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MINUTES WITH...

JOHN OUREN, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
AND GENERAL MANAGER OF PANELS AND
COMMUNITIES FOR MARKETTOOLS INC.

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THERE'S NO QUESTION that the online research industry—that multibillion-dollar behemoth—provides marketers with cheap, abundant and readily accessible quantitative and qualitative data from a growing number of online panels. But there is a question as to how reliable that data is.

MarketTools Inc., a San Francisco-based online research firm, introduced a solution called TrueSample in April. Using the same technology that works to prevent identity theft and credit card fraud, TrueSample helps vet online survey respondents, allowing marketers to ensure that those survey takers are not only authentic but also engaged. Venerable marketing giants including Procter & Gamble and General Mills have already signed on.

John Ouren, MarketTools' executive vice president and general manager of panels and communities, recently spoke with *Marketing News* about TrueSample and how his company is working to glean higher-quality and more trustworthy data from online research.

Q&A

Q: Obviously one of the key issues in online research is the survey takers' authenticity and the data's reliability. What role does True-Sample play in ensuring that the research comes from the source it's purported to have come from?

A: The industry ... is going from sort of a child phase into an adult phase. The child phase was: 'Isn't it neat? We use these techniques, but we're not going to bet our business on it.' ... [Now] the only research some firms do *is* online. And it's a meaningful portion of the share of what even the firms that still do most of their research offline [are doing].

It's going through what I would consider to be an adolescent phase, and an element of that is some concerns related to trust. ... Because it's online, and because I can't see that person and I don't have necessarily all of their detailed data ... I have some questions about whether that person is authentic. I have some concerns as to whether or not I'm interviewing the same person over

Q: How do you measure someone's level of engagement in a survey?

A: There are a number of different techniques which we are automating into our platform, the first of which is the time it takes a survey participant to complete the overall survey and various different sensitive portions of the survey, and how does that compare versus the mean? How does that compare versus expectation? And we will throw out outliers. ...

Another element is how they're actually interacting with particular types of questions; for example, a matrix question. There are different ways of answering those questions, which might indicate disengagement: 'straight-lining,' in other words, picking the same thing all the way down the matrix; ... [and] patterns, which people naturally do when they're really not reading, but they're just kind of answering and trying not to appear like they're straight-lining.

And also a third category is inconsistency in responding to the same information being asked twice, what they call in the industry track

[MarketTools' online consumer panel] ... they basically provide us [with] information about themselves ... very high-level demographic information: their date of birth, their gender, and their name and address. And we basically require that the information should be correct, should be able to be verified by some independent, third-party data source. ... We believe that independently verifiable information should be validated at the point of entry into a panel. So if we can't validate that information, we do not allow that particular participant to do client-facing surveys. We may allow them to do surveys for our own experimentation and other reasons. We may accept them into the panel, but we will not allow somebody that we can't validate as being somebody that is real and non-duplicate on the panel from the get-go. In the database world where I come from, it would be considered to be basic list hygiene. In other words, you make sure your file is valid, you make sure your file has been—to the greatest degree you can—screened of non-duplicates using data.

“Without biometrics and retinal scans and fingerprints ... we take every other approach to, at least, validating that the information that the person is providing is consistent with a real individual.”

and over again, i.e. are they unique? I have some questions related to whether or not the survey person is actually engaging in the survey. You know, are they distracted? Are they actually malicious and they're using a bot ... to take massive quantities of surveys in an automated fashion?

We felt it was really important to apply data and technology, which has really been established in other industries, to those three questions to be able to assert unambiguously that each individual person that responds to a survey from our panel or a partner's panel ... is actually real. They are who they say they are. They are non-duplicates ... each individual response comes from a unique respondent. And ... their participation within the survey is consistent with behavior that we would regard as valid or 'non-suspicious.' It doesn't show a lack of engagement or distraction. It doesn't show a level of professionalism, which would be concerning, as somebody [could be] taking surveys in a factory-like fashion.

questions. ... Inconsistent results may indicate a lack of engagement. ...

These are things that are done in the industry and they're part of best practices, but they're not done in a consistent, rigorous way by which you score the panelists based upon their reaction, and you can measure the degree to which they are exhibiting unattractive or suspicious behavior relative to an average panel.

Q: How can you prove the survey taker's authenticity?

