Subject Recruitment and Panel Management:
Experience and Observations Based on our Work Creating eLab and eLab 2.0

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Subject Recruitment

- How we recruit subjects into the panel:
  - Develop a Website that attracts visitors and put a sign-up portal on that Website
    - The sign-up portal itself is a way to attract panelists if they ever hit the portal on their own, as you can expose them to the panel signup page (portal includes signup data, change information, opt-out option, check participation history functionality, description of policies, etc.)
  - Affiliate marketing program with “money for surveys” subject recruitment sites. This is becoming less effective as such sites proliferate, their quality deteriorates, and online survey use explodes.
  - Referrals from current subjects (we created a “refer a friend” program that offers subjects the option, at the end of every study, of signing up their friends). It helps to have interesting studies that have a professional look and feel and don’t “break.”
  - Obtain lists of email addresses of “qualified leads” – you could purchase or borrow such a list – academics could consider sharing these lists because our research has found it’s worse to never contact a panelist than to contact too much.
- We never did any *paid advertising*, but that could certainly be explored. Problem is the quality of subject that might attract. We’ve had good luck with our subjects because they are attracted to participating in research conducted by academics; the lack of paid advertising contributes to our “higher calling” positioning compared to corporate surveys.

- We *track referral sources* (affiliate link, mailing list, page on specific website) whenever possible. This is important to monitor the effectiveness of recruitment efforts.

- We run *monthly drawings* as an incentive to join. Over time if subjects don’t participate they are removed from drawings, so it is also an incentive to participate.

- *Search engine optimization* (SEO) is very important. You want prospective panelists to be able to find you. We use SEO methods to closely track our Google page rank and related stats (e.g. how high up we appear in result listings based on particular keyword searches). This is very successful and worth the time. Caveat: it doesn’t work if you don’t have significant content on the site, since Google’s ranking algorithm involves how many sites link to your site and the quality of those linking sites.

- *Companion sites with a shared registration system*. Our new prediction market site, the eLab eXchange, currently in development, offers users the option of signing up for the eLab 2.0 panel at the same time that they sign up for the eLab eXchange. Companion sites like the eLab eXchange also serve the purpose of generating traffic to the site and raising awareness for the panel.

- Different academic labs could *team up* so that when you sign up for one lab at one university, you have the option of signing up for another. These sorts of partnerships require some work to implement technically (and IRB approval) but could reap big rewards.

- As we are doing at the University of California, and as many psych departments already do, *put the local subject pool online* (e.g. Sona Systems) and treat it as a sub-panel. This gives you the opportunity to run local student subjects 24/7 from remote locations (e.g. their dorm rooms) using your panel management software.

- **Number & demographic distribution of panelists:**
  
  - Once we set up these tools and systems, we achieved 10,000-20,000/year joining the panel. In our experience, it is relatively easy to get people to sign up, but much more difficult to get them to stay.

  - We found a strong skew toward women signups (about 70%).
There is some bias toward higher education, though all education groups are represented.

There is a very strong bias toward long-term Internet use. Most panelists are experienced Internet users. This has become less of an issue in the last few years.

Geographically, most of our panelists came from English speaking countries: US, Canada, UK, Australia, and India. However, our panelists represent over 150 countries around the world.

After four years, we had built the eLab panel to 88,000 email addresses. (We think the proliferation of online surveys will start making it harder to attract panelists.)

Panelists are relatively easy to attract, but increasingly fickle and difficult to retain.

- Declining response rates over time
- Had a list of 12,000 who had opted-in to be contacted by academics at other institutions. We emailed them and about 5000 replied. We emailed those 5000 and about 2800 signed up – 56%
- Long run, we need to think about attracting more involved panelists with some connection to the research institution (e.g. alumni panels, community panels, etc.)

Panel Management

- Quality of panelists
  - Although we had 88,000 email addresses, we did not have 88,000 panelists willing to participate. We estimated that we actually had about 15,000-20,000 “real” panelists. Of those real panelists, we estimated that about 1/3 of contacted panelists would participate in any given study.
  - What happened to the bulk of the panelists? Research we conducted showed that because over 1/3 of the panelists were never contacted, we lost them. We also lost some to bounced and changed email addresses. Also, a large percent signed up just for the monthly drawing, so they were not serious panelists and could not be counted on to stick around.
  - So, if we break it down, out of the 88,000, about 10% were bad email addresses, and the remaining 90% can be divided into three roughly equal groups: 1) good panelists; 2) never contacted decayed panelists; 3) opportunistic prize seekers.
• **Incentive Structure:**
  
  o Have to keep track of how you will incent panelists to stay in the panel and participate in experiments. We developed a point system so subjects could earn points for each study they participated in and (also for referring friends to sign up). These points effectively weighted the subject in the database and increased their chances of being selected for a drawing.

