ESOMAR 26: Questions and Answers to the DocCheck Online Panel
# Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DocCheck</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DocCheck Research</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data quality</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPANY PROFILE</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAMPLE SOURCE</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANEL RECRUITMENT</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANEL UND SAMPLE MANAGEMENT</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLICIES AND COMPLIANCE</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 16</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 17</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 18</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTNERSHIPS AND MULTI-PANEL MEMBERSHIP</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATA QUALITY AND VALIDATION</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 22</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 23</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 24</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 25</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 26</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTACT</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DocCheck

With more than 645,000 registered users, DocCheck is the most subscribed portal for professional medical occupations in Europe. With the free DocCheck password, users gain access to the internet sites from pharmaceutical companies and medical publishers, which provide information only for expert groups. In addition to the password service, DocCheck offers several informational offers and services, like the periodical DocCheck Newsletter, an Online Shop with more than 15,000 medical products and a lot more. The future is also provided for. With DocCheck Campus, medicine students receive comprehensive information about their course of studies and a lot of practical learning aids like the exam planner or the Ixxer, a tool to check online IMPP questions. The operator of DocCheck is the DocCheck Medical Services GmbH, a 100% subsidiary of the listed DocCheck AG.

DocCheck Research

Scope

With about 150,000 participants, DocCheck has one of the largest panels for professional medical groups in Germany. A majority of this deals with physicians, pharmacists, dentists and veterinarians, but also with other medical occupations (for example MTA; pTA), along with alternative practitioners, diabetes advisors or psychotherapists. A good representation of the basic population is therefore guaranteed.

Speed

The field study phase is normally completed after 3 - 5 days. Even for otherwise difficult to reach target groups.

Transparency

Starting with the first interview, clients have complete access to field statistics and diagrams online.

Data quality

In contrast to a lot of other panels, each panelist at DocCheck has provided proof of their occupation. The randomized recruitment and the blocking of „self-inviters“ guarantee clean data.
COMPANY PROFILE

Question 1

What experience does your company have with providing online samples for market research?

DocCheck, Europe's largest portal for professional medical occupations, was founded in 1996. The DocCheck market research has been able to establish itself since its existence on the market, particularly in the area of medical and pharmaceutical market research. In order to do so, DocCheck has their own panel with about 150,000 panelists in Germany (193,000 in Europe) from all medical faculties. On average, about 90 studies are done a year so that DocCheck can look back at a wealth of experience in the conception and execution of studies.

In addition to Germany as the core market, DocCheck also has panels in other European countries like, for example, Switzerland and Austria. A network of cooperation partners fills the gaps where panelists are missing. DocCheck works together with leading physician and health portals in other countries that have their own physician panels and years of experience. The constant increase in DocCheck panelists will also allow for the expansion of individual panels in other countries in the following years.

DocCheck places the most value on panel maintenance in order to be able to guarantee the high quality of the data. Since the creation of the panel, countless quality assurance measures were developed, as shown on the following pages. In order to make the knowledge transparent and to pass it down as well, DocCheck conducts training for market researchers again and again and also likes to explain all of the relevant details about the panel to the clients on site.
SAMPLE SOURCE

Question 2

Please describe and explain the types of source(s) for the online sample that you provide (are these databases, actively managed panels, direct marketing lists, web intercept sampling, river sampling or other)?

The idea behind DocCheck is to allow doctors quick access to websites that fall under the Law on Advertising in the Health Care System (HWG). This includes internet sites from countless medical service providers (for example, Rote Liste) and pharmaceutical manufacturers that are required to make their websites accessible only to medical occupational groups. The prerequisite for access to a website is the registration at the respective service provider and submitting occupational proof. DocCheck offers medical expert groups the possibility to register once for a password and to receive access to most of the websites that fall under the HWG.

Under specification of personal data, individuals can register for a password. However, the password is first activated after submission of a proof of occupation. In the course of this registration (and also at a later point in time), the individuals will receive the possibility to also register for the panel.

