Research excellence

Shorter, more predictive surveys
Three Rs that can make research more predictive





Tracking surveys are in trouble, but their plummeting response rates, faulty answers and flawed analysis can easily be solved by the disciplined application of three core principles

Imagine two people, a man and a woman. On the 37th question in a tracker survey, they are asked how likely they are to take a holiday in Thailand next year. The man answers "very". The woman answers "not very". We conclude that Thailand is likely to have one visitor; and it'll be a man. We advise our client to prepare for a man; and send the man tourist information.

The woman goes to Thailand and the man doesn't. When she goes to Thailand, she discovers that it's not a great place for women because they weren't expecting her. She goes home and tells her friends not to bother to visit Thailand.

How did we, as a research agency perform in this scenario? We were right about the numbers, since half the people in the survey visited Thailand, but we were wrong about who those people would be. And the consequences for our hypothetical client of that flawed analysis we pretty dire.

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The trouble with tracking

This is an exaggerated but truthful account of what is wrong with tracking surveys. By the time they answered this crucial question, the man and woman had both been bombarded by 36 questions, many of which were not relevant to them and had very little to do with how they make decisions. At this point, they were so bored and disengaged that it was even more difficult for them to answer the important question accurately than it is would have been had they been asked it first. And even if they had been asked it first their chances of answering it accurately would not have been great.

We know what happens when we ask people questions about what they are likely to do. The aggregate numbers are often right (as they were in this case) but the detail of who does what, is often wrong. This is a problem in itself, but it becomes more of a problem when researchers analyse survey responses as if they reliably told us which individual would go to Thailand, and which would not.



It doesn't have to be this way. Surveys do not have to be long and boring. And they do not have to be wrong about individual behaviour. The solution lies in applying three core principles, three Rs that should be fundamental to any survey: a commitment to Respondent-level validity, leveraging Redundancy to reduce survey length and increase accuracy, and focusing on respondent Relevance. Between them, these three principles can transform the survey experience for participants, and deliver huge improvements in the value of survey data to clients.

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The principle of Respondent-level validity
We know that human memory is faulty. We also know that people are not good at predicting what they will do in the future. Yet many of our questions ask people to recall what they've done or predict what they're likely to do.

If we took seriously the principle of asking only questions that a respondent can answer accurately, how many questions would we no longer ask? Here's a short (and by no means exhaustive) list: any question based on memory; any behavioural intention question, any rating question taken in isolation like customer satisfaction (I could go on – and I have done. For a full list see the study by Louw and Hofmeyr, 2012).

This may lead you to ask: if we take such a rigid view of respondent-level validity, what information is left for tracker surveys to provide? The answer is, plenty. But let's make a start by no longer asking invalid questions.

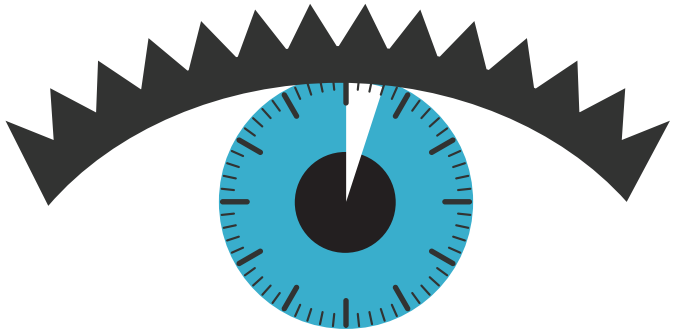
The principle of Redundancy
Anyone who's spent time with survey data will know that you can predict how a person will answer some questions by looking at how they've answered others. For instance, the brand that first comes to mind when you ask a person to "think about brands in a category" (what's known as "top-of-mind awareness"), is often the brand that they use most. And the brand that they use most is usually the brand they associate most strongly with positive attributes. So why not use these kinds of relationships to auto-fill surveys? Knowing the answer to one question, will simply fill in the answer to the other , closely related question, without asking it.

