

Heavier Responders in Online Survey Research **Professional Panel Management Matters**

A Joint Research on Research Study from



Online research continues to grow given its benefits of lower cost and faster turnaround. To satisfy the growing demand for online research, some Internet survey providers are inviting their respondents to complete an ever-increasing number of surveys. As a result, concerns have emerged as to whether these practices are impacting the decisions made based on these survey results. Experienced, professional research firms understand the importance of well-managed samples and panels, and as such, responsibly limit the frequency of survey invitations to any given respondent. Nonetheless, those firms cannot control exposure to survey invitations other than their own. Frequent survey takers make up a portion of any sample. The influence of heavy responders is a function of their importance to the total sample, and the degree to which they provide different results or not.

Background

In 2005, Ipsos, The NPD Group, and TNS, three research industry leaders in the realm of managed access panel philosophies, formed a partnership to identify and better understand heavier online survey participants and their potential impact on survey results. A roughly equal number of panelists from each company's professionally managed sample participated in a number of concept tests across different product categories. Fourteen concepts and eight product categories were part of this research over several months, with approximately 1,000 panelists responding to each concept. Key concept measures included Purchase Intent, Uniqueness, Value, Liking, and Believability.

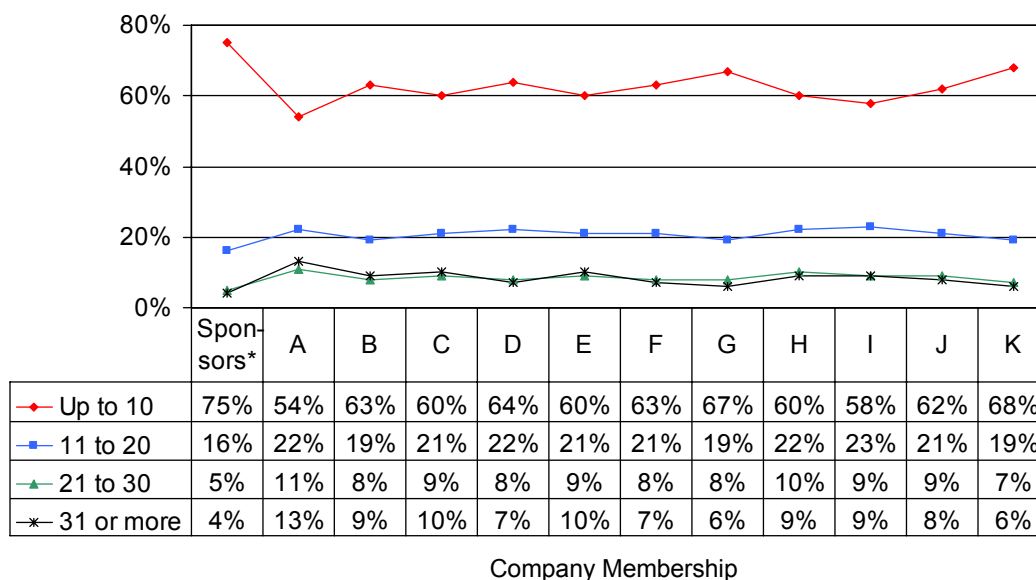
Upon completion of the standardized concept surveys, respondents were then asked to complete a standardized 'Survey Participation' questionnaire covering their online survey-taking behaviors. The survey covered the research organization sponsoring the survey (either Ipsos, The NPD Group, or TNS) as well as any other research organizations. Questions included survey participation frequency and factors influencing decisions to participate.

Survey Completion Rates

To begin, the consortium examined reported frequencies of survey completion from any source over the past 30 days. Approximately 81% of survey responders claimed to have completed ten or fewer surveys in total from any survey source over that period. Further, the average number of completed surveys was 7.9, representing about one survey every three to four days. By contrast, the average number of surveys presented by the participating supplier (Ipsos, The NPD Group, or TNS) that were completed in the past 30 days was 4.0, and as such, did not reflect 'heavier' responding.

Responders also had the opportunity to indicate membership in survey panels other than that of the sponsoring supplier. The names of numerous major survey companies, each with their unique survey rules and incentives, were provided as aided options for the responders. The chart below demonstrates the variation in reliance on the heaviest of responders across those companies. Nearly one quarter of responders with membership in Company A, for example, completed 21 or more surveys while only 14% of responders from Company G indicated so. In fact, Ipsos, The NPD Group, and TNS were among the companies with the lowest representation of heavier responders. Clearly, certain survey companies are much more likely to appeal to heavier responders, most likely a reflection of sample management practices.