• **Subject recruitment is relatively easy, but panel management is the hard part.**
  
  o Some issues that have to be carefully managed include refreshment rate, keeping panelists busy, demographic balancing over time, keeping track of bounced emails, getting rid of old panelists, constantly recruiting new panelists, demographically balancing the panel on an ongoing basis, and the difficulty of efficiently paying subjects (e.g. institutional barriers against Paypal).

  o If someone has been in your panel a year and you never contacted them, you should delete them.

  o Our research showed that you can use your panelist database to develop a dynamic optimal contact strategy for each panelist, to maximize response rates over a multi-study time horizon.

• **Panelist database:**
  
  o It’s essential to track key information about a panelist’s experiment participation history and background data:
    
    - Random ID (IRB required), email address/password.
    - Answers to initial sign up questions (name, gender, age, educ, etc.)
    - Date joined and acquisition source
    - Date, time of invitation to study and time of completion (independent of measures experimenter collects for any particular study)
    - Points earned and prizes awarded
    - Panelist status code (e.g. active, bounced, opt-out, etc.)

  o Sampling functionality is required:
    
    - Must be able to include/exclude based on all characteristics in the panelist database
    - Must be able to specify completion quotas based on all characteristics in the database
Integration issues:

- Email program: Panelist database needs to be integrated with a system for sending emails to invite respondents to participate in studies
- Individual experiments: Panelist database must capture completion information from studies so you know who completed what study. The panelist database is the common link across multiple studies using the same respondents.

Administrative functionality:

- Aggregate panelist statistics on all panel management variables (does not include experiment-specific statistics or data)
- Ability to import and export panelist data

Does it really have to be this intense?

- We developed a sophisticated system that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to launch and maintain. It cost us a year to design and build eLab and about $175,000/year to run eLab (mostly staff salaries, plus subject incentives and hardware/software). Over time, we began to feel this was just not efficient or cost-effective and kept the experimenter too far from the process.
  - The first pass of each study was custom programmed in about one-to-two weeks by a full-time staff of two people.
  - The experimenter did not have hands-on access to the real-time creation of the study.
  - Changes and edits were inefficient and time consuming.
  - Pre-testing and pilot experiments took just as long to program as full-scale studies.
  - The process would not scale well.

- Based on these experiences, we are implementing a new model with eLab 2.0:
  - The researcher controls study development (but not panel management!) using menu-driven front-end tools that require only minimal training.
  - The production cycle is decreased from two weeks to about two days.
  - The system scales to very large numbers of experimenters all working simultaneously to create pre-tests, pilots and full-blown sophisticated experiments.

- This system has the strong advantage of keeping the researcher much closer to the research process.
o In eLab 2.0, the experiment and panel management functions have been separated, so full time staff are able to devote themselves to sophisticated custom programming for the panelist database, companion Websites and associated tasks, and off-the-shelf software (now much more sophisticated than what was available in 2001 when we originally launched eLab) is employed by the researchers themselves to program their experiments.

o Having said that, when initially starting a panel, we also believe it makes sense to start with off-the-shelf panel management software (turn-key solutions now exist to do this relatively easily and very inexpensively compared to our past approach of dedicated programmers).

o It’s more important to get started right away and then upgrade than to take a long time to customize everything. You won’t know exactly what you want, what software to use or how to integrate it, and experience with a turn-key solution will end up saving you much time and money in the long run.

o Further, while some online labs may outgrow the turn-key solution, for other labs, it might be perfectly sufficient. One key advantage for us is that, out of the gate, we are up and running (in mere weeks compared to an entire year to startup) and the solution scales.

o There’s a certain comfort to using well-developed and extensively tested market research software solutions we could never afford to develop in our own lab without a multimillionaire budget and a large staff of programmers.

o It’s important to note that even these turn-key solutions probably would benefit from at least one full time professional database/programmer type to do some heavy lifting. This is especially true as the number of researchers in the lab grows.

Reference