

Andera Gadeib

**Online Samples - Demand and Reality
A Report from Practice**

The article draws up the recent state of affairs on the basis of the current guidelines and demonstrates the common practice of online samples. It's to be discussed if the demands of guidelines are met and which parts have backlog demand.

The quality and the shattering effect of the research online –a much discussed theme, can be traced back to the quality of the sample. One of the more persistent preconceptions is the doubt about the representiveness of the statements, as in "online users are not like normal people". Another bias is manifested through the opinion that only certain target groups are interested in participating in market research online. This is also an assumption known from traditional face-to-face market research, regardless if the participant is recruited from the street or through a reliable random process on the doorstep of the participant. Online research is also rumoured to attract Internet pros and incentive hunters, which can cause not controllable sampling effects.

The article draws up the recent state of affairs on the basis of the current guidelines and demonstrates the common practice of online samples. It's to be discussed if the demands of guidelines are met and which parts have backlog demand. The reason is that online research not only has advanced very far but also could lead to a far better quality of samples compared to traditional market research. Clients who request online research can receive hints about aspects that need special attention.

• **Demand: Standardizing quality assurance in online research**

It is almost four years since the standards for quality assurance was published jointly by ADM, ASI, BVM and D.G.O.F. in May 2001. The check list for online research clients followed in September 2001. Both documents are in my opinion important measures of quality, but they are also limited fulfilled. Valid results call for compliance with certain quality criteria concerning relevant samples:

1. Creating a research

- a) Is the target group (basic population) of the survey clearly defined and accessible online?
- b) Will the test persons become active on the basis of random sampling or on the basis of a quota method?
- c) Will the test person be spoken to individually after a clearly defined selection process?
- d) Will the consumption quota within the access panels or within the random sample be documented?

2. Realizing the research

- a) Is the field time sufficient?
- b) Will the extent and the manner of the neutral incentives appeal to the target group and make them participate?
- c) Will multiple participation and clicking through the survey be excluded by field control?
- d) Will field control be documented adequately?

3. Online- (Access-) Panels

- a) Is the number of the verified and regularly participating test persons specified?
- b) Will the enlistment and selection of the panel members be sufficiently documented?
- c) Will the basic data of the panel members be regularly updated?
- d) Will it be ensured that the panel members are being questioned not too often?

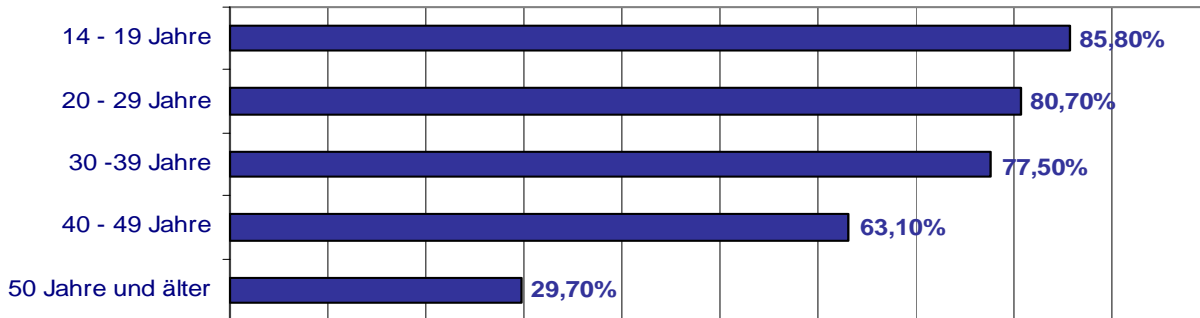
• **The reality: Current practices in online research**

The starting point of this observation is the current method of observing national and international online market research. The focus is on using the internet as a survey tool, especially for consumer behaviour, and not so much on internet as enquiry mechanism.

• Definition and availability of the target group

The realisation of the survey is rarely done through a random sample. It is more often done through a quota sample based on a factual and clearly defined target group. Then it is easier to e.g. conduct a study of consumer behaviour where the target group are women between 25 and 45 years old, homemakers and who doesn't dismiss certain brands. Influential factors like education, regionality or usage of main brands are taken care of in the opening of the survey, so that no distorting effects are introduced into the sample. An online sample will only be realized when the online penetration in this group is "clearly demonstrably advanced" – at least a value between 60 and 70 % in the target group. An online research should not be used where there are lower penetration values in a country or target group.