The principle of respondent Relevance Markets offer people a lot of choices; and those people's choices vary a lot. This is quite daunting for market researchers. It's why they are terrified to leave any potential brand attribute out of a survey; they fear missing the crucial information that's actually shaping people's choices. As a result, we get trackers for product categories like laundry detergents or soft drinks where each brand image question asks people to choose from 40 or more attributes.

Nobody that I know takes that many things into account when deciding what to use or buy. And I strongly suspect that nobody you know does so either. In fact, important work done by Gigerenzer of the Max Planck Institute shows that, as long as you identify the one thing that matters most to a person in a market, you'll be able to predict what they'll use. Our brains are wonderfully effective at sifting rapidly through available information to identify what may work for us. They do so by using what academics call "heuristics", mental short cuts or rules of thumb. By taking advantage of these short cuts; and by homing in on what's relevant to a person, we can dramatically cut the length of a survey for each person while still covering the full range of needs and desires; products, services, and brands.

Putting the 3 R principles to work

When we apply these three principles to the design of surveys, we can deliver very immediate benefits to both the people tasked with answering them and those depending on the insights that the surveys deliver.



Brand equity surveys, once long and boring, now take less than three minutes to complete; we avoid forcing people to pore over long lists of attributes and increase the accuracy of their answers by 60 per cent or more; we cut the number of questions that we ask, and this gives us time to ask far more relevant, interesting questions of far more engaged respondents.

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Brand equity in less than ten minutes

If you're not familiar with the three principles, then the chances of conducting a valuable brand equity survey in less than three minutes seem pretty remote. Consider the auto market. In most territories, this market is dominated by five or six manufacturers who offer six to eight types of car each, two or three models in each type and multiple price-points. How do we measure the brand equity of everything in every market when our surveys must cover so many options? Even a traditional brand tracker struggles to fit it all in.

The key is to recognise that nobody considers every possibility. Most people quickly identify a subset of relevant options and then focus on those. We should do the same: by identifying just the brands that are relevant to a person, we dramatically reduce the number of questions they have to answer. After all, if a brand has no chance of being used, its effective brand equity is zero.

Imagine a person who wants to own a Ferrari, but can't afford it. We would say that Ferrari appeals to them strongly, but circumstances make it impossible for them to act on that attraction. Suppose Toyota Lexus is their second favourite car. If they can afford it, it's the one they'll buy. Audi may be their third favourite and affordable. It will not get bought.

This example shows us that you only need to know two things about a brand in order to quantify its equity with a person: first, where does the brand rank (first, second, third, etc.); and second, to what extent are the scales tipped in its favour or against it by circumstances. At TNS, we call the first its power in the mind; and the second, its power in the market.

Hang on, you say, this sounds like more questions not less. After all, how many questions does one need to measure a brand's true level of attraction? Or the extent to which it is favoured or hindered by circumstance?

The answer is: no matter how complex the market we can establish the brand equity of every brand at respondent level by applying the three principles. We apply the principle of relevance to focus only on the brands that are in a person's consideration set. Across the world in most categories this turns out to be about four. We apply the principle of redundancy by asking only one brand-rating question for each of the four brands. And we apply the principle of respondent-level validity by asking a usage question that's been proven, in our research, to correlate best with what people actually do.

The result is a core survey that takes less than three minutes no matter how long the brand list or complex the market. This survey achieves a correlation with what each individual person actually does of about R = 0.62, in other words, it's right at predicting your personal behavior more than 6 times out of 10. When it comes to predicting market share, it achieves a correlation of R = 0.90+, right on nine out of 10 occasions.

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Cutting the length of lists and improving validity
One of the main drivers of long surveys is long lists. A typical hotel satisfaction survey will include questions about the check-in experience, the room, business facilities, leisure facilities, check-out, and so on. Within each of those there will be a second set of questions. Brand equity studies typically include anything between 30 and 120 brand image statements.

