

COMPANY PROFILE-Center for Economic and Social Research, USC The Understanding America Study

1. What experience does your company have in providing online samples for market research?

Context: This answer might help you to form an opinion about the relevant experience of the sample provider. How long has the sample provider been providing this service and do they have for example a market research, direct marketing or more technological background? Are the samples solely provided for third party research, or does the company also conduct proprietary work using their panels?

Our study does not typically participate in market research. Researchers both from USC and elsewhere use the panel to study decision making, social and economic policy and health. The UAS is also used to conduct various methodological experiments. The work is supported through government grants for the most part and data is made available to the research community through our data dissemination pages. Although the UAS is a new study, the team responsible for the UAS has worked on similar projects for about twenty years.

SAMPLE SOURCES AND RECRUITMENT

2. Please describe and explain the type(s) of online sample sources from which you get respondents. Are these databases? Actively managed research panels? Direct marketing lists? Social networks? Web intercept (also known as river) samples?

Context: The description of the types of sources a provider uses for delivering an online sample will provide insight into the quality of the sample.

We do not use online sample sources to construct the panel. Our samples are purchased from vendors (initially ASDE, now MSG) who have access to postal records for Address Based Sampling (ABS).

3. If you provide samples from more than one source: How are the different sample sources blended together to ensure validity? How can this be replicated over time to provide reliability? How do you deal with the possibility of duplication of respondents across sources?

Context: The variation in data coming from different sources has been well documented. Overlap between different panel providers can be significant in some cases and de-duplication removes this source of error, and frustration for respondents.

Only one source (ABS) is used to recruit respondents

4. Are your sample source(s) used solely for market research? If not, what other purposes are they used for?

Context: Combining respondents from sources set up primarily for different purposes (like direct marketing for example) may cause undesirable survey effects.

Our sample is not used for market research, but primarily for academic research. It is currently used by USC clients, international universities and other government researchers.

5. How do you source groups that may be hard to reach on the internet?

Context: Ensuring the inclusion of hard-to-reach groups on the internet (like ethnic minority groups, young people, seniors etc.) may increase population coverage and improve the quality of the sample provided.

A random sample is drawn from across the nation, to whom we send a pre-notification letter followed by a mail survey. On the last page of the paper survey, respondents are asked if they are interested in joining the UAS panel. If they express an interest they are invited to regularly participate in online surveys. We only recruit adults aged 18 and older. If the household returns the survey stating they are willing to participate, but not in possession of internet access and/or a computer or tablet, we provide one for their use for the duration of the study. Next to the nationally representative sample, we have drawn special purpose samples of Native Americans and families with young children in Los Angeles County. Also in these cases we use address based sampling, supplemented by additional information. In the case of the Native American sample we use zip-code information on racial composition to increase the likelihood of drawing zip-codes with a higher proportion of Native Americans (any respondent to the paper survey, whose ethnicity is not Native American is excluded from the study). In the case of the Los Angeles sample of families with young children we used birth records information from the state of California to target addresses where children were born in the recent past

6. **If, on a particular project, you need to supplement your sample(s) with sample(s) from other providers, how do you select those partners? Is it your policy to notify a client in advance when using a third party provider?**

Context: Many providers work with third parties. This means that the quality of the sample is also dependent on the quality of sample providers that the buyer did not select. Transparency is essential in this situation. Overlap between different providers can be significant in some cases and de-duplication removes this source of error, and frustration for respondents. Providers who observe process standards like the ISO standards are required to give you this information.

We do not supplement our sample with samples from other providers.

SAMPLING AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

7. **What steps do you take to achieve a representative sample of the target population?**

Context: The sampling processes (i.e. how individuals are selected or allocated from the sample sources) used are the main factor in sample provision. A systematic approach based on market research fundamentals may increase sample quality.

UAS respondents have been recruited using Address-Based Sampling methods. Respondents without Internet access are provided with broad band Internet and a tablet. We weight and match our sample against the CPS.

8. **Do you employ a survey router?**

Context: A survey router is a software system that allocates willing respondents to surveys for which they are likely to qualify. Respondents will have been directed to the router for different reasons, perhaps after not qualifying for another survey in which they had been directly invited to participate, or maybe as a result of a general invitation from the router itself. There is no consensus at present about whether and how the use of a router affects the responses that individuals give to survey questions.

We do not employ a survey router, but we use our knowledge of the demographic background of respondents in the UAS to determine which respondents may be selected for a particular study.

9. If you use a router: Please describe the allocation process within your router. How do you decide which surveys might be considered for a respondent? On what priority basis are respondents allocated to surveys?

Context: Biases of varying severity may arise from the prioritisation in choices of surveys to present to respondents and the method of allocation.

N/A

10. If you use a router: What measures do you take to guard against, or mitigate, any bias arising from employing a router? How do you measure and report any bias?

Context: If Person A is allocated to Survey X on the basis of some characteristic then they may not be allowed to also do Survey Y. The sample for Survey Y is potentially biased by the absence of people like Person A.

N/A

11. If you use a router: Who in your company sets the parameters of the router? Is it a dedicated team or individual project managers?