As a sample source, DocCheck always chooses the method that fits best to the concrete question. Primarily, DocCheck’s own actively led panel is used, but also panels from long-term cooperation partners. Furthermore, data provided by the clients can be used. Of course, the privacy policies are maintained at all times. DocCheck members are only contacted if they have agreed to the market research activities through opt-in. All data is used exclusively within the scope of the legal possibilities and according to the most important market research organizations of BVM, ESOMAR and DGOF.

Direct marketing lists, web intercept sampling or river sampling are not used, because the high quality of the panel cannot be maintained with these methods and this cannot satisfy the special requirements of the clients.
Question 3

What do you consider to be the primary advantage of your sample over other sample sources in the marketplace?

The DocCheck panel is a panel that is only accessible for employed individuals and students from medical expert groups. This is connected with special requirements, but also very special possibilities, which clearly sets the DocCheck panel apart from other panels. Thus, the DocCheck panel can only be compared with other providers in a limited sense. On the one hand, there are special policies that must always be complied with for market research with doctors and pharmacists. On the other hand, this is a target group that has registered at DocCheck due to the services offered and they have registered for market research in this connection. Thus, membership in the panel is an additional possibility for observing the DocCheck services and the motivation for the panelists is different than by other panels. The focus here is particularly on medical questions. Since DocCheck is nearly exclusively launched for studies with medical contents, the interest of the panelists is very high and this results in very low drop-out quotes.

DocCheck is also characterized by the high quality of the samples, which is at a high level due to the internal quality controls. The participation in a panel is exclusively linked to an occupational activity in a medical field or a course of studies from a medical field and must be proven through occupational proof or a certificate of enrollment. However, additional quality tests, regular updates and countless personal studies provide for expansive panel maintenance. Individuals can register themselves for the panel, however, they are only allowed in the panel if all of the admission criteria has been examined and fulfilled.

Another advantage compared to other panel providers is the comprehensive personal consulting of the panelists: At any time, the subjects can contact the responsible project manager personally (by mail, email, fax, telephone) with questions; their contact data is sent with every invitation to a study. On a work day, an answer is normally received within 4 hours. This guarantees that the panelists are very satisfied with the procedure of the studies in general and are available for a long-term cooperation.

DocCheck makes sure that there are no „professional panelists“ who exclusively participate in surveys in order to make money. DocCheck places much more value on panelists being experts who show primarily contextual interest in the surveys. This is guaranteed through
appropriate compensation, which is oriented towards the normal hourly rates for doctors. Random selections and the exclusion of individuals who have already participated in a survey within a defined period of time makes it nearly impossible to participate frequently in surveys and it makes the panel unattractive for „professional panelists“.

**Question 4**

*If the sample source is a panel or database, is the panel or database used solely for market research? If not, please explain.*

DocCheck uses the panel primarily for market research. Since the panel illustrates a subpopulation of the users registered at DocCheck, the panelists are also approached for direct marketing measures, provided they have given their consent to this.

The majority of the panel usage is for DocCheck's own projects, however, there is the possibility to use the panel for surveys from cooperation partners within the scope of sample-only studies. The personal data from the panelists will never be shared. The invitation for the panelists occurs exclusively through DocCheck. Panelists are led to a previously tested survey and after completion of the survey, they are sent back to DocCheck for the purpose of incentivization. Recruitment, invitation, incentivization and user support is provided exclusively through DocCheck; the panelists are informed in the invitation that the survey itself is being conducted by a cooperation partner.

**Question 5**

*How do you reach source groups that may be hard-to-reach on the internet?*

DocCheck offers market research with a focus on medical professionals and correspondingly only contains panelists from medical occupations. Altogether, these target groups are very internet affine so that there are hardly any target groups in the DocCheck panel that are hard to reach. Generally, you can assume that most graduates and thus, also the majority of the DocCheck panelists, have internet access and use this, as a study from the D21 Initiative shows\(^1\).

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Due to the size of the panel, most medical occupational groups are accurately represented, as comparisons with the data from the German Medical Association show (see panel statistics). In specific cases, with the help of quoting, the representativeness of the sample source can be achieved so that supposed difficult to reach subgroups are represented in an appropriate scope.

