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What you missed at recent MR & Intelligence conferences

RFL Communications, CMOR & IIR Research Industry Summit: Improving Respondent Cooperation Chicago, IL Sept. 28-29, 2006

Research Reveals Alarming Incidence of “Undesirable” Online Panelists

Main Point: Roughly 14% of online research panelists fall into one or both of two undesirable categories: Frauds and Mental Cheaters (i.e., strong satisficers).

Mental Cheaters—whose goal is to complete the survey with the least amount of effort in the shortest amount of time—pose a potentially greater threat to data quality than Fraudulent respondents (who misrepresent themselves in order to qualify for a survey and collect an incentive).

RCR impressions of content:	Freshness	A
	Relevance:	A+
	Practicality:	A+

Jeff Miller, SVP, Burke Inc. (Cincinnati, OH), opened with an observation: “Online panels were supposed to help solve much of our industry’s respondent cooperation issues, but clearly they have not done so,” he said. “Marketing research depends upon honest, thoughtful and unbiased input from consumers. So, it’s more than reasonable to ask if we are getting what we are paying for from survey respondents, particularly online panel respondents.”

To answer that question, Burke undertook its own research to determine the extent to which undesirable behaviors are exhibited in 13 of the most popular commercial online panels. The study employed a common set of respondent qualifications for each panel and the same contrived questionnaire and instructions. Across panels, response and completion rates averaged 20% and 70%, respectively.

Several “traps” were placed to identify deceptive and/or satisficing respondents. Panelists were initially screened for usage of several low incidence categories and brands (e.g., use of a blood glucose monitor and owning pet health insurance). “These are pretty low incidence populations, yet the percentage of panelists who claimed to belong to one or both of these groups was relatively high. When combined with other indicators, it led us to conclude that a significant number of panelists were lying,” reported Miller.

To peg strong satisficers, Miller included several questions aimed at measuring respondent attention. For example, the instruction, “Please verify your place in the survey by typing a ‘2’ for this brand,” was added into a battery of brand attribut-

es that respondents were asked to rate on a scale of one to 10. “Logically, anyone actually paying attention to the survey questions would’ve answered with a 2,” he reasoned. The average rate of failure to respond to this request across panels was 20.7%. To put this number into perspective, Miller revealed that when the same instruction was inserted into a real customer satisfaction survey using a sample of highly involved respondents provided by the client, the failure rate dropped to 2%.

Miller classified the panelists who falsely claimed to use a combination of low-incidence categories/brands as “Fraudulents.” “This is the worst kind of respondent. They will say anything to qualify and get the incentive,” he described. “They typically adopt multiple fake online identities, use automated form-fill software to expedite the process, and may take multiple passes through the same survey.”

According to Miller, roughly 5% of panelists in a typical high-incidence study are Fraudulents. “This frequency can be twice as high in some panels,” he cautioned. Even more troubling was Miller’s revelation that frauds may potentially be much more prevalent in low incidence studies where “proportionately, more of them would erroneously be screened as meeting the criteria. In a single-digit incidence category, Fraudulents may comprise 40% or more of the total completed sample. They must be identified in the screening process, before they are permitted to take the survey,” he advised.



Jeff Miller

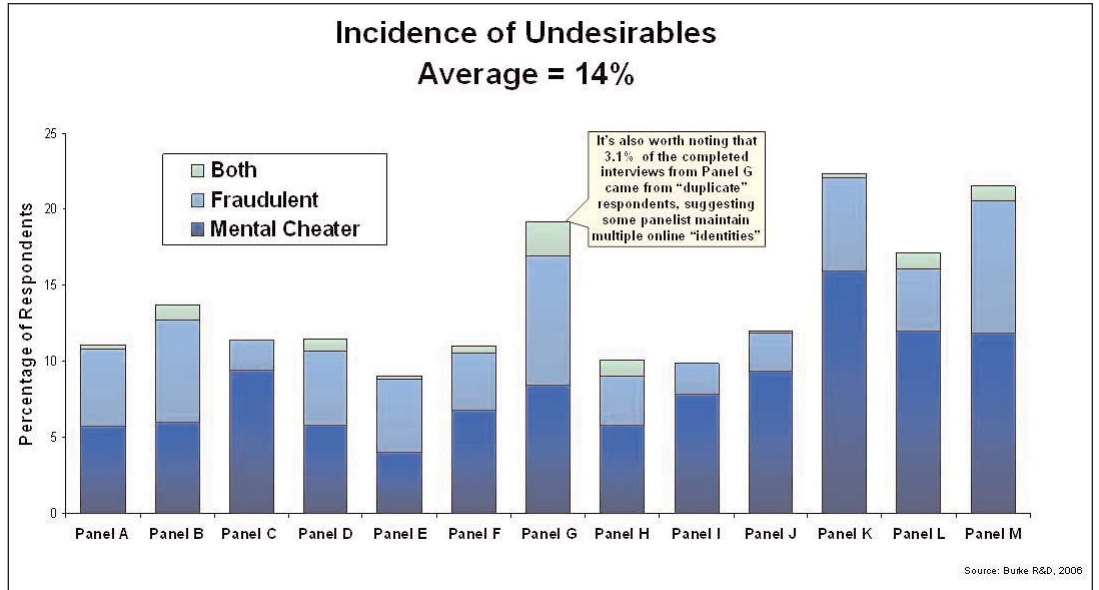
Miller classified the second group—those who, among other tests, failed the “number 2” test—as “Mental Cheaters.” This group is characterized by frequently selecting the first response, by having no variance in ratings, by “straight-lining” their responses and by not checking “all” that apply, etc. “About 5-10% of panelists take significant mental shortcuts in a typical 15-minute-plus survey. Their goal is to finish,” he explained. “This frequency can be twice as high in some panels. Mental Cheaters are also potentially much more prevalent in longer studies, where, proportionately, more of them would complete the survey. And Mental Cheaters can only be identified after the survey is completed.”

