

## AMSRS POLICY STATEMENT

### Internet Access Panels (Online Panels)

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AMSRS has established guidelines that make a clear distinction between:

1. Internet access panels (online permission based panels) used exclusively for the purposes of market research, and
2. Internet access panels (online permission based panels) used for direct marketing and like activities (e.g. database building).

Based on this distinction, AMSRS will only accept membership, sponsorship and advertising from individuals and/or organisations that are not involved with the provision of internet access panels used for direct marketing activities.

Where an organisation is involved in both research and non-research activities, any association with AMSRS can only be possible via a legally distinct entity of that organisation, which only uses online panels for market and social research purposes. Moreover, the distinction needs to be clearly defined in its branding, positioning and operations.

This position is in line with international standards and is designed to protect the standards, ethics and long-term health of the market and social research industry in Australia. AMSRS supports similar provisions regarding membership of its sister organisation AMSRO.

For further information or for a full copy of the AMSRS Policy Statement relating to internet access panels, please contact the Executive Director, AMSRS, Elissa Molloy on (02) 9566 3100.

## **INTERNET ACCESS PANELS (ONLINE PANELS): DIFFERENTIATING MARKET RESEARCH FROM DIRECT MARKETING**

The use of internet access panels (online permission based panels) for sampling and questioning is a relatively new research technique. While the rapid growth of this technology has opened up dramatic new opportunities for collecting and disseminating information, it brings with it a number of ethical and technical issues that need to be addressed if the medium is to be used effectively for market and social research purposes. The Australian Market & Social Research Society (AMSRS) is seeking to introduce a policy that addresses these technical and ethical issues and ensures that we are kept in line with international standards in this area.

AMSRS seeks to make a clear distinction between:

1. Internet access panels (online permission-based panels) used exclusively for the purposes of market research, and
2. Internet access panels (online permission-based panels) used for direct marketing and like activities (e.g. database building).

An internet access panel (or "online panel") can be defined as a sample database of potential respondents who provide permission to receive invitations to participate in future internet interviews if selected.

The aim of this policy is to differentiate clearly between online panels used exclusively for the purposes of market research and online panels used for direct marketing, in the minds of those engaged in these respective activities, and in the minds of the general public. Making such differentiation is so important not only to avoid confusion but to help maintain response rates to research surveys and to ensure that the quality and value of data in research is maintained for the commercial, governmental and social organisations (and the general public) which make use of it.

### **BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE AMSRS**

1. All research carried out on the internet must conform to the rules and spirit of the AMSRS Code of Professional Behaviour and the Market and Social Research Privacy Code.
2. Market and social research activities must always be carried out in a way that minimises any risk of respondent or public confusion between research and other types of activity such as direct marketing.
3. Direct marketing through the use of an online panel, where the names and contact details of the panelists are to be used for individual selling, promotional, fund-raising or other non-research purposes, can under no circumstances be regarded as market or social research, because the latter is based on preserving the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondent and the integrity of the data.

Individuals approached for such a direct marketing project must not in any way be misled into thinking that they are taking part in a confidential and anonymous research survey.

4. When researchers are acting in their capacity as researchers, they must not be involved in carrying out direct marketing or any other non-research activities.
5. The anonymity of respondents must always be preserved unless they have given their informed consent to the contrary. In general, if respondents cannot be assured of anonymity\*, then by definition the data collection activity is not market or social research and must not be represented as such, including by implication or by the use of words like "survey".

It should be noted that these principles apply to any research activity. Research using online panels, like any other form of research, must not be combined with, linked to or confused with any form of direct marketing.

## **POLICY GUIDELINES**

### **Online panels used exclusively for the purposes of market research:**

1. AMSRS believes that it is in the best interest of the research industry for online panels to be actively managed and maintained at all stages as outlined in the ESOMAR guidelines for internet access panels.
2. Information collection for market and social research purposes through the use of an online panel must be carried out as a completely separate and distinct activity from any direct marketing or database generation activities.
3. Where an organisation is involved in both research and non-research activities, market and social research should be carried out by a legally distinct entity from those other parts of the overall organisation which carry out non-research activities through the use of online panels.
4. When recruiting members for an online panel, it must be expressly pointed out to them that their address, as well as various selection criteria will be stored by the research agency for the purpose of further surveys. Furthermore, it must be pointed out that members can discontinue participation at any time and can ask that their data be deleted. Ideally, the research opt-out should be distinct from the marketing opt out, to reinforce the separate nature of these two activities and to allow panelists to make separate decisions.
5. Where respondents are joining a panel for market and social research purposes, they should be made aware of:
  - a. The 'sign up' process

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\*This is the basic principle on which market research is conducted. However the Code of Professional Behaviour allows for the respondent to be identified if the respondent has been informed as to the uses to which the information will be put, has given consent to being identified, and the researcher has ensured that the information will not be used for non-research purposes.

