

# Guideline for Online Surveys

This guideline is issued by the ADM Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V., the ASI Arbeitsgemeinschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Institute e.V., the BVM Berufsverband Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforscher e.V. and the DGOF Deutsche Gesellschaft für Online-Forschung e.V.

## 1. Introduction

Scientific online surveys for purposes of market, opinion and social research are conducted by private sector research agencies as well as academic and other public and internal research facilities. When the term "research agency" is used in this guideline, it refers equally to all of these groups.

The term "online surveys" as defined here includes surveys in which the respondents ...

- complete the questionnaire online via Internet on a server belonging to the research agency or a provider,
- download the questionnaire from the server via Internet and return it by email, or
- receive the questionnaire incorporated into an email and return it in the same way.

These interview techniques can be used for single interviews, repeated or follow-up surveys and access panels.

This guideline was developed primarily for online surveys. Fundamentally the same professional rules apply – where appropriate – for other research instruments used online (e.g. online focus groups).

## 2. Professional rules and quality standards of market and social research

The professional rules governing market and social research are laid down in the "ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice" and in the preceding "Declaration for the Territory of the Federal Republic of Germany". They are binding even if they are not specifically emphasised in the following.

In the various "guidelines" issued by the associations of German market and social research the professional rules are put into concrete terms with respect to specific areas and instruments of research – as here for scientific online surveys. In particular here it is referred to the "Guideline on the Treatment of Addresses in Market and Social Research" and the "Guideline for Interviewing Minors".

Of course, the methodological requirements of market and social research have to be observed, too, when online surveys are carried out. They are laid down in the standard DIN ISO 20252: 2006 "Market, opinion and social research – Vocabulary and service requirements".

The **scientific procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymisation of the data collected** and the strict **separation of research and non-research activities** form the ethical, methodological and legal foundations of market and social research. Adhering to the quality standards and professional rules is essential, also when data are collected online. The fact that adherence to them may be difficult for certain research projects does not release from the obligation to observe them strictly.

## 3. Scientific procedures

Market and social research are based on scientific methods and techniques of data collection and data analysis. Surveys are not "scientific" per se, even if they are carried out using a large number of respondents. The clients and users of market and social research must not be left in the dark or misled concerning the scientific procedures.

As with all techniques of data collection also in the case of online surveys, sample selection and drawing shall be based on recognized scientific methods which are appropriate to the research goal. **Self-recruitment of respondents is often not suitable** to guarantee generalisable research results. Also when recruiting access panel members it is necessary to define and document the means of achieving panel structures which satisfy the scientific requirements towards the representativeness of samples for the population of Internet users or defined subgroups thereof.

It is only correct to talk of a scientific method of sampling if the particular population of a study is clearly defined in terms of content, geographical distribution and time, and if at the same time the basis used for sample selection is either this population or a representative sub-group thereof, which must be described.

The selection of respondents for a study has to be conducted either by means of a random procedure which demonstrably leads to equal or at least calculable chances in the population to be selected, or by means of socio-demographic or other quota which demonstrably correlate with the object of research and whose distribution in the population is known.

In online surveys – as with all studies in market and social research – it must be documented to the client, how the population is defined and how the sample has been selected and drawn.

It shall be explicitly pointed out if shortcomings in the definition of the population, the sample selection, the response rate (using random sampling) or the target-actual-structure (using quota sampling) mean that the research findings are not representative or only to a restricted degree.

The design of the questionnaire in terms of content, formal or technical aspects, and where applicable the type or amount of incentives offered to respondents shall not lead to any distortions of the research results. In particular, parts of the selected sample shall not be excluded actually from the survey as a result.

The methods used for weighting and proportionalization shall be documented. Besides the handling of “missing values” and the answer categories “don’t know” and “no response” and where appropriate the editing of the collected data shall be documented.

#### **4. Voluntary nature of participation**

In online surveys – as with other techniques of data collection – respondents shall be informed already during the recruitment about the voluntary nature of participation which lasts up to the end of the study, and if appropriate that not taking part in the study will not cause any disadvantage to them. In addition, they shall be informed that their responses will be used exclusively in an anonymised form and for research purposes only.

