The Fallacy of “Getting Paid For Your Opinions”

It’s time to take aim against misleading tactics.

By Donna L. Gillin and Jane Sheppard

Have you recently received e-mail that offers to pay you for your opinions, “turn your opinions into cash,” or the like? If the answer to this question is yes, you’re not alone. Many in the survey research industry have received and expressed concern over similar e-mails with offers for the opportunity to pay members of the public for their opinions (usually for a membership fee). In reality, these Web sites sell their “members” a database of industry members they claim will “pay” respondents for their opinions. There are several concerns associated with this type of offer. First, respondents are never asked to pay to become a research participant by a legitimate survey researcher (focus group or otherwise). Second, with the publicity of these offers, respondents may become uniformly accustomed to being “paid for their opinions,” rather than, in some cases, being paid as an incentive or a thank you for participation by legitimate industry members.

Moreover, although incentives may be used in focus groups, mall studies, customer satisfaction studies, Web surveys, or others, incentives normally are not used in telephone studies where telephone numbers have been randomly generated by a computer. Since telephone studies make up a considerable amount of the survey research conducted in our industry, the respondent is left with an unrealistic expectation of being offered or receiving an incentive whenever they participate in survey research. In addition, given the reality that all potential respondents won’t fit the desired demographic for all studies, the materials (generally) don’t clearly notify potential respondents that they may never be chosen to participate in any survey research and therefore may never be provided with an incentive to participate in the research process.

Lastly, as industry members have expressed, one of the net effects of such “offers” is the creation of “professional respondents” or “professional survey takers.” Such individuals who frequent group discussions have views that may not be wholly representative of the group and are more familiar with group discussion practice—which may result in uncharacteristic and unrepresentative behavior.

In response, the Council for Marketing and Opinion Research (CMOR) has created a model response letter to be sent to companies that utilize this practice. In addition, CMOR is researching each of these companies to determine if Better Business Bureau reliability reports are on file, which would contain information about any complaints against the companies. The next step is to contact the local BBBs, as well as Federal Trade Commission (FTC) contacts to discuss any possible misrepresentations being made by the companies/Web sites. Through these efforts, CMOR is seeking to do the following:

- Educate the companies/Web sites (and potential respondents) about the true nature of survey research. In legitimate survey research, survey respondents are randomly chosen from a predetermined sample, which is representative of a select group, and are requested to provide their valued opinion. They’re never required to pay money in order to be a respondent. Furthermore, respondents are not “paid” for their opinions, but are provided with an incentive to participate or a thank you for their participation.
- Explain the difference between qualitative and quantitative research and the methods for choosing respondents in each.
- Explain to the companies/Web sites (and suggest they make it more explicit to respondents) that their “members” may never be chosen to participate in survey research and therefore may never be provided with an incentive to participate in the research process.
- Express concern about the potential for “professional respondents.”
- Ask that the companies cease misrepresenting the nature of the survey research process.

CMOR will be working with industry members to put an end to this and other misuses/abuses of the research process. For more information on the “get paid for opinions” issue or our efforts to combat abuses of the research process, please visit the CMOR Web site at www.cmor.org.

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