**Heavier Responding by Survey Company Membership
Among Those Who Are Members of 2+ Companies**



* Sponsors = Ipsos, NPD Group, and TNS combined

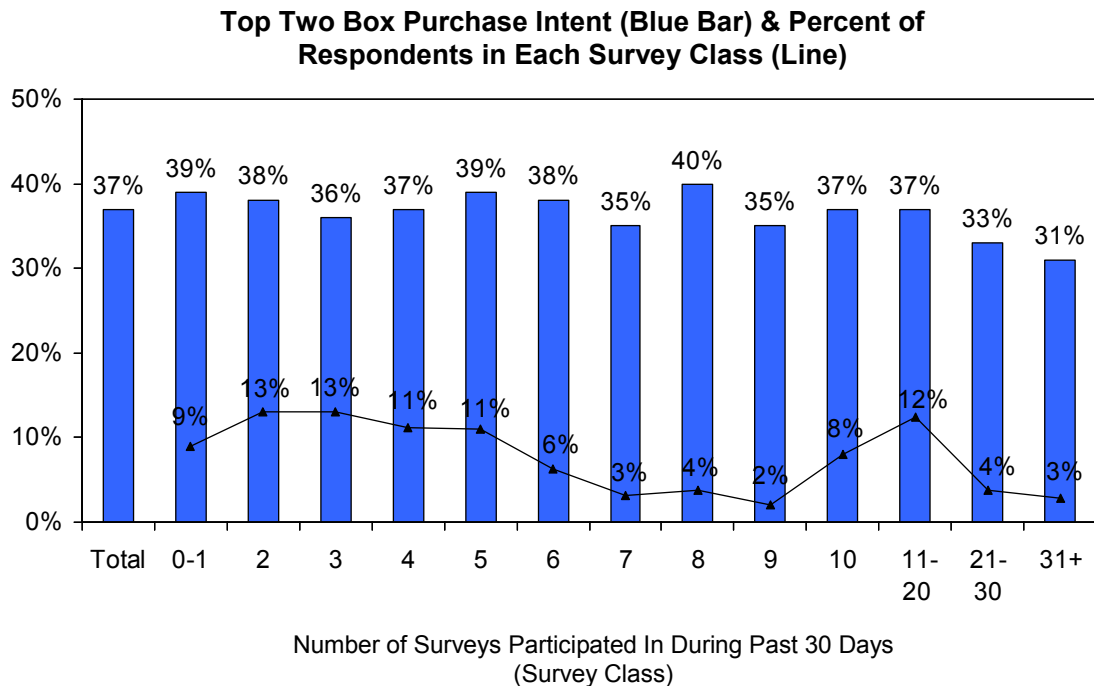
Characteristics of Heavier Responders

Heavier responders are somewhat different from lighter responders in terms of their demographics. The very heaviest responders (31+ surveys per month) are more likely to be men, be part of smaller households, have lower incomes, and/or have lower education levels. However, the very heaviest responders represent a very small portion of the participating firms' samples (3%).

Impact of Heavier Responders on Key Measures

Regardless of any small demographic differences, it is important to determine whether heavier responders influence survey results. Although there are statistically measurable differences between the heaviest and lightest survey participants, (heavier responders do have lower purchase intent and value scores), there are simply too few heavier responders on the Ipsos, NPD and TNS panels to alter the overall results.

The table below provides the details of top two box purchase intent by self-reported survey frequency in the past 30 days. Some of the variability is explained by the various concepts taken, which may not have been equally distributed across survey-taking classes. The one group that does stand out as different is that of the very heaviest responders, or those claiming to have taken more than 30 surveys in the past 30 days, representing an average of 3% of the responding samples.



On the Ipsos, NPD, and TNS panels, heavier responders do not meaningfully impact key survey results. The table below presents mean and top two box concept scores for the total sample, as well as for survey participation sub-samples. Compared to the total sample results, when data from the heaviest responders were excluded, neither the mean nor top two box sub-sample concept scores differed. The same result was observed even when results from only those responders who participated in no more than 10 surveys in the past 30 days were included. In other words, whether heavier responders from Ipsos, The NPD Group or TNS are included or excluded, the results remain unaffected.