- b. The information that will be captured
  - c. How often they can expect to be contacted and the likely duration of the contact
  - d. How password systems (if used) work
  - e. How they can opt in or out of surveys
  - f. The details of any reward scheme
6. When using an online panel for a market or social research survey, the questionnaire must identify the organisation represented, state the purpose of the data collection activity and advise the respondent that the information collected will be used only to produce statistical information and that the privacy of the respondent will be protected.

### **ESOMAR Guideline on internet access panels**

Internet access panels are being used more and more often in market research surveys. The advantages of this method of sampling and questioning are such that the use of Access panels is set to increase considerably in the years ahead. However, the rapid growth of this approach to sampling brings with it a number of potential implications. At present the market is largely unregulated and it is often difficult to find out exactly what quality standards, if any, are being applied in sampling and recruiting of panel members and how they are maintained.

ESOMAR believes that the best interests of respondents, research buyers and research suppliers will be met by developing actively managed access panels. Each should be a permission database managed in order to develop a mutual and trusted relationship between the panel owner and panel members. The following sections provide guidelines to panel owners who wish to build actively managed panels. They cover recruitment, project management, panel monitoring, panel maintenance and data protection.

In many of these areas the guidelines define the set of management policies that the panel owner should have in place, while not dictating the exact detail of the recommended policy. Future developments of the ISO standards for market research may define more explicit policies that participating companies will implement in their operating procedures.

### **Panel recruitment**

1. Panel members must be told that they are a member of a panel and be asked to voluntarily and actively indicate that they wish to be on the panel. A double opt-in recruitment process is recommended particularly where respondents are recruited on-line. This procedure requires the respondent to initiate an approach to the panel owner, the panel owner replies confirming the panel details and double checks that the respondent is who they seem to be and that they do wish to join. The respondent then replies to complete the double opt-in and joins the panel.

There may be circumstances when the panel owner already has email addresses for potential panelists, where a simplified opt-in process is

acceptable. This would start with an email from the panel owner followed by the panel member replying or visiting a web site to enrol. The panel owner should retain documentary proof (either hard copy or electronic) of each panel member's agreement to join the panel.

2. The size of the panel should be stated honestly and be based on the number of individuals who have personally joined the panel. Even though the panel owner might have data on other household members in panelists' homes, the panel size should not be calculated to include additional household members who have not actively joined the panel.

The claimed size of the panel should be based on active panel members (see Panel Maintenance point 1 below)

3. The panel owner should retain documentary proof of how each panel member was recruited – from what type of source their name and e-mail address was obtained including, where relevant, the web site from which they were invited to join the panel? In particular, respondents who have been actively recruited through a traditional sampling approach and invited to join the panel should be identified. An overall analysis of type of recruitment source for the active panel or for any sample drawn from it should be available to potential buyers. Panel owners may protect commercially sensitive information about the exit sources used.
4. The panel owner should have documented procedures for checking that new panel members are not already panel members and thereby avoid duplication in the panel.
5. On recruitment all panel members should provide a set of basic descriptive information about themselves in order that the representativeness of the panel can be assessed and that targeted or stratified sample can be drawn.
6. ESOMAR does not proscribe a mandatory minimum set of background variables that should be recorded about each active panel member. However, the following variables all have valuable roles in strategies to avoid duplication or clarify individual identity, stratification of samples for research projects, and weighing strategies to counter heavy user bias:
  - Sex
  - Level of education
  - Household size
  - Region
  - Location (postal code + house number)
  - Age (date of birth)
  - Presence of children in the household
  - Working status
  - Weight of internet usage (hours per week)
  - Type of internet access

Panel owners should have a published list of background variables for which data are available from all panel members.

7. All panel members must be given a clear and unambiguous guarantee that the access panel is used solely for the purpose of conducting market research surveys (i.e. there will be no attempt to sell products or approach panel members for telemarketing or any other form of marketing activity).

