

The StudyResponse Open Recruitment Method
By Jeffrey M. Stanton, Ph.D.

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Syracuse University, School of Information Studies, Syracuse, NY
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The StudyResponse project facilitates online research for behavioral, social, and organizational science researchers by distributing email participation requests to adult research participants. The StudyResponse project explores the features of studies that encourage quality responding. The project is hosted by the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University and has received institutional review board approval (#02165).

To obtain participants for the StudyResponse panel – which varies in size between 70,000 and 90,000 participants – StudyResponse maintains a public website that includes an interactive panelist registration process. StudyResponse does not actively recruit to obtain panelists, and does not “harvest” email addresses or use any other involuntary process to enter participants into the panel. Completion of the registration process requires a secondary active confirmation stage, such that the entire panelist registration process conforms to the definition of “double opt-in” – currently considered a best practice method in marketing for maintaining lists of volunteer research participants.

Anecdotally, a “typical” StudyResponse research participant hears about the project through word of mouth from another participant, or through links to the StudyResponse project that various other web page authors have placed on their sites. The typical respondent is a female U.S. resident in her mid-30s, with a high school education and about 14 years of work experience, who is interested in winning a random drawing incentive or some other compensation in exchange for completing surveys. This profile fails to adequately represent the full range of panelists however: Panelists report more than 41 different occupational types, a range of computer experience from neophyte to expert, and an age range from 18 to more than 90 years old. To an increasing extent, panelists are also international, with approximately 30 countries represented and the greatest number of panelists outside the U.S. from Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

The StudyResponse website contains a facility that allows participants to remove their panelist subscriptions from our active panelist database at any time. Such requests are usually fulfilled by a StudyResponse staff member within seven days. Over the life of the project fewer than 2500 individuals have requested removal from our database, representing less than 1.7% of all panelists ever registered. The StudyResponse panelist membership management system also detects email addresses that become permanently unreachable and archives the corresponding panelist registration, making it inactive for any further research requests. On average a panelist whose email address becomes inactive or unreachable remains in the panel for 8.5 months. The average “lifetime” of a panelist is considerably longer than this – approximately 15 months – because this duration only accounts for individuals no longer registered for the panel. The panel currently contains more than 3500 individuals who registered more than four years ago. At this writing, the median panelist registered in October of 2004.

Together, these procedures represent an all-volunteer “open” recruitment model that ensures purely voluntary participation consistent with contemporary U.S. standards for the treatment of human research participants. The advantages of the open recruitment model are primarily economic: By minimizing the time, effort, and funding associated with maintaining the panel (e.g., no advertising costs), StudyResponse ensures that researchers can obtain sizeable samples at a modest cost, while also helping to ensure a fair distribution of incentive funding to panelists who participate in studies. The disadvantages of the open recruitment model include volunteer bias. The available panelists do not represent a cross section of U.S. society (or any other country) on a variety of criteria. Differences between StudyResponse panelists and the population at large include greater access to and experience with information technology, higher education levels, more free time, and a higher interest in web browsing for recreational purposes.