



Sampling Effectiveness  
Advisors

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**About the Author:** Cindy Johnson is a product sampling expert for CPG brands. During Cindy's career with P&G, she worked with all brands in her role as Corporate Sampling Programs Manager. She now owns a specialty marketing and research firm, Sampling Effectiveness Advisors, which focuses on helping brands improve product sampling results. SEA has been in business for 8 years and has worked with some of the largest U.S. brands.

## Why Your Market Research Results May Be Misleading... (and what you can do about it!)

The title of this paper refers to the quantitative promotion effectiveness research commonly used to measure product sampling programs, although the issues outlined in this paper may also apply to other types of research.

**Background:** The type of research used to measure sampling programs is a quantitative study (at least 150 respondents), with either a pre vs. post methodology, or test vs. control methodology. The main goal of this study is to determine how much incremental business the brand received as a result of the sample. (This is the key input to the ROI model). The pre-survey determines what percent of consumers were buying the product before the sample, and the post-survey determines what percent of sampled consumers are buying the product since receiving the sample (the difference being incremental business). This research can be used to determine the business impact of any other type of promotion.

### Data Collection

Prior to the internet, the only way to collect consumer information (for the purpose of contacting them later for the post study) was to either collect names and contact information at the point of sample distribution (via a clipboard or some other sign-out sheet), or by providing the consumer with a BRC card to fill out at the time they received the sample. Market Researchers were likely to get a 2-5% response to these cards as they were simple to fill out and because postage was paid, all a consumer had to do was drop it in a mail box. Brands only had to provide a small prize such as \$100-\$200, as an incentive to participate. (But the cost of printing the cards and the return postage were high.)

However in the past few years, the majority of consumers now have access to the internet and can register for these promotions not only from their computers but also from their cell phones! When the consumer receives the sample, they are directed to a website address and are told they can win \$500 by

going on-line and providing some limited information. It's an easy process but the issue is, not only are brands doing this type of research - but so are retailers, restaurants, and many other service providers. The typical consumer might get 3-7 offers a week to participate in this type of study. Since only a small percentage of the population is willing to invest their time providing this type of feedback, brands are competing against other offers for responses.

### **The result? Lack of quality feedback!**

Besides a lower response rate, what SEA has seen is that consumers are also less willing to provide honest, quality feedback about their product experience. They have participated in so many of these surveys that they truly aren't reading them or taking the time to provide honest answers. And why should they? After all, most of them only register because there is a prize giveaway associated with the research. So their main interest is to register for the prize, not to provide honest feedback about their brand experience.

SEA has seen an increase in the percentage of consumers who claim to already use the product, even though it might be a new item (a brand with a 3% share might see a 20% prior use rate). Consumers incorrectly believe that if they say they use the brand, that it will help them win the prize. When asked "which brand do you use most often" in the pre-survey, many will say they use the brand being sampled (even though it might be new to the category). There is also inconsistency between pre and post answers. Consumers who say they already use the brand or use the brand most often in the pre-survey, will have forgotten what their answers were by the time the post survey rolls around. When we are comparing a consumers pre and post responses, we see that they will say "yes" they tried the sample, "yes" they bought the sample, and then go on to say that the reason they haven't bought it yet is because it's too expensive. Or the reasons they give for not buying the product doesn't agree with their future purchase intent (if they said it's too expensive, we would expect them to say they "probably won't buy" in the future, not to say they "definitely will" purchase in the future). When comparing the pre and post responses of the same consumer, there are too many red flags.

### **How to address the problem (what SEA does)**

The solution is not to avoid market research; there is a lot of important information that comes out of these studies. It's the only way to know if the program has a positive return on investment. It's also a great way to

audit program distribution (by asking how many samples the consumer received – one of the biggest sample waste issues.) Therefore the goal is to get as much good information as possible, while eliminating the bad. There are several steps Sampling Effectiveness Advisors takes to try to address these issues up front. In reviewing research results from other companies, we know that many do not go through all of these steps. It is more time consuming to take these steps but we believe it's important to get the best data possible.

**Step #1 – Go for a bigger base size.** The more respondents you have in your base size, the more selective you can be in throwing out suspicious entries.

**Step #2 – To get a bigger base size, you need more registrations.** You should either dedicate an entire side of your collateral material to announce the research/prize drawing or make the font/announcement large enough that it gets more attention. Also, emphasize product feedback vs. the prize. While the prize is necessary to get enough registrations, encouraging consumers to provide feedback is key to getting more balance in your responses.

**Step #3 – Do NOT increase your prize value; in fact limit it to \$500.** This may sound counter-intuitive but the last thing you want is for your offer to end up on a sweepstakes blog, where consumers who know nothing of your promotion, are registering. If you offer a prize of \$1000 or more, it will end up on these websites. It may also help to give some smaller prizes like five - \$100 cards instead of one \$500 card.

**Step #4 – Utilize both phone and internet surveys.** There are consumers who will not respond to an email request for the research. There are also consumers who will answer questions online, but won't take the time to provide honest answers (they will simply check the first block, whatever it is). While it's much easier for the researcher to have all responses gathered online, SEA believes the phone responses help balance out the accuracy of the response. If you are interviewing the consumer on the phone and they give you a contradictory answer, you can address it right there at the same time. Note: remember to rotate the questions online so if consumers are selecting the first response, you will have an equal representation of invalid answers.

**Step #5 – Throw out suspicious responses.** For those consumers who report one activity in the pre-survey,

but another activity in the post-survey, we suggest you not risk the validity of your results – throw the response out. As mentioned, most researchers never compare the pre and post responses (they are usually just totaled). Without visually checking both the pre and post response against each other, you won't know if those errors are occurring.

**Step #6 – Tell consumers that their responses will NOT improve their odds of winning the prize; explain that it is a random draw sweepstakes and that you are only looking for honest feedback. (Put this in Bold/Caps at the beginning of the brand questions.)**

**Step #7 – Ask a “trick” question. One thing we used to do when preparing a post survey for a large CPG company was to include a ghost brand. If the consumer didn't know the brand wasn't sampled and answered trial questions about it, then their survey was thrown out. For example, a hair care brand SEA worked with had sampled three products at once. In the survey we asked “which sample did you receive?” Answer: a.) shampoo only, b.) shampoo and conditioner or c.) shampoo, conditioner, and gel. If they did not accurately remember what the sample was, there was a good chance they either never received it, or that they hadn't opened/used it.**

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**Last thoughts – Improving Effectiveness Research**

While all of these things will help reflect more accurate research results, there is no guarantee that you will be able to identify all the erroneous information in your study. Sampling Effectiveness Advisors specializes in this type of research and we are aware of what the issues are and how to avoid them. If you put all these safeguards into effect, it will provide a more accurate picture of how your program performed. For more information about product sampling and tools to measure results, visit our website at [www.samplingeffectiveness.com](http://www.samplingeffectiveness.com)