### **Project management**

1. Panel owners should have a clearly defined list of data about panelists that can be used in the definition of a sample to be selected from the panel. This list should include both background variables provided by all panel members and items of panelist history such as recency of selection for a previous project and co-operation history.
2. Panel owners should provide to clients a clear and honest description of the nature of their panel – the population it covers – and be transparent about partnership arrangements with other panel owners.
3. Panel owners should have a published policy about how frequently they select individual panel members to participate in surveys.
4. Panel owners should have a clearly stated policy about the maximum number of research projects for which a panel member will be selected to participate in any given period of time.
5. Panel owners should have a clearly defined list of information that can be used to exclude panelists from selection for a project sample.
6. Panel owners should have a clearly defined policy on how they reward panelists. The research buyer should be informed of the reward method to be used on their project.
7. Panel owners should provide a comprehensive response analysis at the end of each survey. This should also include a copy of the solicitation email sent to panel members and the full wording of any screening or introductory questions put to panelists before the main survey started.

ESOMAR recommends the following content in a project technical summary:

- Original invite text(s)
- Date(s) of invites (date(s) of reminder(s))
- Date of closing fieldwork (days in field)
- Panel used (proprietary or third part and amounts)

Response based on the total amount of invites (% or full numbers) per sample drawn (country, questionnaire).

- % questionnaire opened
- % questionnaire completed (including screen-out)
- % in target group (based on quota's)
- % validated (rest is cleaned out, if applicable)

A short description of how the response and the project relate to the standard criteria, is it less or more than usual and any peculiarities with the survey?

8. Panel owners should have documented procedures to ensure that a panel member can answer a survey for which they have been selected, only once.

### **Panel monitoring**

1. Panel owners should keep detailed records for each panel member of:
  - The research projects or surveys for which they have been sampled
  - The nature of the panelist's response to each project or survey

The records should be stored in such a way that it is easy to determine:

- When a panelist was last selected for a survey
  - When a panelist last co-operated in a survey
  - The number of surveys the panelist has completed in any given period of time
2. Panel owners should calculate regularly and be able to make available to potential client's key data about their panel including:
    - Average number of projects selected for, per panelist per period
    - Maximum number of projects selected for, per panelist per period
    - Average number of complete questionnaires per panelist per period
  3. Where panel owners adopt an electronic storage system that allows all responses given by a respondent (across many surveys), all data collected exclusively on behalf of a client must be treated as confidential and may not be used in the future on behalf of a second client either in the selection of sample or analysis of data. Data ownership, and the associated responsibilities to respondents, may be changed by contractual agreement between panel owner and client in advance of data collection.
  4. Panel owners should have a clear and published policy about validation checks. They should maintain records of any checks they carry out to validate that the panel member did indeed answer a survey.

### **Panel Maintenance**

1. Panel owners should have a clear and published definition of an active panel member. The size of the active panel will normally be lower than the total number of panelists. ESOMAR recommends the following definition but the final definition rests with the panel owner:

An individual panel member whose set of background variables are complete and up to date (see point 3 below) and who in the preceding 12 months has either

- a) Joined the panel following procedures set out in the Panel Recruitment section above.
- b) Co-operated by completing an on-line questionnaire (including replying to a screener)
- c) Indicated to the panel owner that they wish to remain a member of the panel

2. Panel owners should regularly remove from the panel non-active members. Each panel member's record of participation should be reviewed regularly and the panel owner should have clearly defined rules for when to remove panelists as non-active based on their co-operation history in the preceding period. Panel members, who appear to be inactive because they have not been selected for a survey since the last review of their status, should be contacted in order to confirm their willingness to continue as panel members.
3. Panel owners should have a clearly defined policy on how frequently panel members will be asked to update their background information. This policy should also define whether or not changes in circumstances discovered during survey projects will be recorded in the data record.
4. Panel owners should have a clearly defined policy on how long they will allow an active panelist to remain on the panel before they are removed and replaced by new panel members.

### **Privacy/data protection**

1. The panel must be managed in accordance with local data protection laws and, if legally required, should be registered with the appropriate authority.
2. Panel members must, on their request, be informed which personal data relating to them are to be stored. Any personal data that are indicated by panel members as not correct or obsolete must be corrected or deleted.
3. Panel members must be given a simple and effective method for leaving the panel whenever they choose to. Panel members who have stated that they wish to leave the panel must not be selected for any further surveys and must be removed from the panel as soon as practicable.