Obtaining the consent to participate in a study by electronic means shall take place as deliberate and unequivocal act of the chosen persons and shall be recorded. The content of the consent given shall be checkable by the persons who have consented to participate at any time.

In studies in which visitors to a particular website are firstly asked to take part in a survey, it shall be ensured that visitors who

refuse to take part can continue straight to the website originally wished – e.g. by means of an appropriate button.

If a repeated or follow-up survey is intended, the “Statement Concerning Data Protection” as agreed upon with the supervisory authorities for data protection shall be displayed on the screen at the latest by the end of the first interview, together with obtaining the consent for the necessary storage of the address data. The respondents shall be given the opportunity to print out this statement. The respondents shall be able to refuse further participation by a suitable option.

When recruiting access panel members it shall be explicitly pointed out to them that their address together with various selection criteria will be stored in the research agency for the purpose of further surveys. Furthermore it shall be pointed out that the access panel members can close their participation at any time and can demand that these data be deleted. The incentives earned by the access panel members up to the date of their retirement shall be given.

The persons chosen for a study shall be given the opportunity to find out more about the research agency carrying out the study by giving them the name of a contact at the research agency together with his/her address (postal address, telephone number, email address). In addition, a corresponding hyperlink is recommended for this purpose.

The willingness to participate in a study shall not be increased by means of misleading information, for instance about the probable duration of the interview or the expenses incurred by using the interactive medium and the reimbursement of them. Respondents shall be informed if they have the option of completing the questionnaire at a time convenient to them within the schedule dictated by the time frame of the study and/or to interrupt completion of the questionnaire. Beyond this, respondents shall have the option not to answer single questions or to break off the interview at any time.

If additional information is to be collected unnoticeably during the interview and stored, the respondents shall be expressly asked in advance for their consent – preferably to be given by clicking a corresponding button. In doing so, the scientific purpose of the unnoticeable collection and storage of additional information shall be explained to the respondents. Respondents shall be able to withdraw such consent at any time during the interview. In this case the information already stored shall be deleted immediately.

If it is essential to install software or to store “cookies” on the respondents’ computer in order to conduct the study, the participants shall be informed appropriately in advance and shall give their explicit consent – preferably by clicking a corresponding button in connection with an explanatory text. The respondents shall be given the opportunity to refuse the storage and should the occasion arise not to participate in the study. A sample wording for obtaining consent to install a “cookie” is attached to this guideline. The stored “cookies” shall be used solely for the research purposes of the study in question and shall be deactivated after its conclusion. The participants’ consent in the storage of a “cookie” is not necessary if this only steers the moment of the invitation to participate in the survey or avoids repeated invitations to a survey.

#### **5. Surveys by email**

Email advertising is in principle subject to the same legal restrictions as telephone and fax advertising. This means that unsolicited emails for advertising purposes (“spamming”) are largely prohibited. Following a detailed investigation of the legal situation – though this has not been confirmed yet by the courts – these restrictions do not apply if emails do not serve advertising but solely research purposes. This difference in the legal situation alone means that the strict separation between research on the one hand and advertising and sales promotion on the other hand must be observed in the case of email surveys – as with all studies in market and social research. Without this separation, the emails used for recruiting respondents

and sending questionnaires, which are in principle permissible, would not be permitted without the prior consent of the recipients.

If a person has explicitly expressed the wish not to receive emails in the context of an email survey conducted for market and social research purposes, it is inadmissible to attempt to recruit he/she once again by email in the course of this survey or to send him/her a questionnaire. If in addition he/she has refused any form of participation in this survey, other means of contacting him/her again are also inadmissible.

If the email addresses of potential respondents for a research project are supplied to the research agency by the client or a commercial address broker, the responsibility for the legitimacy of storage and transmission of these addresses lies particularly with the client or commercial address broker. However, the research agency is required to make the corresponding request to ensure that they are legitimate. (For the general problem of transmission of addresses for research purposes the "Guideline on the Treatment of Addresses in Market and Social Research" is referred to.)

## **6. Anonymisation of the data collected**

Also data collected online may only be processed and transmitted to the client of the study or other institutions in an anonymised form – as always in market and social research. Transmission in a personalised form is only permissible in the context of the cooperation of research agencies on the same research project and to the extent that it is necessary in order to achieve the research goal. Respondents shall be informed correspondingly. (For the general issues associated with this the "Guideline on the Treatment of Addresses in Market and Social Research" is referred to again.)