Comparative studies between online and offline enquiries can show if sample effects can lead to distortion in the results (see image 1). The survey participants are being recruited from an internal or external access panel. Online and offline methods can be used for the recruitment in access panels and ad-hoc samples. The recruiting should be wide spread and regionally distributed. The same benchmark should be used for both recruitment targets. Online recruitment is at present most dominant, but it is not always easy to say whether there is a wide spread.



Internet penetration in Germany. Source: forsa, @facts monthly, December 2004
74,7 % of the 14-49 years old are online!

• Active vs. passive recruitment

An essential element for the quality of samples is the difference between the active vs. the passive selection in the recruitment.

Active recruitment means "the institute decides when it's appealing". This is essential for the ad-hoc recruitment, but also for the panel recruitment. In an access panel this means an actively recruited panel with a closed group of participants. It means no publishing of banners on selective web sites or listings of institutes on web sites.

The web site for the institute should also have no direct or indirect access to the access panel, because this form of recruitment means an implicit interest in marketing.

The institute receives in practice telephone calls from interested test participants who want to be registered in the panel. We have to disappoint these persons for the benefit of the active recruitment, because that is not how we do the recruitment. This also excludes offers from direct marketing specialist who have access to databases with marketing affine. Also with these people there is an element of passive recruitment and therefore a negative sample effect. Prevalent are platforms like „geizkragen.com" or „geld-verdienen-mit-umfragen.de", they combine passive recruitment with a strong emphasis on incentives. Some platforms place a link on the well known panels without asking the panel manager or institute, because they want to control where the source is coming from.

Every active address should be annotated with a corresponding parameter in order to trace the source of the recruitment by the registration. Every participant without such a parameter is assumed to be a "passive recruited" participant and should be excluded from samples within the panel. With all those passive gained samples there will be an uncontrollable distortion because of the self-selection. That way professional testers are being recruited who have an important, negative effect on the quality of the results.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the following content:

- Page Title:** Geld verdienen mit bezahlten Umfragen im Internet (Informationen, Anbieter und Extras) | Impressum
- Navigation Menu (Left):** Home, Aktuell, Nachrichten, Informationen, NEU Anbieter, Spezials, Extras, Neuester Anbieter.
- Main Content:**
 - Header:** GELD-VERDIENEN-MIT-UMFRAGEN
 - Text:** Auf Geld-verdienen-mit-umfragen.de erfahren Sie, wo und wie Sie mit dem Beantworten von Umfragen im Internet bis zu 20 Euro pro Stunde verdienen können.
 - Section:** Vorteile von Online-Umfragen
 - Jeder kann an Online-Umfragen teilnehmen
 - Benachrichtigung bei neuen Umfragen**
 - Hohe Verdienste möglich
 - Meist sehr schnelle Auszahlung**
 - Keine Extra-Software für die Beantwortung nötig
 - Mitgestaltung der Zukunft**
 - Viele Anbieter: Parallelteilnahme möglich
- Survey Question (Right):**

Frage 1: Wie wichtig sind Ihnen Handys? (Bitte ankreuzen)

Frage 2: Wie wichtig sind ...
- Footer:** Jobangebot Finanzberater, Jeder Klick bringt Bares, Gooooooooo-Anzeigen, Weitere Sponsoren: Amazon.de | Conrad.de | Technit.de

• **Verifying the selection and document the controls**

The verification of the recruited test person is necessary when the selection of participants is not based on random selection. It is not sufficient with personal information about demographical characteristics or the email-address. Telephone numbers and mailing address should also be available for verification. The well proven plausibility- and consistency controls, where repeating questions about age or gender appear, are regularly done. That means that a test person who registers as a 30 year old male in the access panel must not change his gender or age too fast in the following surveys. Variables like hair colour or brand usage are of course not controlled. With this procedure it is possible to ensure that there will be no false identities ("Mickey Mouse") in the access panels, to hinder participants in answering more than once because they want more incentives. The important thing is to document the means of control and show the documentation to the client.