A: There are always limitations, just like there would be on a phone call. Without biometrics and retinal scans and fingerprints—which I think would fail almost any privacy screen anyway and are really unreasonable—we take every other approach to, at least, validating that the information that the person is providing is consistent with a real individual.

When somebody signs up for ZoomPanel

Q: How do you feel about the role of incentives in online research? Do you think they have the potential to mar data because people are just filling out surveys to get the free sample or the gift card?

A: We do research, primarily community-based research, without incentives where we really have relatively small populations to do more qualitative work. ... Quantitative research requires numbers to the degree that recruiting populations that create statistically meaningful results in various small sub-segments really requires aggregating very large panels. Nobody has broken the code on being able to do that type of research without some level of incentive, virtual or otherwise. ...

To not have an incentive at all I think is ideal. And in the case where you're dealing with small communities who are really engaged, and they're providing their opinion in qualitative research and are operating in a forum and

Q&A

community-type basis, I think it is very possible to run those types of situations—and we've seen it and we've done it over and over again—without incentives. But for quantitative research and building large panels, to do very low-incidence study work or consistently representative populations even in consumer work, we think that those incentives need to happen.

The question is, can you make a living on incentives? And if you're not careful and you're not really enforcing these types of standards that I've described on a rigorous basis, you open your panel up to systematic fraud. And that's what I'm more concerned with. It isn't, 'Well, do these incentives encourage people to bias the research?' And we've done enough research on research to indicate that's not the case. What we are concerned about is that we [don't] go out into the marketplace, and on behalf of a client, we buy a sample from a panel where fraud has been allowed to run rampant. ... With TrueSample and the certification process, we're going to do everything we can to make sure that somebody isn't making a living off of incentives.

Q: With the certification that you can do now, do you think online panels will start to take the place of in-person panels? Will the online version eventually supplant the in-person version?

A: That question is what I call, 'Will video kill the radio star?' And the answer is it never happens. We still have radio. It's a 1911-whatever technology, and it has its place in advertising.

I'm from the direct marketing world and

advertising world, and there are a lot of advertising analogies that say that certain mediums are appropriate for certain types of advertising. And radio is a much bigger business than it was 80 years ago, television's a bigger business; does it lose share of wallet? Definitely. So my sense of online research is it's still in the early stages of cannibalizing and gaining share of wallet as these innovative technologies get to be applied to different methods.

And it's not uniform. ... There are other types of research where the technology may be applied to further move share towards online; there may be certain methods, which forever are best explored using offline techniques. I sort of see the example of the mix of advertising across different mediums as technologies have emerged as a really good indicator of what's likely to happen to research.

Q: Has the research industry begun to demand certification or authentication tools like TrueSample to ensure that the research they're doing online is meaningful?

A: We do think that a solution needs to be objective and rigorous. And one of the concerns I have of, sort of, a highly balkanized approach where everybody is saying, 'Well, I'm doing the same thing,' is who's the independent, objective third party that's vetting this?

We're not the biggest player in sample. There are very large players out there that are focused around building huge panels. What we're focused on by delivering this effort is to say, 'On behalf of the researcher, and based

upon the technology that we can bring to bear on the market, we have an approach that allows any researcher to make sure that he is vetting his particular panel in an aggressive fashion. ... The way I see this is that there could be multiple approaches, but there's a lot of power in really aggregating around a common, objective, independent third party.

Q: Because there's strength in numbers, have you encountered anyone who is hesitant to apply TrueSample because it will weed out too many of the panelists that the researcher worked so hard to accumulate?

A: I have a high degree of empathy because we spend a lot of money on recruiting. And at the end of the day, we've applied all of these techniques to our panel, and the layered effect of that is that we're going to lose 10 to 15% of our panel. And we've done it to a couple of other panels out there, and they're going to be losing similar amounts.

The cost is entirely economic, though. ... Those panelists that you spent \$10 or \$5 or \$20 acquiring, you're going to have to not get the long-term value out of those people. But if you can apply these techniques going forward and integrate them into your recruiting process, then you can avoid the expense to begin with. ... We don't pay for people that we can't validate, and there's nothing that prevents other firms from doing the same thing. So to me it's a one-time hit. ... And if it's something that the sample business has to do to make sure that the online research industry continues to grow, it's a small price to pay. **m**