Should it not be possible for DocCheck to achieve the desired target groups in its entirety, there are different possibilities available. On the one hand, individuals can be found with the help of the DocCheck cooperation partner panels, both online and offline. The high quality of the data has been confirmed in long-term cooperation and is constantly examined. On the other hand, DocCheck has also had good experience with telephone and mail recruitment. Often, this recruitment results in people not just participating in one survey, but rather, a lot of people often register for the panel and are available for market research for a long time, as experience shows.

Since the medical panel is a very special and exclusive target group, normal measures from other institutes can be avoided (for example, mailing out flyers). The DocCheck panel only illustrates a specific portion of the German population, namely people in medical occupations and the panel is representative for this target group.

**Question 6**

**What are people told when they are recruited?**

The people in the DocCheck panel are generally not actively recruited, but rather, they are primarily added to the panel when they register for a DocCheck password (see figure). In the Terms of Use (http://www.doccheck.com/com/termsofuseo/) and the privacy policies (http://www.doccheck.com/com/privacy), which are provided on registration, you will find all information about the DocCheck services, thus, also about market research. Here they can receive information about the execution of market research surveys, the possibility to register or unregister from the panel, the compensation and privacy. Only after consenting to the terms of use and privacy policies can the users have the possibility to participate in the surveys, provided the required occupational proof was submitted. The most important questions about market research can also be answered under http://research.doccheck.com/faq/ or by contacting an employee directly.
Thus, a majority of the panelists register themselves for the DocCheck panel. Only on rare occasions is recruitment done by mail or telephone for an assigned study where people who are not yet panelists are invited to a survey. In individual cases, this leads to a permanent registration for the DocCheck panel, however, this is not the goal of the contact and thus, this is not seen as active recruitment.

**Procedure of the registration and activation process**

**PANEL RECRUITMENT**

**Question 7**

*If the sample comes from a panel, what is your annual panel turnover/attrition/retention rate and how is it calculated?*

The panel mortality at DocCheck cannot be simply calculated, because the panel affiliation is not only defined through the consent to market research surveys, but rather, it is also connected with the DocCheck Password. If a DocCheck user terminates their password, they are automatically excluded from all DocCheck services and thus, the panel as well. Additionally, a DocCheck user can only retract their consent to market research and then they are no longer a part of the panel, but they are still users of other DocCheck services. The user can rejoin the panel at any time. The reasons for an active deregistration from the panel in particular or DocCheck in general can be due to a lack of time, lack of interest or retirement. Additionally, technical aspects can lead to an individual leaving the DocCheck panel, for example, if the email address loses its validity and invitations to surveys can no longer be sent. However, the users often update their data so that they are available again as panelists. Thus, panel mortality cannot be calculated in the same way as for other panels. As experience has shown, the panel mortality is about 3%, which can be well balanced through an annual growth in all target groups (for example, in 2009 there were just under 5,000 new panelists, 3,500 of them doctors). The majority of the panelists are available long-term for market research surveys, mostly up to their retirement and beyond.
**Question 8**

Please describe the opt-in process.

During the registration process, there is a difference between single-opt-in and double-opt-in. With single-opt-in, after entering an email address a website will be displayed where the registration confirmation is shown. With double-opt-in, after entering an email address the registration confirmation will be sent to the specified email address in order to see if this is also valid. The registration can be confirmed and completed through an activation link contained in the email.

DocCheck uses exclusively double-opt-in in order to maintain the high quality of the panel. Initially, the potential panelist registers at DocCheck and enters their personal data. After this, they will receive an email and they can confirm their participation in the DocCheck services. On the one hand, the validity of the email address can be guaranteed through this, on the other hand, the information during registration will be compared with the occupational proof from the individual. This guarantees that the person tells the truth in regards to their personal data. On the registration site, there are links to the terms of use, usage conditions and privacy policies so that a high degree of transparency can be provided for the panelists.

**Question 9**

Do you have a confirmation of identity procedure? Do you have procedures to detect fraudulent respondents at the time of registration with the panel? If so, please describe.

Before panel candidates can be accepted in the panel, they must initially fulfill different quality criteria. Upon registration, the personal data must be entered and a valid email address must be specified - this email cannot be in use by a different user nor can it be an email used for a former registration. Since invitations to market research surveys are sent exclusively to these email addresses, uniqueness is essential and this excludes the possibility of registering multiple times under the same email address. Furthermore, the respondents agree to the terms of use and privacy policies in which the corresponding conditions for participating in the market research surveys are also found. The confirmation of these conditions allows for participation in the market research.

