



A business mindset

B2B market research is, in many ways, a world unto itself. Clients may not have their own research expertise, or even much marketing nous – “the marketers we deal with tend to be ex-engineers”, sighed one research provider. Respondents are hard to recruit and validate. Some methods work less well or not at all. Budgets are smaller, and you might end up in a testy stand-off with a powerful sales director if you challenge the conventional wisdom.

Clearly, this isn't the sort of research challenge that everyone would relish. But beneath the operational and methodological problems, there's the opportunity to work directly with senior management, genuinely to influence strategy, and become a valued long-term part of the client's business. In short, everything researchers want – but too rarely get – from their careers.

“In B2B, you need to influence a board of directors. We rarely deal with insight directors, so the buyers of our research are non-technical; they use financial, business language,” says Roger Perowne, CEO of MIG Global.

Emma Pyke, a director of Kantar Millward Brown's corporate practice, agrees: “B2B research is about looking at the client's central question. They want to understand their propensity for getting more sales or increased market share – but they don't necessarily use those

Understanding the motivations of a business audience requires particular research skills – and it is often less about market research and more about solving a business problem.

By **Tim Phillips**

words. What they are actually saying to us is: ‘We want to understand how we're positioned in the market’.”

The business relationship

“The advantage consumer researchers have is that they will have day-to-day experience of a lot of the things they're researching,” says Andrew Dalglish, founder of Circle Research. “Our clients want to work with people who get business, rather than people who get research – plus, you're often researching things that most people don't even know exist.”

Dalglish has taken on everything from cargo shipping to the sterilisation of scalpels, and the first challenge in every project is to be able to communicate with the client and the respondents in language they understand and respect.

This means the brief will often not be expressed as a research project, but as a business aspiration or goal. Methodology is less important than

getting the job done. Sometimes, Dalglish says, the information they are expected to discover already exists in the business, and Circle's role is to extract data from the organisation's logs or sales records, and make sense of it. At other times, the job involves finding published reports and information from third parties, or it will involve primary research.

This means, at the other end of the project, that the client will have little interest in raw research results. “I've seen a lot of B2B presentations from other agencies that are 100 slides long – full of pie charts. It usually doesn't go down well,” says Dalglish.

“Clients are looking for a story and they want that journey to start with the problem they're facing as a business, and what they can achieve as a result of what we've done for them. For example, we usually follow up with a workshop, at which you have top management in the room. You'll have someone from marketing, one from sales, one

►from products and another from customer service – all the key people who need to take action. Then we'll facilitate it so they can come up with an action plan.”

Clients come back if the B2B research is an intrinsic part of solving business problems, rather than just generating insight, says Pyke. “We've got some long-standing relationships with clients, where we've worked with them for 10-plus years. We're predominantly doing tracking, but – within that – we'll also do other, ad hoc projects for them, or, if something comes up from the trackers, we'll do some qualitative interviews. Our responsibility is to get under the skin of the business a bit more.”

The relationship with the respondent can be almost as intimate. For a senior executive to give up an hour of time for a researcher, there has to be trust that

“ It might be that the only follow-up to our interviews is to call and say: 'That was great. Thanks.' But I doubt it ”

this will be an hour well spent, says Colin Bates, managing director of Customer Champions. Few will take part in a survey for excitement or an Amazon voucher, but they will cooperate if the research has value to them. It might just mean that the respondents expect to see a report, or to be part of any initiative taken on the back of the research – but it could mean they expect to have any issues they raise listened to and reported. In this way, the researcher is also a relationship manager.

“Our clients need to follow these concerns up with their business customers. It might be that the only follow-up to our interviews is to call



and say: ‘That was great, thank you. We’re all deliriously happy’,” says Bates. “However, I doubt it.”

Extracting information

Clearly, business owners, directors or influencers have other things to do than talk to a researcher, so being able to find enough respondents – and to validate that they are who they claim to be – is a major challenge of B2B research. With small sample sizes, a few rogue responses can skew results, especially when fishing in a small pool of decision-makers.

It may be worse to misidentify who is making the decisions in a buying process – which is one of the reasons why companies with an expensive sales cycle often choose to do deep research into key customers (see box, ABM).