• **Documenting and justifying the consumption quota**

The consumption quota describes the part of the complete utilisable interviews, and is an important sign for the quality of a sample or access panel. Because the sampling error can only be determined for the random sample, and the random sampling online barely feasible is, the online research should be open to mistakes in the broader sense. This is mostly a matter of selection errors (systematical errors) e.g. wrong selection technique or the wrong treatment of the sample. In doing so the response from the access panel indicates the quality of the panel. A return from between only 10 or 20 % of the gross sample indicates a quality problem within the sample. It seems to us that with lower response rates the transition between an access panel and address list works fluently. Concerning the documentation of the response and the comparative analysis with different samples, should always be based on the same conditions, i.e. that the response is always analysed and compared after seven field days and two reminders. The project documentation should be added to the consumption quota and the sample failures.

• **Field time**

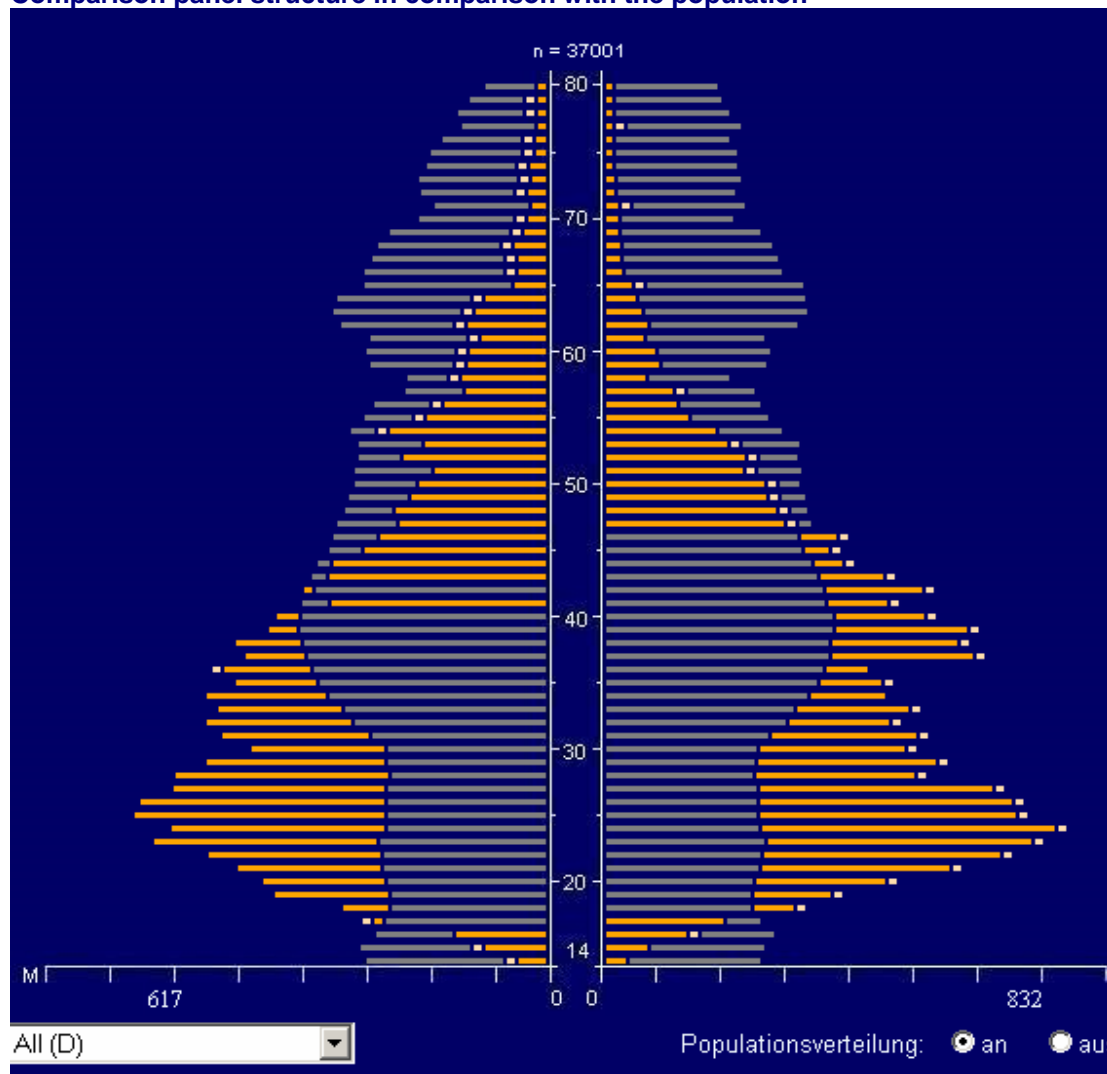
The field time is based upon the subject matter. If the online field just lasts a few hours, we can conclude that only the heavy users with disproportionate high online use will be asked. The normal field time for a study should be at least seven days. This time could be shortened, but then the client should be informed that the sample effect through the selectivity of the sample should be expected.

