



# Data Collection Using Online Panels

Using an online panel to collect data is an attractive option to researchers interested in saving time, minimizing costs, and making the most of technology to create more realistic stimuli and testing conditions. However, online panels are not necessarily the panacea many hope they will be. Rather, consumers need to understand the limitations and advantages of online panels in order to use them most effectively.

Not all online panels are the same. It is important to distinguish between the two major types: *nonprobability-based* and *probability-based*.

Nonprobability-based panels are also referred to as “opt-in” panels because they work by maintaining a large database of individuals who can opt in to participating in surveys sent out in invitations by the panel administrators at any time. The panel administrators build these panels by sending out widespread advertisements, and allowing anyone who sees the advertisements to join the panel provided they meet the requirements specified by the panel builder. In contrast, probability-based panels select potential members in advance from a sampling frame of the target population and then attempt to recruit only those sampled individuals to join the panel.

The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), an authority on this topic, released a landmark report in March 2010 summarizing their review of online panels. The task force's review led to a number of conclusions and recommendations, including the following:

1. Researchers should avoid nonprobability-based online panels when one of the research objectives is to accurately estimate population values. There currently is no generally accepted theoretical basis from which to claim that survey results using samples from nonprobability-based online panels are projectable to the general population. Thus, claims of "representativeness" should be avoided when using these sample sources.
2. There are times when a nonprobability-based online panel is an appropriate choice. Not all research is intended to produce precise estimates of population values, so there may be survey purposes and topics where the generally lower cost and unique properties of web data collection is an acceptable alternative to traditional probability-based methods.
3. Users of online panels should understand that there are significant differences in the composition and practices of individual panels that can affect survey results. Researchers should choose the panels they use carefully.

Taken from: *AAPOR Report on Online Panels. The American Association for Public Opinion Research*, March, 2010. <http://www.aapor.org>. Last accessed April 26, 2010.

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Thus, the decision to use an online panel should first and foremost be consistent with and appropriate for the research questions that need to be answered. If the objective is to estimate population values, nonprobability-based online panels are not sufficient; however, they may be entirely sufficient if the objective is to conduct an experiment or delve deeper into a topic to explore relationships or discover new insights. Fewer probability-based panels exist than nonprobability-based panels; however, custom probability-based online panels can be created if a suitable population frame exists.

Nonprobability- and probability-based online panels share a number of commonalities when it comes to managing the panel process. The Interactive Marketing Research Organization (IMRO) released a report in 2006 establishing guidelines for best practices in online sample and panel management. This report highlights several leading threats to the quality of online panel data, including panel overlap (same person is member of multiple panels), internal panel duplication (same person takes same survey multiple times within same panel), bad survey-taking behavior (such as "straight-lining," or answering branching questions in a specific way to avoid follow-up questions), and panel conditioning (exposure to content on previous panel surveys influences a person's responses to subsequent panel surveys). Guidelines and other points for consideration are outlined in the IMRO document to help panel users (or those who buy panel data) evaluate panel providers and hold them accountable to specific quality control standards.

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