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Building Trust with Online Panel Members: A Path to Quality Data

By Gene Ridgley, Director of Panel Relations

Strong respondent cooperation is critical to the data quality that decision makers in business, government and academia need. But the process of engaging a member of an online panel in a truly meaningful way is not fast or simple. Nor can it be bought. It goes far beyond telling panelists that they can make a quick buck by completing surveys; instead, it involves creating a sense of community where voicing opinion and making a difference in the wider world takes precedent. The more we can relate to and connect with panelists as individuals, the more we can count on them to participate and give us truthful answers. To create a panel representative of the U.S. population, Knowledge Networks (KN) recruits non-internet households then provides them with an Internet connection device; it's imperative to provide the support required to maintain this unique effort. And as part of a probability selected, nationally representative Internet panel, members of our KnowledgePanel[®] enjoy a totally different, more dynamic experience as compared to those who simply click on a web site to join a panel. KnowledgePanel members are not just drops in the ocean; they're the source of our information and an integral part of our business

commitment to deliver our clients the most precise and reliable online survey information in the market.

Knowledge Networks' Panel Relations philosophy is to pleasantly surprise our panel members with an extraordinary and unexpected level of service to engage them and solidify a mutual commitment. Our panelists even write to tell us "you guys are the real deal" in keeping to our commitments. We support KnowledgePanel[®] through multiple channels of communication, to reflect varied levels of respondent sophistication — technical or otherwise. We want to build trust, and we do this by showing them real faces of real people. KN manages KnowledgePanel very carefully — not just because it's the right thing to do, but because it's essential to ensuring quality research.

Let me give you a quick overview of the defined processes and unexpected interactions that make KN's approach to panel relations unique in the online research marketplace effective — from the use of printed mailing pieces (almost unheard of among online panels) to the rapport that develops between specific KN

Case Managers and the panelists they assist.

The KnowledgePanel® welcome

A person cannot volunteer to join KnowledgePanel, which ensures that our sample frame is based upon the U.S. population. This is unique in the marketplace.

KnowledgePanel members are initially contacted and recruited by phone, which on its own is highly unusual but important in the creation of a representative sample. The day following a successful recruitment call, we send each new panelist a custom-designed, impactful kit welcoming them. This brightly colored, eye-catching welcome packet not only creates a physical presence, but shows the legitimacy of our organization and sets the tone for all that will follow during a panelist's tenure. It carefully lays out detail for getting started, including KN's commitment to safeguarding our panel members' privacy. The piece introduces our Members-Only website, where a panelist can find more detailed information, check for outstanding surveys, update contact information and availability status, and redeem rewards.

Approximately one week after recruitment, we follow up with an in-person courtesy call to each person in the household. We offer technical support as needed and reiterate why it's important for them to participate in the surveys we send them. In so doing, we put a human face on Knowledge

Networks and reinforce that we are a community of people working together toward a common goal — giving decision-makers the best information available about what the public wants and needs. Unfortunately, many other online panels choose not to invest the resources for establishing an off-line relationship with panelists — a decision that could be contributing to declining cooperation rates and gaming of survey responses.

Creating an on-going relationship

At Knowledge Networks, if panel members fall behind in taking surveys, we call them to check in and to see why. If they have been out of pocket, we let them know that we understand — we've got busy lives, too! — and that we can suspend their surveys for a time if they wish to take a little breather. We want to accommodate panel members' lifestyle and needs, and we try to reiterate that in every contact.

While these interactions are scripted in the sense that we have major points to cover, the goal is to have conversations with our members, respectfully informal, so they walk away knowing they have spoken with a real person. Our agents, or "Case Managers," have a natural way with people and an acute sense of empathy. Over the course of Members' tenure, they are likely to speak with the same agent again and again; thus panelists internalize phone calls as coming from a specific person — not from a faceless, anonymous entity. In a recent panel satisfaction survey, 75% of

KnowledgePanel® members who had called our Case Managers in the prior two months said they'd be extremely likely to call again.

We offer multiple channels of inbound communication to our panel members, and the majority of our inbound interactions come from email or telephone. A Case Manager “owns” each inbound case and sees it through to a positive resolution via our customized CRM system. Panel members can send email directly to us; they don't have to fill out a rigid form. They can hit “reply” and respond to any communication we send them.

Again and again, we hear how pleasantly surprised Members are, which leads us to believe that we're making a positive impression in today's climate of impersonal customer service. In addition, panel members can always reach the person who responded to their email.

To encourage further interaction, we communicate our toll-free phone number in every contact with our panel members. Because of the diversity of our panel, Case Managers must quickly assess the level of sophistication and know-how of each caller, as well as the pace at which the call should go. In addition, our phone system is designed to route future calls to the agent who last handled the panelist, which enhances efficiency and further builds rapport. Panel members know that they have a “friend” and advocate at KN. In contrast, it is possible that the

impersonal nature of opt-in online panels may lessen respondent motivation, and even promote a feeling of disconnection.

Newsletter

Our quarterly *Panel Pulse* newsletter is another way by which we reach out to KnowledgePanel® members. Named by the panelists themselves, the piece shows non-confidential survey results and introduces the real people who make KN and the KN community tick. We've featured various people within the company with descriptions of their roles, as well as panel members who have their own stories to tell. Because an honest survey answer from quality respondents is the fundamental building block of any accurate survey, Knowledge Networks' goal is to surpass members' expectations.

Judging from the experiences of people who belong to opt-in online panels, the Knowledge Networks approach to Panel Relations is truly unique. Through panel member engagement, we build trust and community with the individuals who make up KnowledgePanel. This is evident not only in our strong response rates, but in the accuracy of our information, which closely tracks well-known benchmarks. Results from our panel satisfaction survey support our efforts: 76% of KN panelists surveyed believe that they're part of something important.

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He ensures that our Panel Members have the best experience possible on KnowledgePanel®—including top-notch support from Knowledge Networks' team of Panel Relations Case Managers and their Supervisors. He received a B.A. degree in English from the University of Nebraska — Lincoln. He can be reached at gridgley@knowledgenetworks.com.