Long lists are not just boring for survey respondents; they are often fatal to the quality of the data that the surveys deliver. The more you are asked to think about things that have nothing to do with your behaviour; the harder it is to give accurate answers about the way you really behave. Cutting down lists should be an absolute priority for tracker surveys.

As it happens, the objective of cutting down lists becomes far easier when we apply the principle of respondent relevance. When you take into account all of the different things that people in general might think about when making a choice, you will generate a long list. But the list will be considerably shorter if you think only about what's relevant to each person.

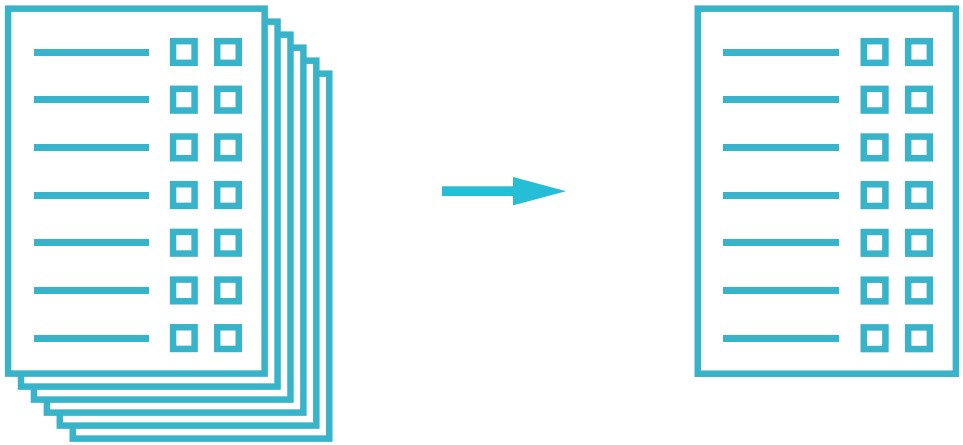


Figure one: Using heuristics to drive list reduction
Focus on the subset that's relevant to the respondent

- Personally relevent brands (8.9)
- Personally relevent attributes/touch-points (8-17)
- Dramatically reduces the respondent task
- Dramatically reduces survey length
- Improves validity: Correlation with real share of wallet goes from R= 0.31 to R= 0.62

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Applying the principle of redundancy to cut length

Our industry is potentially awash in useful data. We do thousands of surveys a year. And yet we do very little meta-analysis to discover how the way a person answers one question relates to the way they answer another. If we did, we'd discover many relationships that reduce the need to ask questions. And so we've begun the process of meta-analysis at TNS. We have used predictive analytics to deliver dramatic time savings through more efficient segmentation an the auto-filling of answers

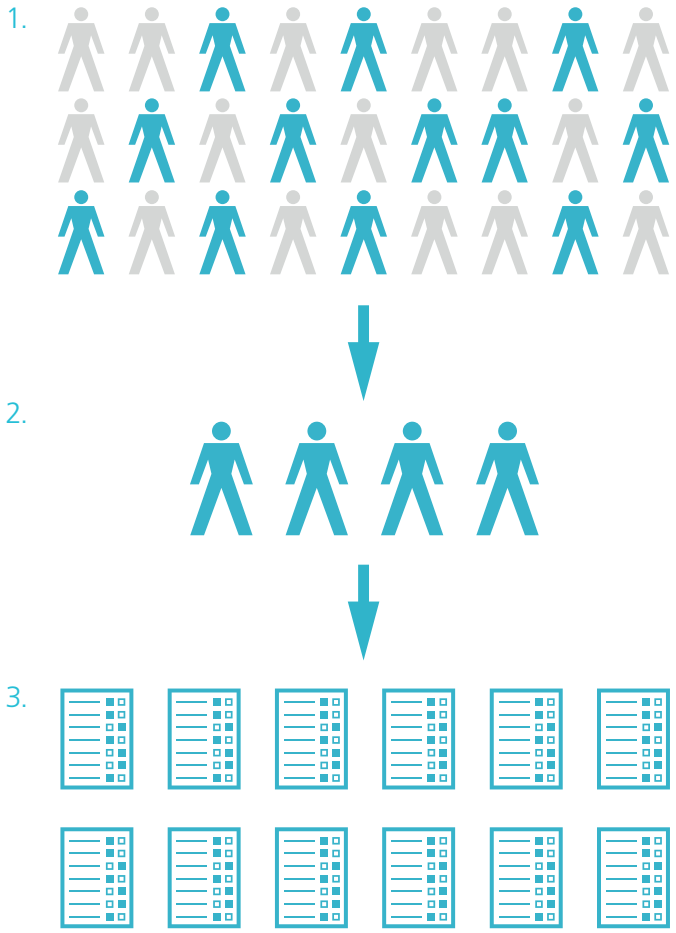
For an example of how effective this approach can be, let's look at the relationship between how committed people are to a brand and how they respond to attribute association questions (see Figure 2).

