The art of managing and maintaining member panels

Contributed by Toluna
Friday, 28 August 2015

Market research online communities (MROCs) are now mainstream â€“ used by companies across all sectors from retail to entertainment and automotive to telecoms â€“ but these are exciting times in their growth and development.Â

Advances in mobile technology mean panellists can participate in surveys anywhere, anytime, allowing companies to get closer to the decision making process, for example issuing in-the-moment surveys while panellists are at retail locations. The ability to connect data points more effectively allows profiles to be enriched with purchase information and social media data, building a more complete picture of the panellist. Passive metering enables everyday activity to be tracked via an app that resides in the background of the panellistâ€™s smartphone providing a previously unimaginable level of behavioural detail.Â Â

These developments mean the value of member panels has never been higher, but companies often underestimate the level of management and maintenance required to preserve their effectiveness. Investment in building an online community is frequently wasted when panels arenâ€™t maintained properly or at all â€“ a trend that must be reversed.

So what practical steps can be taken to manage and maintain the health of member panels?

Step 1: Maintain a steady tempo
Setting and sustaining the right pace is a key step in managing online communities. If thereâ€™s not enough to do, panellists will quickly lose interest; while bombarding them with activities on a daily basis will soon put them off. Set their expectations by sending a weekly or monthly email setting out planned activities â€“ such as invites and surveys â€“ for that period. Keep the frequency of contacts consistent and â€“ as a rule of thumb â€“ aim for a minimum of one per month and a maximum of two per week.

Step 2: Keep it stimulating
Sending out the same survey week after week, month after month, is the quickest way to bore panellists and erode their interest. Create a good mix of activities for the panel and keep the topics varied to maintain attention. Lean towards short surveys wherever possible, and compensate panellists fairly for their time when longer surveys are required. Put yourself in your panellistsâ€™ shoes. If you received the subjects and surveys yourself would you stay on the panel? An effective panel will have a built in feedback process which can identify whether panellistsâ€™ interest is being maintained. Member mailboxes where panellist support emails are received are also a good source of information if response rates are dropping, and can help in understanding member discontent.

Step 3: Review your reward programme
A successful MROC requires a reward programme that provides real value for the panellists. Understand what members want and provide rewards they will find relevant and appropriate. Intrinsic rewards such as the opportunity to express an opinion about a brand can sometimes be enough for high affinity panels â€“ when combined with occasional prize draws or discount vouchers â€“ while a lower interest panel will require more tangible rewards such as a points system, information products, or specific gifts.

Step 4: Conduct routine health checks
Regularly checking the health of a panel is essential once it has been established for more than six months and has built up an adequate volume of activity. The frequency with which panels are health checked depends on the volume of research activities. A panel with weekly contacts will need checking every three months, while a lower volume panel â€“ perhaps with just one contact per month â€“ can be checked annually or bi-annually.

When measuring panel health look at how panellists are participating in the online community as well as how they respond to survey invites. All too often panel health is assessed using just survey response rates, but activities such as blog comments, interaction with other community members and participation in quick polls, all need to be considered to gain a deeper understanding of panel health. Once participation is assessed, categorise panellists into four groups; non, low, medium, and high responders. Itâ€™s expected to have non or low responders on a panel as long as this segment isnâ€™t too large. A healthy panel will generally contain one third high responders, one third medium responders, and one third non or low responders, although a panel with high brand affinity will naturally have more high responders, and a non-branded low interest panel will have more low responders.

In addition to assessing panellist participation and response, a health check should analyse data about surveys such as length, topic, number of days in the field, and number of reminders sent. This will identify causes of low response rates such as not allowing enough time to respond to long surveys, not issuing reminders, or sending out repetitive topics.

Step 5: Remove and replace regularly
Purging and replenishing non-responders may be necessary following a health-check, and an effective panel health report will identify which panellists to remove. Longevity of panellists could also be considered to create a balance between old and new panel members, potentially removing some of those who have been on the panel too long to provide a fresh perspective. Replacing panellists can be costly if the panel is unbranded, but response rates are a direct function of how often this purge and replenish cycle is completed and the investment is necessary to maintain the value of the panel. Communities with high brand affinity, where panellists are fully engaged with the topic will only need purging and replenishing less frequently (e.g. bi-annual or annual), whereas a non-branded panel with lower engagement will require this process every three months.Â Â Â Â Â Â Â

Most businesses understand the value of online communities in getting close to their customers, but few comprehend the importance of managing and maintaining panels to maximise ROI. Investing in panel maintenance through health-checks and replenishment cycles â€“ as well as making participation stimulating and rewarding â€“ results in higher panellist retention, increased response rates, and better quality data; allowing companies to benefit from the recent developments in research and ultimately boost their revenue.

By Julie Paul, Senior Vice President, Branded Communities Toluna