Measure (Mean)	Total	Number of Claimed Surveys Participated in Past 30 Days		
		0 to 30	0 to 20	0 to 10
Purchase Intent	3.14	3.14	3.15	3.15
Uniqueness	2.96	2.96	2.96	2.95
Value	3.23	3.24	3.24	3.24
Liking	3.84	3.83	3.83	3.82
Believability	3.52	3.51	3.50	3.50

Measure (Top 2 Box)	Total	Number of Claimed Surveys Participated in Past 30 Days		
		0 to 30	0 to 20	0 to 10
Purchase Intent	37%	37%	38%	38%
Uniqueness	31%	31%	31%	30%
Value	36%	37%	37%	37%
Liking	37%	37%	37%	36%
Believability	54%	54%	53%	53%

Survey Completion Times

Although heavier responders took somewhat less time to complete the concept test questionnaire, they took slightly more time than average to complete the follow-up questionnaire concerning their online survey participation. One hypothesis is that heavier responders have become familiar with the concept survey method thereby allowing them to complete it in less time, yet they continue to carefully consider their answers.

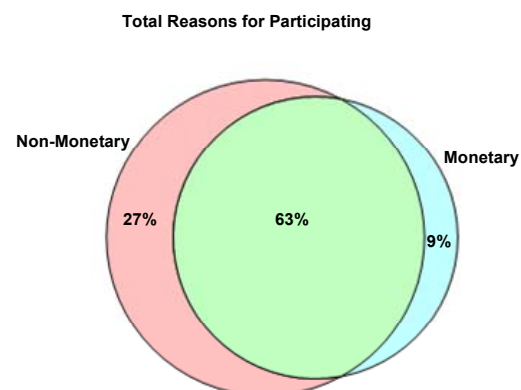
Reasons for Participating

Reasons for participating in survey research also differ depending on survey participation rates. Those participating in more surveys are more likely to be doing so for monetary reasons and less likely for non-monetary reasons. "I enjoy doing surveys" was an exception to this rule.

Top Reason for Participating	Total	Number of Claimed Surveys Participated in Past 30 Days			
		0-10	11-20	21-30	31+
Non-Monetary Reasons	61%	61%	60%	58%	52%
I enjoy doing surveys	17%	16%	20%	22%	23%
To make my opinion count	17%	17%	16%	16%	13%
I find the surveys interesting	10%	11%	9%	8%	6%
I appreciate being asked for my opinions	10%	10%	9%	6%	5%
To be able to shape important decisions	5%	5%	6%	5%	5%
I like to be 'in the know'	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Monetary Reasons	34%	33%	36%	39%	46%
To win cash or prizes	15%	15%	15%	20%	24%
To earn points that can be redeemed for cash or gifts	13%	13%	12%	11%	12%
To support my income	6%	5%	9%	8%	10%

Even though heavier responders may be interested in financial gain for their survey responses, it is more important to determine whether these reasons for participating impact concept scores. The table below indicates that those who participate for financial gain do have a tendency to give lower concept ratings. However, only a small portion of the sponsoring companies' panels are completing surveys solely for financial gain. In fact, when examining all reasons respondents provide for participating, only 9 percent of respondents are completing surveys solely for monetary reasons. Most who mention monetary reasons also mention a non-monetary reason.

Top 2 Box %	Top Reason for Participating	
	Non-Monetary	Monetary
Purchase Intent	39%	35%
Uniqueness	32%	28%
Value	39%	33%
Liking	39%	35%
Believability	55%	51%



Well-Managed Panels

The experience and high-quality panel management practices utilized by Ipsos, The NPD Group, and TNS substantially reduce the impact of heavier responders on the concept scoring results. The inability of heavier responders to impact the results of Ipsos, The NPD Group, and TNS concept scores is attributed to the high-quality panel management practices to which all three companies strictly adhere. The quality assurance measures include, among others, tight controls of:

- 1) the total frequency of survey contacts,
- 2) the frequency of survey contacts within similar categories,
- 3) who receives which surveys, and
- 4) sample balancing on multiple demographic targets.

Conclusions

The volume of survey activity on the Internet has risen dramatically, in part due to lower cost per complete compared to traditional survey methods. Respondents have choices, and as such, some respondents will choose to become more engaged in survey taking than will others. That inevitably leads to a class of heavier responders in the national pool of survey takers.

Professional research firms understand the importance of sound sample management practices, and the importance of balancing well-crafted incentive systems, survey invite frequency, and client survey demand. Ipsos, The NPD Group, and TNS exercise considerable restraint on survey frequency, minimizing reliance on the heaviest of survey takers despite higher operational costs. Further, these firms have designed their incentive systems so that no single participation motivator (cash payment for example) dominates their samples.

Excluding the heaviest responders from the concept studies did not alter the overall survey results in this research because they represent a very small proportion of the total sample. However, the very heaviest responders generally do produce lower concept test scores than do the lightest responders. The best insurance against biased results is to use professionally managed samples.

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