

Case article Citizens' Panels....beat them or join them?
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Citizens' Panels....beat them or join them? Some Marxist thoughts on longitudinal surveys.

Longitudinal, or panel, surveys always seem like an excellent idea.....until you try to do one. In theory they tick all the boxes and might even appear relatively cheap; in practice they tend to be a nightmare. The good thing is that in the public sector the infatuation with panel surveys, the coveting of the citizens' panel, might be on the wane. And to be honest, for many authorities the relationship with the panel was very much a 'tick-the-right-box' affair anyway: consultation must not only be done, it must be seen to be done. Many citizens' panels remind me of the TV sitcom of the late '60's and early '70's which was set in a tailors' shop and was called "Never mind the quality, feel the width". To be even more brutal, when thinking about panel recruitment and those who become 'loyal' members, we should always consider how apposite and sage were the words of Groucho Marx when he claimed not to "want to belong to any club that will have me as a member".

I know this is very hard on many successful and well-run panels, but it might be worthwhile to look at panels afresh, and while I might knock panels, I will suggest something to put in their place. Furthermore it should be added right away that what goes for local authorities and other

public agencies and their need to gauge public opinion, awareness and attitudes, need not apply to private sector consumer or other panels where the objectives tend to be more narrowly focused on such issues as product development or customer retention.

Regardless, it is timely to review the pros and cons of panels if only because currently there may be a move towards using on-line versions as cheap and cheerful ways of cutting market research costs in a time of recession.

Why Citizens' Panels?

A panel survey is one where the same people - commonly around 1000 to 3000 - take part in a series of surveys, perhaps up to 12, over a period of up to three years. While any type of fieldwork can be employed after the recruitment phase, postal self-completion has become the standard fieldwork method...no doubt because it is the cheapest.

The methodological attraction of panels is that the statistics of the results are that much more robust because the variance of the means over survey waves - the longitudinal aspect of the method - are smaller because the samples comprise the same respondents; that is, they are not independent samples. This being so, the crucial technical issue with panels is getting the initial sample, the recruitment of the panel, absolutely right.

The financial attraction of panels is that they are seen to be cheaper than ad hoc, one off, surveys, because the respondents have been identified, are committed hence more likely to respond, and because the questionnaire need not devote or waste a lot of time or space to collecting background demographic or other information after the initial recruitment phase.

So there appear to be strong methodological and financial reasons for setting up a panel.....in theory. In practice things are a bit different.

Key to a good panel is having a set of panel members which reflect the population in the area concerned. And if that is not hard enough, the bigger problem emerges in trying to keep them on the panel for a number of waves. Panels do not solve the problems of involving hard-to reach groups, or attracting participation of the under '25's or those from EMG backgrounds. But even more importantly, panels do not attract a broad

spectrum of attitudes or mindsets, and this is surely the fundamental weakness of panels; those who are willing to be recruited are more likely to be active in, or concerned about the local community or whatever the panels purports to be about: remember what Groucho said.

Anyway, even if we do succeed in recruiting our set number of mythical 'one-legged Chinamen', and our requisite number of single parents, and ethnic minority respondents, and ye Gods, our set number from different faiths, oh, and those under 25, the truth of the matter is that it is those very members who are most difficult to recruit who are then the most likely to defect; so all the hard work and expense in setting up a 'representative' panel is really all wasted by wave 2 or 3 of the subsequent surveys of the panel. In the world of panels, the hard-to-reach are also the easy-to-lose! Without interim recruitment, and targeted boosting, the panel of participating members becomes one biased towards older, more affluent, white, women.

Even if this tendency is controlled and managed, representativeness is still jeopardised by the very act of participating. Simply by being on a panel its members become conditioned and become more aware of the issues being surveyed. And of course tracking awareness over time becomes meaningless since the very act of questioning in one wave influences knowledge in subsequent waves. Hence the need to refresh the panel on a rolling basis and making sure that no-one stays on for more than three years. This is a major cost element in any 'well-run' panel.

But this is not all. This attrition to the panel, and its on-going refreshment, also undermines its methodological attraction. We never get a series of surveys with the same 1000 respondents; at best, in a panel of some 1300, we may expect to get maybe no more than 600 who respond to three or four waves in a row. In other words, all the benefits of the longitudinal fieldwork have evaporated since each wave does not comprise the same respondents.

So in all, with the best will in the world, and even a bottomless purse, panels rarely deliver on their twin attractions of offering longitudinal analysis and relative cheapness.

Why not Citizens' Panels?

The most common reasons given by clients for setting up panels are;

- they are visible indications of consultation (ticks the boxes) which can be promoted under a comprehensive and enduring marketing banner
- they introduce discipline into the setting of and adherence to a time schedule of surveys where many interested parties or departments need to have their say. (They don't tend to mention the fact that Panel waves must go out fairly regularly anyway in order to keep members warm and maintain response rates.)
- they offer a ready pool of participants for other smaller research exercises
- they are comparatively cheap.

But you don't need a panel to generate these 'benefits'. You could just do three or four ad-hoc, independent surveys every year; and you can still brand them as a package for your organisation's consultation. In my last employment we developed this idea and called it Programmed Polling; it tended to comprise say a 3000 mail-out survey (with a target of 900-1000 returns) once a quarter, each sampled independently, but distributed and reported upon under a common brand name.

Yes, this approach has all the problems of representativeness associated with any postal survey, which can clearly be avoided if the more expensive fieldwork options of telephone or in-home interviewing were adopted, but compared to the panel, it does allow attitudes and awareness to be tracked over time since the sample is a fresh one each time. Furthermore, by asking for recruits for other surveys it does allow a database of volunteers to be amassed very quickly.

But perhaps one of its greatest advantages comes in places where there is on-going redevelopment/regeneration or a high incidence of transient populations. Ad-hoc surveys are better placed to accommodate such (speedy) changes to local demographics because they sample the population that is there at the time, not what was there when panel recruitment took place.

And of course, programmed polling has no costs associated with panel recruitment and refreshment. While the cost per wave is higher, because the response rate is lower than that of a more committed panel, these extra costs can be less than the costs of all the aspects of panel maintenance and management. And, in these days of engagement, just think, in a year of four waves of survey, a panel might contact the same 1000 members while an ad-hoc regime would contact 4X3000, ie 12000 residents and hopefully elicit some 4000 respondents.

So....

Think dispassionately about what you want from a panel, then think if that is the best way of getting it. Do the sums. A panel might well be better but I personally remain to be convinced. I am a panel beater rather than a panel joiner, but as Groucho also said "Those are my principles and if you don't like them....well, I have others".

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