

Panel Studies

Meaning

A panel study is defined as a study that collects information on the same individuals at different points in time. The various data collections are often called waves. A panel study is therefore a longitudinal study; it differs from other studies that collect information over time, such as time series and cohort studies, in that it studies the same persons longitudinally.

Advantages of Panel Studies

(a) If mini-samples of a given population are studied by single contacts and differences in the results noted from one period to another, one cannot know whether these differences are due to differences in the samples surveyed during each period includes the same persons or groups, as in the panel techniques, the variations or shifts in the results may be attributed with certitude to a real change in the phenomena studied.

For example, full effect of a campaign cannot be ascertained through sequence of polls taken on different people. They show only majority changes.

They conceal minor changes which tend to cancel out one another and sometimes even major changes if these are nullified by opposing trends. Most importantly, they neither indicate who is changing nor do they follow the vagaries of the individual voter along the path of his vote, to discover the relative effects of various other influential factors on his final voting verdict.

(b) Data secured from the same persons over a period of time, affording a detailed picture of the factors involved in bringing about shifts in opinions or attitudes, can be secured for everyone in the panel. An analysis of the chartered profile of individuals in a panel may afford the researcher an insight into the causal relationships.

(c) The information collected about each person from time to time tends to be deeper and more voluminous than that obtained in single contacts. It is possible, despite certain limitations to build up an inclusive case history of each panel member.

(d) Provided, of course, that the group constituting the panel is cooperative, it may well be possible to set up experimental situations which expose all members of the panel to a certain influence and thus enable the effectiveness of this influence to be measured.

(e) It has been the experience of researchers that the members of a panel learn to open out and unload their feeling in the course of frequentative interviews and so valuable comments and elaboration of points made by them can be secured.

Whereas the first interview may elicit only 'yes' or 'no' responses from the respondents, the repeated interviews or measurements spread over a continuum of time may elicit from them elaborate responses in so far as they might have thought deeply about the problem after the first administration. On first contact, the informants may be suspicious of the investigator and may have little familiarity with the problem.

Benefits of Market Research Panels

- **Accessibility** – a prearranged target group of people willing to help you.
- **Promptness of Fieldwork** – a combination of online research with opt-ins leads to speedy data collection.
- **Targeted Focus** – in most cases, panels are created around interest/purchasing around specific products or services. So, who better to survey than the people who already have your company in their consideration set?
- **Efficiency** – no need to re-screen participants on key qualification criteria.
- **Longitudinal Advantages** – a large enough panel gives the client the opportunity to track change in behavior over time.

Limitations of the Panel Studies

The problems raised by the panel procedure are often sufficient to off-set the gains attendant upon it. We may briefly discuss the Limitations of the Panel techniques.

(a) The loss of panel members presents a formidable problem for the researcher. People change their locale, become ill, or die or are subjected to other influences which make it necessary for them to drop out of the panel. Thus, the panel that was initially intended as a representative sample of the population may subsequently become unrepresentative.

The losses in the membership of the panel may be occasioned by the loss of interest among the panel members or a change in attitude toward the panel idea. Not infrequently, the enthusiasm of the panel members dies down after the first or the second interview.

(b) Paul Lazarsfeld has pointed out that the members of a panel develop a '**critical set**' and hence cease to be representatives of the general public. The panel invariably has an educational effect.

It tends to dramatize and increase one's interest in otherwise unobserved elements and to heighten one's interest in otherwise unobserved elements and to heighten one's awareness of things and events around him. Hence the mere fact of participation in the panel may change a person's attitude and opinions.

(c) Once the members of a panel have expressed an attitude or opinion they tend to try to be consistent and stick to it. Thus, panel members as compared to the general public are less likely to change. Thus, the panel may misrepresent the population.

(d) The detailed records are available for the most stationary elements of the population. Of course, the mobile groups of a community belong to the panel for a shorter time. Panels composed of the same persons for many years will gradually become panels of old people and eventually die out.

A panel study, however, is not always feasible. One of the difficulties is that the events or thoughts may already be long past by the time the researcher begins. Occasionally, memory is not always reliable and the respondents may be inclined to 'construct' these past events not so much from their fading memories but from their personalized theory about their past.