

# The Rise and the Ruse of Online Panels

*Proceed with  
Caution and  
Clarity*



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# In today's digital landscape, online panels are an efficient, cost-effective means of gathering data through online surveys for primary research purposes.

This approach follows a predictable model: define the characteristics of a particular population (the 'universe') and randomly select from this group an appropriate number of respondents to meet the objectives. Cue the survey that targets the sample and launch.

A sample of a few hundred participants, for example, will give marketers a representative snapshot of the country's sentiment. Or so we're led to think. Matters are not so simple. In fact, these days the process is increasingly fraught and likely to be more misrepresentative than ever.

My market research career with the Angus Reid Group started in the 1990s when the web and email were in their infancy, and almost all quantitative research data collection was conducted via landline telephones. The introduction of Random Digit Dial (RDD) platforms greatly enhanced representivity, the key to data accuracy. In theory, these RDDs served up random telephone numbers that could potentially reach any household in the country. Researchers could design reasonably well-defined and truly random sample frames (think geography and variables like income and household composition), which are the basis of good research.



## Cutting the Cord

When we sold the original Angus Reid Group in 2000, it was due in part to the emerging momentum of the online world. Landlines proved to be an increasingly inadequate and inaccurate data collection tool. Mobile phones were gaining traction, which made RDD more difficult. As any call centre staff person could attest, interrupting people at dinnertime to give their opinions to a stranger was a system on life support. When your known universe is unreachable or unwilling to participate, random probability sampling loses most of its credibility. The cards were laid bare on the table. The shift to the internet? Inevitable. Researchers need to go where their subjects go.

Fast forward to current practices where the vast majority of quantitative (and increasingly qualitative) data collection now takes place by way of surveys distributed via email to “online panels”. Panels were invented as the solution to replicating, as close as possible, the scientific rigor of random digit dialing in a world where spam (the online equivalent to telephone RDD) is unworkable and often illegal.

## Panel Profile

Panels are sizable communities, sometimes comprised of hundreds of thousands of people who have agreed to participate in online market research engagements. Properly assembled, they are recruited through multiple channels and reflect a truly representative group balanced against the country at large, or even a specific region. . Profiled on their individual geographic, demographic, behavioural and psychographic characteristics, good panel composition replicates the full diversity of the country in representative fashion.

Still, a truly effective panel goes deeper. Not only is it representative, it's actively engaged (e.g., high response rates and thoughtful responses), it maintains panelist

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tenure and is sized accordingly to ensure participation is neither overly demanding nor too scattershot.

Good panels treat their participants with respect and transparency, and cultivate mutual trust by maintaining ongoing dialogue.

## Dirty Data and the Downside of Digital

Unfortunately, the echo of RDD telephone data collection's demise is now playing out in the world of online research. Due to the shifts in online technology and behaviour, good panels are becoming increasingly difficult to find. In turn, data accuracy is being compromised, often with calamitous results.

The root cause of panel deterioration is driven by money. It's simply too expensive to recruit and maintain a stable representative panel. The term 'panel' now is a loosely defined construct, as they are often nothing more than portals to massive autonomous online populations or email databases. Individuals are recruited to participate in surveys on a one-time basis through a variety of channels and inducements. There's little to no control over the sample source underlying any particular study. This means it's often impossible to ensure that a sample is representative of anything other than what those who were surveyed think.

Fighting back the weeds is an endless challenge. In this case, the propagation of increasingly inexpensive surveys that are of dubious quality, reliability and accuracy. The point being, all panels are not created equal. It's impossible to assess data accuracy without a proper understanding of panel recruitment techniques, panelist churn, response rates and panel composition.

Get a hundred people to answer a question? Easy. Pose an incisive question to that same group that accurately represents the views of the entire population? That's on an altogether different level.

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Never underestimate the inherent value of a well-managed panel, but the real lesson is to question the panel composition and quality. As always, caveat emptor – buyer beware.

## Always Question Authority

What to do? Start with due diligence before undertaking any research initiative. At Angus Reid Group we would advise clients to start with a handful of straightforward questions, such as: Where is the sample coming from? Are these known and profiled respondents? What is the average tenure of these panel members and what does panelist churn look like? Is the sample being supplemented from outside sources and, if so, what sources? What routine steps are taken to ensure the respondents are real people (not bots) and what is done to clean out dirty data?

Reasonable questions, all of them. Any reputable research supplier will have ready answers. And if they don't or they waffle, well, there's your answer. In short, don't be dazzled just because it's the digital world. Prepare accordingly, proceed with caution and choose with confidence.



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**QUESTIONS THAT MATTER.  
ANSWERS THAT COUNT.**

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