A familiarity with hard-to-find respondents counts for a lot. “Reaching these people is what

our practice is very good at,” says Pyke, at Kantar Millward Brown. “We’ve been doing this for years, so a lot of our regular respondents are C-suite, FTSE 100. They know us, and know our interviewers. We have really good interviewers, and they’ve got relationships with the gatekeepers – they know the PAs.”

Protecting that relationship means being careful about the content and frequency of research. “We need to make these people feel important, and emphasise that we genuinely need to speak to them. Then we must make sure the questionnaire is engaging,” adds Pyke. “These are really insightful people, so rather than just giving them a whole battery of questions, it’s about putting an open question, so you give them the opportunity to talk and really share their knowledge.”

This is one reason why a higher percentage of B2B research is still done in person or on the phone,

rather than online. “You contact them in person because of the response rate you will get. Your entire universe may be a few hundred people and it’s, potentially, a very niche group,” says Paul Watts, a director at Morar HPI, who has researched B2B categories as diverse as pub landlords and fork-lift truck drivers. “If you are approaching people who drive fork-lifts, you could try to do some of it through online panels, I suppose – but, realistically, you have to do most of the work on the phone.”

Panel quality is a universal headache for researchers, but there are understandable reasons why B2B panels are hard to create. The first – as above – is that the motivation to take part in research may be about deepening relationships, rather than a financial incentive. Another is that a job title alone gives little insight into the role that the respondent plays in his or her

A TWO-SIDED PLATFORM VIEW FROM RIGHTMOVE

“It’s easy to forget how complex the life of our agents is,” says Suzanne Lughart, head of research at Rightmove. “In every project, we have to think about what we’re doing and how it might affect the estate agents, or how they might feel about it.”

Rightmove is part of an emerging category of businesses that act, primarily, as two-sided platforms. Although a feature of the offline world – auctions, street markets and cooperatives are two-sided – matchmakers have flourished in the internet age. Amazon, Airbnb, eBay and Uber function in this way, but so do many other business models – such as games consoles, or even the market for organ transplants. These businesses have huge start-up costs and, in the commercial world, most fail.

Matchmakers are the intermediaries that bring buyers and sellers together. Attracting customers (house buyers) is important, but it is useless unless those customers can be matched with providers (estate agents). In the B2C world, we are accustomed to thinking about competition in the market, attracting a larger share of the consumer’s wallet. For a platform, competition is also for the market, attracting a larger share of the provider’s commitment – and one optimal outcome is to become a monopoly provider by attracting all possible B2B clients from its rivals.

Inside this type of company, the internal salespeople who speak to the providers are

often powerful influencers on strategy, and the guardians of much useful informal feedback. Rightmove supplements this with a rolling programme of B2B research, which has to be undertaken with care. “Estate agents think portals have taken away part of their value chain, so, when we talk to them, it is a chance for some of them to get stuff off their chest. But we’ll always go to them again and have the conversation about how we can improve – which is the conversation we really want to have,” says Lughart.

As with many other B2B operations, Rightmove relies less on the headline figure from its NPS tracker for B2B because “it was bouncing around all over the place”. This was partly because of small sample sizes (Rightmove has 10 million buyer visitors per month, but only a few thousand agencies to track) and partly because the emotional response tended to swamp the rational feedback. But, in addition, the explanations behind the scores were far more reliable as a guide to improving the business than the scores themselves.

Effective research combines operational business metrics with an emotional side. “We started by defining what value looks like to agencies, and that is a mixture of rational and emotional,” Lughart says. “Rational would be things such as the quality of the leads that we send to agents – the quality of the data we supply to allow them to target their markets.

But we also need to take notice of how they feel about us.”

For emotional responses, a regular panel of telephone interviews is combined with surveys using metaphors; for example, agents can place themselves on a virtual sofa, which measures how close they sit to a man wearing a Rightmove T-shirt and to competitors, such as Zoopla, to examine how close the relationship is, and what would secure or threaten it. Simply doing the research helps to deepen trust and commitment in the relationship, and Rightmove now prioritises training to agents.