• **The extent and manner of incentives**

Incentives, a way to award the participants, should be neutral for the participants in an online survey. A draw for a kitchen machine that is being questioned in the survey could lead to distortion. The test persons assume that a positive appraisal will lead to better chances of winning. Much better is the award from virtual points that can be turned into cash or gift coupons. Another possibility is

to donate the points, something that has established a neutral, intrinsic and strongly motivating appeal. One factor to be taken into account is screenouts (persons who are not qualified to take part in the main survey) in any case are to be given incentives. This also goes for fieldblocks (persons with ample quota characteristics in the sample). This raises the total cost of the study, but without the payout of incentives there will be an increased danger of falsification of the panel members, and they learn that they should only cross the “right” answer in order to get to the main survey where there are incentives. The incentives for the screenouts and the fieldblocks are an important quality criteria and instrument of care in taking care of the panel. But this is not universally spread.

Comparison panel structure in comparison with the population



The blue bars show the Mikrozensus / BRD
The orange bars show the age pattern of the Dialgo Access Panel Germany

- **Multiple participation and clicking through the survey**

Multiple participation in the survey is excluded through a unique link that is being sent to the participants in the access, as well as the above described one time registration in the panel. It is possible to measure how much time the participant is using for answering the online questions in the survey. Every part of the survey as well as the end of the survey is being monitored through “time stamps”. “Clickthroughs” are test persons whose handling time is well under the average handling time of all the test persons. “Clickthroughs” are easy to identify, and should be taken out of the data base by data cleaning.

- **Documenting the field control**

A reasonable documentation of the field control during the study and after the study is an elementary part of every online study. This is usually done through a predefined quota sample test on a quota controlled selection of the members of the access panels. If the target group, e.g. men and women between 30 and 69 years old, is to be divided into three groups, only persons that correspond to this will be selected and invited to the survey. The field control documents both the number of the gross and net interviews in the segment, and excludes test persons with unwanted characteristics for this survey. The elaborate master dates in the access panels make it possible to perform a targeted selection of the gross sample by means of selection criteria (e.g. age and gender). This assures a higher degree of satisfaction from the test persons, and fewer participants will be excluded because of a missing target group adaptation (sample neutral failures). When it comes to the field control, the online research has a greater advantage when it comes to efficiency than the traditional survey.

Through the technological field control and a sufficient scope of panels, it is possible to have a multiple factorial field control of the segment level. It is possible to have experimental groups (e.g. once a month a concept test), and to perform absolute structural comparison concerning the controllable variables. Every concept can be performed and evaluated on the same number of men, women or the exact same relation to brands inside a gender or age quota. This should to a large extent exclude single group's distortion effects in the comparative examination through an unequal distribution of the interacting factors.