In connection with the registration, the individuals will receive an email in which they confirm the validity of the email address through an activation link. This completes the registration, however, access to the panel is not yet possible. Only if the individuals submit a
written proof of occupation to DocCheck, for example, a copy of a doctor/pharmacist identification, copy of the license to practice medicine, etc. will access to DocCheck be allowed and thus, access to the panel and other DocCheck services.

In order to prevent multiple registrations, a manual examination of the data entered on registration will be performed. Particularly with identical entries for first names and surnames, the data will be examined in detail for possible similarities in regards to the address, date of birth or field of expertise. The data is also randomly compared with data from associations or other publically accessible sources.

Question 10

What profile data is kept on panel members? For how many members is this data collected and how often is this data updated?

Expanded and current profile data increases the capability of samplings with a lower incidence and reduces the number of people that must be contacted for a sample source. In addition to general personal data (age, sex, country, region, language), the data stored at DocCheck also has occupational information like the area of expertise, field of activity and additional qualifications specified by the users.

In order to guarantee that the data is up to date, DocCheck executes databank comparisons with doctor’s lists from associations for individual projects and examines the data for concordance. If there are deviations, which only happens rarely from experience, the panelists are contacted by email within the scope of a data verification. With the masking of the currently stored data, the panelists have the possibility to update their data or to confirm the existing data as current. If the panelists do not update or confirm their data within 6 calendar months, they will be automatically shown their own profile data at the end of a survey and given the possibility to update or confirm this data. The data stored will be saved until an update of the data is done or until the person unregisters from DocCheck.

Question 11

What is the size and/or the capacity of the panel, based on active panel members on a given date? Can you provide an overview of active panelists by type of source?

The size of the panel can illustrate an indicator for the capacity of a panel. In general, being able to reach certain target groups and the actual completion rate are dependent on the
panel capacity. DocCheck defines an active panel member as an individual who (a) was invited to a survey within the last 12 months and participated or updated their profile data or registered for the panel and (b) are registered in the panel, but could not be invited to a survey due to a lack of demand. Attempts are made to survey these target groups within the scope of DocCheck studies, but this is not always possible. In October 2009, the panel had about 193,000 panelists, about 150,000 of which were in Germany. The panel statistics (from October 2009) gives insight into the DocCheck panel.

PANEL UND SAMPLE MANAGEMENT

Question 12

Please describe your sampling process including your exclusion procedures if applicable. Can samples be deployed as batches/replicates, by time zones, geography, etc? If so, how is this controlled?

Before recruitment, the profile properties of the searched target group are determined and the subjects are selected randomly according to the conditions of the sample source size. Depending on the requirements, the participants can be excluded or invited according to the point in time of the last survey participation, survey frequency and personal data from surveys. If needed, samples can be used again, for example, for trackings. From experience, about two thirds of the subjects participate in follow-ups. Thus, samples can be used again.

The invitations to surveys can be created and sent so that the highest possible response rate can be reached, for example, under consideration of time zones or (state) federal vacation times and holidays. This selective invitation of the sample can be particularly advantageous for studies abroad and the field time can be greatly shortened.
Question 13

Explain how people are invited to take part in a survey. What does a typical invitation look like?

The invitation is created as an HTML mail with the help of software so that the design of the invitations primarily remains the same, a high recognition value exists and the most important information about the survey is always visible for the participants. In addition to the survey title, the invitation includes the amount of compensation and the estimated duration of the survey, along with a link to the survey. Furthermore, links to the terms of use and privacy policies, along with the contact data from the responsible project manager, are included in the invitation - the panelist can quickly contact the project manager should there be any questions.
Question 14

Please describe the nature of your incentive system(s). How does this vary by length of interview, respondent characteristics, or other factors you may consider?

DocCheck compensates the participants through a compensation amount specified in advance. The amount of this compensation depends on the length and complexity of the survey and is oriented towards the normal hourly rates for medical experts. Before beginning the survey, the time needed to answer the complete survey is estimated and charged with the corresponding hourly rate from the occupational group. After the survey, every survey participant will be credited the compensation on their client account and this will be transferred to the participant’s bank account on a quarterly basis. The client account is a free account that can be cancelled at any time and it serves for collecting payments from DocCheck. The payments can result from the participation in market research, studies or DocCheck mail.