“We spent a lot of time helping to identify the moments in the home-moving process where technology adds value, rather than detracts from it. We want to be seen as a business that enables home-moving, and tries to make it easier. So we’ve synthesised research from consumers and estate agents, and turned that into advice for consumers and training materials for estate agents, which, hopefully, will make the whole process smoother for everybody,” says Lughart.

Does she have advice for platform companies in a similar position? “It’s really important to have a proper research function to complement the feedback you hear from a big sales force that’s talking to customers all the time. Combining that with research rigour means you don’t just listen to one or two people who are particularly vociferous.”



► employer's business. Respondents may conflate emotional, personal responses with replies that are relevant to business research (see box, Rightmove), and this may be impossible to disentangle without personal contact. With the increasing amount of self-employment, even legitimate small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) panels contain a highly diverse group of people. Finally, professional respondents will find it just as easy to piggyback on a business panel as a consumer one.

In the real world, however, if a panel provider claims to have found a large number of business owners or executives for an online panel, it's tempting not to ask too many questions.

SSI is one of the world's largest providers of samples for research – with 18 million panellists in 90 countries – and so one of the largest suppliers of online B2B panels.

"The B2B market, globally, is big – it's growing – but it's probably one of the most underserved markets," says Chris Fanning, president and CEO of SSI. When he joined the

company in 2012, developing higher-quality B2B panels was made a strategic target, based on his experience with poor-quality B2B panels in a career outside the research industry.

"One of the dirty little secrets of our industry is that some of the smaller, less resourced, companies out there are probably trimming

“ The B2B market, globally, is big – it's growing – but it's probably one of the most underserved markets ”

back on their panel assets, offering cheap samples. I know, I've seen it first-hand. Some panel recruiters grab traffic from a lot of sources and just kind of throw it at the survey.

They ask potential respondents: 'What do you do for a profession?' – or, worse, 'Are you an IT decision-maker?' And people know the right answer is 'yes' if they want to take the survey."

Currently, SSI is investing \$100m a year in growing its panels, much of it to weed out these fraudulent respondents. Recruitment for B2B concentrates on externally verifiable sources. For example, airline frequent-flyer programmes offer opportunities to validate identities, and a global sample. "If you're getting those miles and points, you tend to be honest about who you are and where you live," Fanning says.

"We also recruit on professional publications and websites. So, if you're looking for IT professionals, our customers want specific samples; they want Java developers Oracle database administrators – pretty specific topics."

This is one reason, Fanning claims, that B2B panel recruitment needs to be done at scale. The other reason, he says, is that by examining previous survey responses, SSI finds it easier to weed out imposters. There's a process of continuous validation in doing more than 40 million surveys a year.

Fanning was not the only person we spoke to in the B2B research business to admit that bogus B2B

MAKING SURVEYS INTO MAGAZINES

"We have been toying with different ways to do longitudinal research and trying to make our surveys slightly more editorial – more discussional and more community-based – with people providing ideas, getting feedback and coming back to find things out," says Alex Wheatley, innovation researcher at Lightspeed. "That ended up with the idea of survey magazines."

So BusinessMinds was born, a monthly collaboration between Lightspeed and Kantar TNS, directed at the hard-to-survey SME market. The idea was to supply a survey in the form of a magazine, which would offer businesspeople something of value. "It gives them a reason to be there, because these people are time poor and only want to participate if there's something to gain from it," says Wheatley.

The discipline of a magazine structure was useful, says Jon Puleston, Lightspeed's vice-president of innovation, because it made the team think about the complementary nature of editorial – what's provided to engage the reader – and advertising – what the publisher gains from the exchange. "The challenge in all forms of research is trying to think like a publisher. It is a skill to understand what a market wants," he says. "Researchers often tend to treat respondents as a group from which we just want to extract information, and it's not a collaborative process."

The timing was right for BusinessMinds because it coincided with the Brexit referendum – and, in its early surveys, it found that four out of 10 SMEs backed Brexit. The longitudinal format meant the team could perform a before-

and-after analysis of opinion. Brexit wasn't the only editorial strand, however. Readers were asked more open questions; for example: how would they invest £1m in their business; what would they like to do on a company night out; or how do they manage their work-life balance?.