In online surveys, too, the names and addresses of respondents are collected exclusively for purposes of quality control and for conducting repeated or follow-up surveys. Names and addresses are treated

according to the same criteria as with any other techniques of data collection:

Address data (name, postal address, telephone number, email address) and interview data shall be separated from one another immediately on being received by the research agency. After this, the only link between them is a common code number. The address data shall be destroyed at the earliest possible time. In the case of single surveys, this is when quality checks of the collected data have been completed; in the case of repeated or follow-up surveys, the address data – in the case of access panels together with various selection criteria – are stored until the end of the overall study. If a respondent demands that his address data and any stored selection criteria be erased, these shall be deleted.

In the research agency, the data collected online shall be protected from access by third parties to the same extent as with other data collection techniques. When they are temporarily stored on a server that simultaneously allows access to online media, suitable technical precautions shall be taken to ensure that third parties cannot access these data. If the temporary storage takes place on the server of a provider, the research agency shall place the provider under the obligation to take the necessary technical precautions to ensure that third parties cannot access the data on that server or during data transmission. Temporary storage of the collected data on a server shall be terminated at the earliest possible time.

## **7. Separation of research and non-research activities**

Market and social research activities shall be strictly separated from any kind of non-research activities in terms of their organisation and execution. In particular, surveys and other research instruments shall not be combined with advertising or sales promotion activities. The requirement to separate research and non-research activities leads to the following concrete requirements for online surveys:

- Advertising on websites used for surveys and other research instruments are inadmissible. This is true even for websites

implemented for recruiting of respondents. The inadmissibility of advertising also applies when the recruitment of the respondents or the interviews are conducted by email. The inadmissibility of advertising does not include the case in which potential participants in a study are to be recruited or made aware of the study – regardless of the methodological problems possibly connected to it.

- Websites of surveys and other research instruments, email questionnaires and electronic questionnaires shall not contain hyperlinks through which the respondents can go straight to the websites belonging to the client of the study or to other websites. References to such sites are not permissible either. An exception to this rule are hyperlinks and references to websites from which the respondents may obtain further information about the research agency/agencies carrying out the study or market and social research in general, and hyperlinks which are necessary on account of the research design.
- Access panel members shall not be confronted with targeted advertising offers and sales promotion measures as a result of their participation. This applies not only to interactive advertising offers and sales promotion measures, but to all forms of advertising and sales promotion. Sending test products for research purposes is not a form of advertising or sales promotion.

Giving incentives to respondents in an online survey shall not be used as a mean of advertising or sales promotion for products and services of the client or another company. In addition, the requirement of anonymisation demands that the incentives are distributed by the research agency carrying out the study or a third party commissioned with this and not – because of the necessary transmission of names and addresses – by the client of the study. (For this see also the "Guideline on the Treatment of Addresses in Market and Social Research".)

### 8. Final provisions and disclaimer of liability

This guideline forms part of the **professional rules** that govern German market and social research, resulting as they do from the **law** and the **methodological standards**, but also from **common practice**. It always applies when online surveys are carried out from Germany. It also applies when online surveys are carried out from abroad in order to conduct scientific research in Germany.

The principles and procedures described in this guideline represent, inter alia,

the result of weighing up the **personal rights of the data subjects** on the one hand, and the **right to conduct research** together with the resulting methodological requirements, as well as the **right to obtain information** on the other. However, the issuers cannot guarantee indemnity. If the situation is weighed up by other authorities or at a later time, it cannot be ruled out that different, possibly stricter, standards may result regarding the described practices.

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### Standard text for obtaining consent to install a "cookie" for research purposes

Our server \_\_\_\_ would like to install a "cookie" on your computer. The "cookie" is named \_\_\_\_ . It serves only the scientific purpose(s) \_\_\_\_ .

The "cookie" will be used exclusively for the mentioned research purpose(s) of this study and will be deactivated after its conclusion on \_\_\_\_ . It would be a help to us in conducting the study, if you would consent to the "cookie" being installed.

May our server \_\_\_\_ install the "cookie" named \_\_\_\_ on your computer?

yes

no