Question 15

How often are individual members contacted for online surveys within a given time period? Do you keep data on panelist participation history and are limits placed on the frequency that members are contacted and asked to participate in a survey?

Normally, an attempt is made to keep the intervals between the surveys as large as possible and to not invite panel members to a survey more than once a month. However, if an invitation is not accepted, there may be more invitations. Normally, the members are not contacted multiple times, because the panel is of an adequate size for most target groups.

However, the DocCheck panel contains target groups that are more frequently requested by the clients than others. In agreement with the client, an attempt is made to survey these individuals for a different topic than the previous survey or to postpone the designated field time. In order to not frequent the affected target groups too much, the panel is also filled through panels from long-term cooperation partners in individual cases, whereby control questions are used so that it is impossible for the individuals to have already participated in the survey.
POLICIES AND COMPLIANCE

Question 16

Is there a privacy policy in place? If so, what does it state? Is the panel compliant with all regional, national and local laws with respect to privacy, data protection and children e.g. EU Safe Harbour, and COPPA in the US? What other research industry standards do you comply with e.g. ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market and Social Research, CASRO guidelines etc.?

DocCheck strictly complies with the privacy policies standard in the industry. For every participation, the panelist is referred to the terms of use on login; the privacy policies are included in this. During registration, the panel members consent to the terms of use; however, they can be seen at all times on the homepage from DocCheck and through a link in the survey invitation. The data collected in the survey is saved separate from the personal data so that a later assignment of answers to subjects is no longer possible. Just the user ID of the panelists is saved in the dataset in order to allow for a transmission of sociodemographic data and to allow for the incentivization. After the expiration of a year, the user ID will also be deleted from the dataset.

DocCheck is a member of the most important national and international market research organizations like the BVM Berufsverband Deutscher Sozial- und Marktforscher), the ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research) and the DGOF (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Online-Forschung). Correspondingly, it is a matter of course for DocCheck that the data and information from the panel members is treated as strictly confidential. This is the only way to provide for the high quality of the panel in the long run and to guarantee the panel members’ trust in DocCheck. In order to also be able to maintain their own quality requirements in the long-run, the compliance of all policies and the implementation and application of new privacy policies at DocCheck is additionally guaranteed through their own data protection officers.

Question 17

What data protection/security measures do you have in place?

As a member of different market research associations, DocCheck is obligated to guarantee that the information about the panel members is treated with complete confidentiality. In order to guarantee this, different measures are used: The evaluation of surveys occurs
exclusively in an anonymized form. The personal data and the entries from the surveys are saved separately. The user ids from the surveys will be deleted from the respective dataset at latest after one year. Data that is permitted for the identification of panel members is not forwarded to third parties. Moreover, the online surveys are encrypted by SSL so that the entries from the survey participants in the network cannot be read.

**Question 18**

*Do you apply a quality management system? Please describe it.*

DocCheck has an internal quality management system that is applied for all process steps of a market research project. Already during the registration of the panelists, the identity of the participant is guaranteed through a proof of occupation. The randomized recruitment and the blocking of „self-inviters“ provides for high data quality. This blocking is allowed for through the invitation link not leading directly to the survey, but rather to a log-in page where the panelist logs in with their login data in order to start the survey. This also makes it possible to avoid having people participating in the survey who just received the invitation forwarded from a panelist. After the participation in a survey, the data is checked for consistency and validity - through control questions and through the analysis of metadata. Implausible and neglectful answers are identified and the dataset is excluded from another evaluation.

**Question 19**

*Do you conduct online surveys with children and young people? If so, please describe the process for obtaining permission.*

DocCheck does not conduct any studies with children and young people. All panelists must be of age, which is guaranteed before release by submitting a proof of occupation or a student identification certificate.
PARTNERSHIPS AND MULTI-PANEL MEMBERSHIP

Question 20

Do you supplement your samples with samples from other providers? How do you select these partners? Is it your policy to notify a client in advance when using a third party provider? Do you de-duplicate the sample when using multiple sample providers?