Initial response exceeded expectations. Puleston says: "SMEs are humans and they treat their businesses like a member of their family. We were amazed at how much feedback we got from people when we asked about what it felt like to run a business, and the concerns they have.

"In future, you might get hundreds of thousands of people engaged in a survey if the survey's right – and they'll do it on a regular basis because they're enjoying it, not necessarily because they're getting paid to do it."

Finding that long-term business model for BusinessMinds will be more complex, though. The ideal would be for a selection of clients to sponsor it; however, clients with needs that suit an editorial format, and who would be prepared to make a long-term commitment, may be hard to find.

"We are not continuing it at the moment," says Emma Mozley, associate director at Kantar TNS. "We are including it in our B2B briefs, and there has been some interest, but it's a big commitment of time for the client, and it needs to be the right kind of brief."

"We're at the stage where we probably need to build it without the commercial angle in mind," Wheatley suggests, "and have the magazine – the idea – running, and go to our clients at that stage. But, obviously, that will require investment."

panels are the industry's 'dirty secret'. The alternative – building and curating your own panel, and syndicating it to many clients – can be a consistent source of revenue because, by definition, it is almost impossible to replicate. But it's hard work to build a specialist panel, says Perowne, of MIG Global, which built a panel of broadcast engineers that was extremely valuable as a

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source of insight for high-value equipment providers.

“We globally partnered with all the major broadcast shows and the major brands – 20 different publications. Because of this approach, we got huge numbers. It was a collective effort. But there are only 30-50,000 broadcast engineers

in the world, and we had to go through every channel to get to them. You can make this work, but it is hard to do, and you have to take a syndicated approach.”

On the other hand, at least, Perowne could be confident of who was responding – and why – and make that a selling point. “The industry has to be a lot more honest here,” he warns. “A provider could easily validate whether the people on panels are who they say they are by using LinkedIn to check – but I don't know a single panel provider that does it.”

Not all methodology will work

With small sample sizes, the need to know (or find out) precisely who you are talking to – and the more open-ended or qualitative research – means some techniques have to be discarded or adapted in B2B. One example that's commonly measured, but not used effectively in B2B settings, is Net Promoter Score (NPS). It's much harder to work out what the number actually measures

in a B2B environment. Does it capture the quality of the business relationship, or the emotions of one person at one point in time? What does one person's response signify, compared with the wider business partnership? In short: is the NPS question capturing something that the business can, and should, act on?

At Customer Champions, Bates has seen increasing requests for NPS, but he usually discourages them. “The good thing is that B2B companies are now catching up with B2C in terms of recognising the value of getting regular customer feedback – but it would be rare that I would tell them the answer to their problem is NPS, because the value of each customer is of great significance to them. What they really want to look at is how to respond to customers on an individual basis.”

As a result, Customer Champions treats the NPS score more as a conversation starter – a way to say: ‘Why do you score us that way’, delivered in a face-to-

ACCOUNT-BASED MARKETING (ABM)

CSC, a US-based technology and services company, thought it knew its biggest customers well. It did some research into their buying process and discovered that, on average, about 30 people would contribute to it, and that even its best salespeople knew only a small fraction of them. When McKinsey surveyed 200 business customers, their biggest complaint was a lack of knowledge among the people who sold to them, while 55% said they were contacted too frequently.

One of the problems is that service providers such as CSC have the wrong type of information. If the sales process is long and complex, it's not always useful to know about the person who signs the purchase order, the opinions of a panel drawn from many companies, or historical research.

So, particularly in technology businesses, the discipline of

account-based marketing (ABM) has evolved to research ‘markets of one’ – key accounts – in the sort of depth on which salespeople can act.

“We've formalised an approach – a structured approach to market to individual accounts – treating accounts as markets in their own right. Over time, we've evolved the model,” says Dave Munn, president and CEO of ITSMA – a B2B services marketing association – and the co-author of *A Practitioner's Guide to ABM*. For the companies who use it – predominantly B2B ones in technology, for whom the sales process can last 18 months or more, and involve huge up-front investment – ABM is extremely effective.