• **Quantity and quality of online access panels**

Few access panels exist just for one particular target group. They are more often a pool with well-kept survey participants that can be singled out for sample tests. The number of panel members is itself no quality stamp of a panel. Only regular participants and validated panel members (see above) are material to panel size and panel quality. A regular participation in the surveys is heuristically seen when a panel member participates in at least every second study, and also regularly updates the master data. Test persons that do not fit these criteria, should be excluded from the panel in order to add to the mortality rate of the panel. The average response rate from a well-kept panel should at least be around 60 %. We know from experience that the mortality rate in a well-kept online panel lies between 10 and 15 %. This means that the reflections from the "living" panel members are of higher relevance, because only they are worth the time and effort of planning a study. It could mean higher costs and a longer field time if more sample tests are to be done because the panel size is overrated. The panel members should on the other hand be kept at a minimum size. Long serving members and a high degree of participation in the surveys could give them status as pros.

• **Documenting the panel structure**

The panel structure documentation discloses the recruiting process and the description of the recruiting sources. It should document the panels average response quotas, panel mortality, and panel maintenance. The structure could for example show the pay-outs based on important demographical characteristics. Comparison between the populations can also be extracted. The panel maintenance includes preparation, current information, current account balance, possibility of converting the points, and a summary of the latest invitations to take part in the surveys. If possible a test person should answer an invitation within 24 hours. A summary of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) or data protection should always be available. The answers to individual questions should always be consistent, and motivate to more participation. It should nevertheless always be possible to withdraw from a panel. The maintenance of the panel should be a job for a permanently hired and qualified colleague. If the panel is international the maintenance should be done by a native speaker.

• **Updating the master data**

It is important to update the master data on a regular basis, so that the sample tests will be done on actual facts. It is important to know if a household has increased since the last registration, if new household appliances have been bought or if the household has acquired a pet. The continuous updating of the master data makes it possible for the test persons go show us any changes. This does not replace an "expiration date" on a user account because the participant has to register again or renew and control the information they have given the panel. If a master data update is to be done on the basis of a average targeted response, is open for discussion. The alternative to updating the master data is for example when the minimum response rate is lower than 60 %.

• **Survey frequency**

The frequency of the surveys is ultimately important for the success of the sample test quality. Panel members should not too often and not too rarely participate in surveys, especially when the surveys are very much the same. A survey being done more than once each month or several times per quarter is too much. The institute should perform this form of control, how often a participant has taken part in the surveys. If a test person receives an invitation with "if you have not participated in a survey to this subject XXXX" it could motivate test pros to fit their answers to the questions. The ideal survey frequency is between six and 12 surveys each year, but for different themes. Six or fewer surveys each year will lead to higher panel mortality rate. The problem is mostly that the quality of the surveys will be in danger because of too many surveys. That means the panel management has to recruit more test persons of the most needed target groups. For institutes that mainly do surveys for FMCG companies that might be house keeping woman for example.

• **Conclusion**

Transparency in the field work produces confidence in the online surveys. A transparent field statistic that sheds light on the gross sample and the drop outs like unit or Item-non-response and of course the incidence of the study are part of that. Another contributing success factor for an online sample of high quality is frankness about the recruiting channel of the panel and the care actions being taken for the panel.

Institutes and panel supplier should offer a transparent and open documentation actively. Furthermore in case of cooperation with a supplier the client should be informed about the supplier including his documentation. A voluntary commitment to transparency concerning the sample leads to a better sample quality the in the long run and builds up more trust in online research.

Andera Gadeib,

Business School Graduate, studied marketing and information management in Aachen, the Netherlands and USA and is currently doing her doctorate on „Online Marketing Research with virtual Test Markets" at RWTH Aachen. She was employed as scientific worker at RWTH until 1999. She is founder and CEO of Dialego AG Market Research Online and she has published several papers on market research online.
andera.gadeib@dialego.de

**Literature:**

Checkliste für Auftraggeber von Online-Befragungen. Herausgegeben von ADM, ASI, BVM, D.G.O.F. September 2001.

Hüttner, Manfred: Grundzüge der Marktforschung. München 1999.

Liljeberg, Holger; Binnewies, Jürgen; Fäth-Regnet, Matthias: Qualitätsmanagement durch Feldkontrollen. In: BVM inbrief 08/2002, S. 4-6.

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth; Petersen, Thomas: Alle, nicht jeder. Berlin 1998.
Standards zur Qualitätssicherung