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To demonstrate how Fraudulents and Mental Cheaters impact research data, Miller presented a graph (see below, left) of mean attribute ratings from the survey for authentic respondents, Fraudulents and Mental Cheaters. The Fraudulents' responses varied significantly from those of the real respondents, but their mean attribute ratings ran in a parallel curve to those of the real respondents. In contrast, the Mental Cheaters' responses constituted a virtual flat line, and in many cases, individual mean attribute ratings diverged drastically from those of the real respondents.

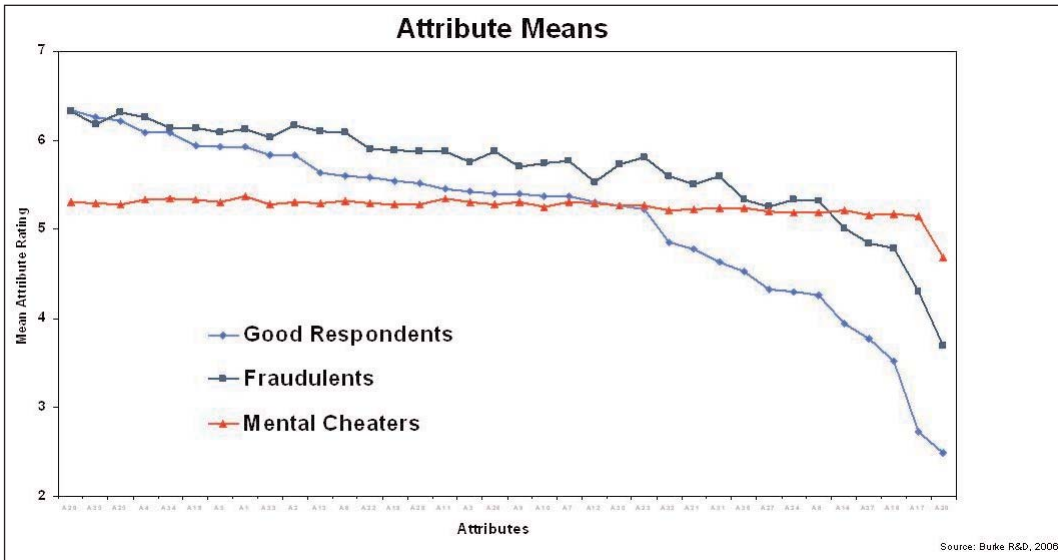
Of the 13 major online panels included in the study, panelists that are either Frauds, Mental Cheaters or both represented anywhere from 8% to almost 25% of respondents. In most cases, Mental Cheaters vastly outnumbered

redundant attributes) and shortening surveys. He also urged panel providers to implement stronger safeguards like random telephone validation and physical address checks to help



identify fraudulent panelists.

"Until panel providers and the MR industry get better at



removing strong satisficers and fraudulent respondents, research agencies have an obligation to do so on their clients' behalf," Miller stressed. Based on its research, Burke has developed a real-time model for identifying and removing Fraudulents (during the screening process) and Mental Cheaters (upon completion of the survey—without counting against fulfillment quota). Burke prevents the undesirable panelists it identifies from participating in future research by storing their Panelist IDs in a "do not use" database. ©

Fraudulents, and comparatively few panelists were identified as both a Fraudulent and a Mental Cheater.

To reduce the number of Mental Cheaters, Miller advised reducing survey complexity (e.g., less word count, decompose questions, etc.), improving survey design (e.g., eliminating

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