield more useful results.

Even if doing a more traditional online survey, give people an opportunity to expand on their answers whenever possible. A response to a question may not always be as black and white as your answer choices. In many cases, the answer may be “it depends” and if so let the respondent tell you how and why. This can be as simple as adding an open end “Want to tell us more?” space to give people the freedom to elaborate if they want to.

Respondents also like to know that someone is listening, so having an active and engaged project manager to troubleshoot, clarify and encourage is important to cultivating the sense of conversation that gets people to open up.

4. Telling is good, but showing is better

Whenever possible, take advantage of survey technology to show respondents picture, concepts, logos, storyboards, or anything else with visual elements. We’re all visual creatures and an online survey presents a great opportunity to use visual cues and elicit responses to what people are seeing for themselves. Visuals can also be used to better simulate the shopping experience, especially when you are asking respondents to choose a product in the context of competitive offerings. Some of the tools to help with this include:

- Shelf mockups
- Virtual menus
- 3-d package testing
- Interactive images and storyboards
- Image analyzer/heat mapping tools
- Video
- Online magazine mockups

5. Choose your sample wisely

There are literally hundreds of sample providers out there and choosing the wrong one can really hurt data quality. While Equation does not manage our own panel, we only work with a few select partners that adhere to the highest data quality standards, for example:

- Double opt-in secure enrollment process
- Physical address verification against government postal information
- Third-party ID Validation to ensure members do not give incongruous answers in enrollment/screening
- Ongoing review of member data and analysis of suspicious member profiles
- Identifying and removing “professional respondents”

We also believe that respondents should be fairly compensated for their time. We only work with panels that offer cash incentives/incentives points that can be redeemed for a variety of rewards. Good compensation for survey respondents also helps to increase response rates and people are more likely to give honest, thoughtful opinions when they’re getting something in return for their time.

To reach the right people, panel targeting is available going well beyond the normal demographics of age, gender, location, income, etc. As a result, Equation is able to select survey participants according to more than 120 lifestyle characteristics - including behaviors, interests and activities.

6. Take a closer look at data quality after fieldwork

Many research providers fail to “clean” the data before looking at the results. Despite your best efforts to use a reliable panel and provide a good survey taking experience on a relevant topic, some ‘bad apples’ inevitably make it through. It’s important to take the time to make sure that only respondents who have given thoughtful answers to your questions are included in the data you’re working with. This is something we approach on a case by case respondent basis from several angles, but here are some of the flags we look for:

- Respondents who speed through and finish the survey in less than 1/3 the median completion time
- “Straight liners” who select the same answer over and over
- Responses to open-ended questions that are gibberish or responses that are not relevant to the question
- Sometimes also including quality checks like asking age at the beginning and end of the survey to make sure the answer is consistent. Or a security statement in a series of attributes to make sure people are paying attention, for example, “For security purposes, please select ‘3’ in this row.”