In general, the panel from DocCheck is big enough in order to provide the required samples. Should a target group not be represented in the required number in the panel, DocCheck works together with a few select cooperation partners. Particularly if target groups outside of Germany are required, the cooperation with cooperation partners is helpful. For the selection of the partner, a lot of value is placed on them having the same high quality standard as DocCheck and their maintenance of the industry research standards. Additional inspections of the data quality are done regularly.

In order to exclude people participating multiple times in surveys, corresponding control questions will be integrated. Should participants be surveyed multiple times and should this be seen with the help of control questions and plausibility controls, these survey participants will be excluded from the data analysis. Normally, however, this deals with individual cases.

Question 21

Do you have a policy regarding multi-panel membership? What efforts do you undertake to ensure that survey results are unbiased given that some individuals belong to multiple panels?

Principally, DocCheck does not check to see if and in how many panels the panelists are registered. However, if a study is realized with cooperation partners or the sample is available as a sample-only, corresponding control questions are posed which should exclude individuals if they have already participated in the same study or in a study with the same or similar questions.
DATA QUALITY AND VALIDATION

Question 22

What are likely survey start rates, drop-out and participation rates in connection with a provided sample? How are these computed?

The return quote illustrates the ratio of the number of invitations to the number of participants in the survey (completes, screen-outs and quota-fulls). The return quotes vary depending on the complexity and length of the surveys, target groups, point in time of the survey, field time and quoting. On average, a response rate between 10-40% can be assumed.

The drop-out quotes depend on the length and complexity of the survey and the interest of the participants in the survey. Correspondingly, no general entries can be made here at this position. However, the drop-out rate moves between 5% and 12%.

Question 23

Do you maintain individual level data such as recent participation history, date of entry, source, etc., on your panelists? Are you able to supply your client with a per job analysis of such individual level data?

DocCheck saves the date of the release for the panel and the data about the participation history. This is required in order to correctly document the remuneration in a transparent way for the panel members. The panelist can look at any time in their client account to see which studies they have already participated in (name of the study, date of participation, amount of the incentive, the date of the transfer of the incentive to the specified bank account) and is informed of this. Since this deals with personally related data, these are not forwarded to third parties.

Question 24

Do you use data quality analysis and validation techniques to identify inattentive and fraudulent respondents? If yes, what techniques are used and at what point in the process are they applied?

In order to guarantee high data quality, the answer behavior of the survey participant is examined during and after each survey. During the survey, a plausibility examination of
the answer times is possible through the saving of time stamps. After the survey, provided metadata, it is once again examined to see if the data was entered in an appropriate period of time and if the answers are plausible and valid. Through corresponding programs, participants who answer according to a pattern can be identified. Open answers are checked manually. Participants that answer incorrectly, negligently or not at all are left out of the data analysis and blocked for future surveys.

Additionally, in the surveys there will be data again and again, for example for capturing the sociodemographic data, in order to compare the data with the data specified in the profile and to check for its validity.

**Question 25**

**Do you measure respondent satisfaction?**

The satisfaction of the panel members is tested with the help of a standardized survey, however, not for every study due to the high project volume. The survey contains questions about satisfaction with the surveys in regards to the length and comprehensibility. Additionally, the panelists have the possibility to store a note in the survey for technical difficulties or problems with understanding or to contact the responsible project manager by email. After clearing up the problem, the subject can immediately rejoin the survey where the survey was interrupted. Through this, a high satisfaction of the panelists can also be reached, which is reflected by the long-term participation in the panel.

**Question 26**

**What information do you provide to debrief your client after the project has finished?**

The client receives access to online reporting during the field time so that they can always have access to the most important data, like the field status and the drop-out rate and a percentage distribution of the answers to closed questions and the verbatim from open questions. An identification of the respondents is excluded, the visible data is completely anonymized.

After completion of the project, the client can receive the anonymized dataset independent of the affected contract agreements (as a SPSS or CSV file), which contains tables and/or evaluated results in the form of a presentation from a statistician. In addition to the results of the surveys, the presentation also contains the precise data from the study (field time, objective and content of the study, sample source design).
If you have further questions please contact us:

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