Knowing how half the respondents have answered an attribute association question, and knowing to which brand they're committed; we've been able to create within-survey models that enable us to auto-fill the esponses of the remaining respondents with correlations of R = 0.99+ at aggregate level and R = 0.75+ at respondent level. That means, we are effectively right almost all of the time where groups of people are concerned, and more than three-quarters of the time when it comes to individuals.

Figure two: Auto-fillin

Using commitment to develop within survey models that auto-fill responses

1. As each respondent answers the survey, calculate share of brand love and assign respondents to share of brand love groups.
2. These respondents answer the attribute questions.
3. The brand perceptions of remaining respondents are auto-filled based on a model developed from looking at the responses of the captive respondents.



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More efficient outing through in-survey calculation

Any survey that's delivered with some computing power behind it has the potential for live calculations to be embedded within it. We can then use these calculations to drive more intelligent routings and improve survey efficiency .

When we embed the **power in the mind** measure of brand equity into surveys, we have the basis for smarter routing. Let's say, for example, that a client has developed a communications campaign aimed at converting uncommitted users of a particular competitor. Using **power in the mind**, we can identify the respondents who fall into that category in real time, and route only these people to questions testing the communications campaign. Suppose that the client has developed a separate set of strategies aimed at retaining their uncommitted users. The same process can identify them and route only them to questions about retention strategies.

This is not a modular approach. We are not proposing rotating inflexible blocks of questions in and out of tracker surveys; instead we are leveraging every element of flexibility and adaptability that our knowledge of human decision-making gives us. In doing so, we not only present more relevant questions to our survey respondents; we focus their attention all the more effectively on the questions that we are really interested in, and we benefit from better data as a result.



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Shorter, smarter and more predictive: the future of surveys

What we're proposing here is nothing less than a revolution in survey design. By applying the Three R principles, ruthlessly eliminating questions that don't relate to what real people do, using mental short-cuts to home in on what's relevant and leveraging the relationship between answers to different questions, we can transform both the efficiency of survey and the value of the data they deliver. By freeing trackers from the requirement to ask people about every permutation of what they might think or do, we enable them to focus on the questions that truly matter; and we transform the accuracy and value of their answers as a result.

References

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About In Focus
In Focus is part of a regular series of articles that takes an in-depth look at a particular subject, region or demographic in more detail. All articles are written by TNS consultants and based on their expertise gathered through working on client assignments in over 80 markets globally, with additional insights gained through TNS proprietary studies such as Digital Life, Mobile Life and The Commitment Economy.

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TNS NIPO advises clients on specific growth strategies around new market entry, innovation, brand switching and stakeholder management, based on long-established expertise and market-leading solutions. TNS NIPO is part of TNS. With a presence in over 80 countries, TNS has more conversations with the world's consumers than anyone else and understands individual human behaviours and attitudes across every cultural, economic and political region of the world.

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