Context: It may be necessary to try to replicate your project in the future with as many of the parameters as possible set to the same values. How difficult or easy will this be?

N/A

12. What profiling data is held on respondents? How is it done? How does this differ across sample sources? How is it kept up-to-date? If no relevant profiling data is held, how are low incidence projects dealt with?

Context: The usefulness to your project of pre-profiled information will depend on the precise question asked and may also depend on when it was asked. If real time profiling is used, what control do you have over what question is actually asked?

We elicit demographic information, such as age, ethnicity, education, marital status, work status, state of residence, family structure, etc., on a regular basis through the "My Household" questionnaire. Specifically, respondents are required to provide or update their demographic information every quarter. Failure to answer the "My Household" questionnaire for more than 3 months prevents respondents from participating in any other surveys until they do so.

13. Please describe your survey invitation process. What is the proposition that people are offered to take part in individual surveys? What information about the project itself is given in the process? Apart from direct invitations to specific surveys (or to a router), what other means of invitation to surveys are respondents exposed to? You should note that not all invitations to participate take the form of emails.

Context: The type of proposition (and associated rewards) could influence the type of people who agree to take part in specific projects and can therefore influence sample quality. The level of detail given about the project may also influence response.

Study participants receive an email or postcard inviting them to participate in a survey. A one sentence description of the survey is included, as well as an estimate of the time the survey should take to complete, a deadline if there is one, and the amount they will receive for completion.

14. Please describe the incentives that respondents are offered for taking part in your surveys. How does this differ by sample source, by interview length, by respondent characteristics?

Context: The reward or incentive system may impact on the reasons why people participate in a specific project and these effects can cause bias to the sample.

Study members receive \$20 for every 30 minutes of survey time. They are paid monthly via funds added to a prepaid card provided by us.

15. What information about a project do you need in order to give an accurate estimate of feasibility using your own resources?

Context: The “size” of any panel or source may not necessarily be an accurate indicator that your specific project can be completed or completed within your desired time frame.

A draft survey questionnaire and desired number of respondents as well as any other selection criteria (age, work status, etc.) is useful in determining project feasibility.

16. Do you measure respondent satisfaction? Is this information made available to clients?

Context: Respondent satisfaction may be an indicator of willingness to take future surveys. Respondent reactions to your survey from self-reported feedback or from an analysis of suspend points might be very valuable to help understand survey results. These survey rankings are included in each dataset.

Each survey asks the respondent at the end of the questionnaire to rate their interest in the survey. Study members also participate in an annual survey measuring the performance of our help desk, and their overall experience in the study, including their preferred survey topics. Data from these surveys is available on our data dissemination pages at no charge and only requires a data login (which is provided on request).

17. What information do you provide to debrief your client after the project has finished?

Context: One should expect a full sample provider debrief report, including gross sample, start rate, participation rate, drop-out rate, the invitation/contact text, a description of the field work process, and so on. Sample providers should be able to list the standard reports and metrics that they make available.

The following items are provided through the data dissemination pages:

- 1) Cleaned data files (STATA and CSV by default; others on request)***
- 2) Weights (for final data sets after a survey has closed)***
- 3) Codebook describing the questions and skip logic of the survey***
- 4) Response rate (gross sample size, number of people started, number of people completed, number of people not started)***
- 5) Basic demographics (as collected in the quarterly survey) of respondents who did not start the survey***

In addition, the following can be provided on request:

- 1) Timing file detailing the time spent by each respondent on each question screen***
- 2) Custom extracts from the survey logs, for example how often respondents went back and forth for a particular question***

Furthermore, data users can combine data from different studies, so that a wealth of additional information can accessed at no additional charge.

DATA QUALITY AND VALIDATION

18. Who is responsible for data quality checks? If it is you, do you have in place procedures to reduce or eliminate undesired within survey behaviours, such as (a) random responding, (b) Illogical or inconsistent responding, (c) overuse of item non-response (e.g. “Don’t Know”) or (d) speeding (too rapid survey completion)? Please describe these procedures.

Context: The use of such procedures may increase the reliability and validity of the survey data.

Data quality is the primary responsibility of the client. Clients have the opportunity to test programmed surveys before these go into the field. They can also review sample test data and run a small pilot of their study should they be interested in doing so. We encourage best practices in survey structure, including the avoidance of “don’t know” as an option whenever possible, and other data validations checks such as numerical ranges and targeted soft and hard checks with appropriate error warning and information messages.

19. How often can the same individual be contacted to take part in a survey within a specified period whether they respond to the contact or not? How does this vary across your sample sources?

Context: Over solicitation may have an impact on respondent engagement or on self-selection and non-response bias.

Our study participants expect at least one survey each month and most welcome more.

20. How often can the same individual take part in a survey within a specified period? How does this vary across your sample sources? How do you manage this within categories and/or time periods?

Context: Frequency of survey participation may increase the risk of undesirable conditioning effects or other potential biases.

A participant can take part in as many studies as he or she is eligible for, but should a client wish to limit participation in any given time period for similar topics of surveys, such details can be discussed and arranged.