“In our surveys, 87% of users said it has a higher return on investment than other forms of marketing. Close to 75% of companies we survey are increasing their spending on

account-based marketing,” Munn says. The key is to disaggregate the research process.

“Many companies will decide on 1,000 target accounts and target CIOs or sales leaders in those companies. They develop mass content – mass programmes – and it really doesn't speak to the individual issues and needs that people and companies have,” Munn adds.

Instead, the information-gathering effort for ABM tends to be a deep dive into one client, or a few, to discover: who influences the process; when it begins; what their specific problems are; attitudes and opinions from every influencer inside the client; what those named influencers are considering; and whether there is a realistic chance of growing the account. This means salespeople can target fewer, more promising, opportunities, and influence the sales process at the start, rather than just responding to a tender.

How does this change research needs? It is important, Munn explains, not to do key account research in an ad hoc or project-based way, but as a continuous, measured, planned process. “Some people just start jumping in and doing random acts of account-based marketing – and those can work, but it's not very structured,” he says.

The deep-dive data looks at every aspect of the customer, including social media, company news, propensity to buy, company performance or search data. Some of the information may already be available, but it can be distributed between many departments, and needs to be collected and formalised. It is then delivered in a timely way – which is often automated – to the correct salespeople.

“This kind of specialist information gathering is bringing daily intelligence to the planning process,” Munn says.



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face interview. It can calculate the aggregate NPS score for clients, but – because of the small sample size – the number is likely to be volatile. Even if it doesn't move around, it is hard to work out in a B2B setting what the client can do to move the number; it's rare that the B2B process will uncover one surprising common problem, says Bates.

However, scoring in this manner might also be a way to select the B2B respondents that the client needs to re-contact. Bates calls these "red flag reports", which he is more likely to recommend than a simple NPS tracker. "With these reports, an account manager or a project manager in the client business has the responsibility of contacting the person we interviewed. It's very actionable research, and the value is often about opening up channels of communication."

This may, Bates says, also be a welcome innovation for those account managers who have been raising their own red flags internally, but who now have rigorous third-party confirmation through an external B2B researcher. It's a long way from using an NPS tracker to improve relationships, he claims, but – in a B2B context – it may be more useful to the client.

If B2B research respondents don't like joining panels, responding to standard quant surveys, or being asked to boil down their responses to a number between one and 10, then – at the other end of the methodological spectrum – there's in-depth qualitative or ethnographic research. But, doing 'ethno' in a business environment isn't straightforward.

One obvious point is that customers won't enjoy – or, legally, cannot have – an external researcher hanging around in their offices. So B2B ethno requires problem-solving creativity, says Sabine Stork, founding partner at Thinktank International Research.

An example of Thinktank's creative solutions in a B2B context is a project in which researchers based themselves at Shell service stations, to speak to truckers on a break or salespeople as they passed through in their cars. But research time was limited, because truckers and salespeople are on the clock.

"It is difficult to interview anyone at length at their place of work in large corporations," Stork says. "A lot of the problems in B2B research are just pure logistics."

If an ethnographer's skill is to observe, there's also the problem

that – in a work environment – staff may find this sinister.

"As a researcher, you just want to observe employees at a lower level in the company, but there will be suspicion about why you are doing it. You still pick up important contextual stuff just by looking around, but they may not want to tell you directly," says Stork.

"One idea is to approach them in work situations, but not actually at

“ It is difficult to interview anyone at their place of work... a lot of the problems in B2B research are logistics ”

work – which is why we sometimes talk to people at conferences. Perhaps they will feel a bit freer in this environment."

In all aspects of B2B research, the researcher's empathy with respondents matters – but, again, this means understanding something about the work that those respondents are doing, whether that be broadcast engineering, running a company or driving a lorry. Before every B2B

TARGETED RESEARCH AT EPICOR

"We look at its client industries, their growth, their characteristics. We don't necessarily talk to the most senior people in the client, we look at a broad spectrum of relevant people," says Paul Watts at Morar HPI.

IT companies are some of the largest consumers of B2B research, because their products are general-purpose technologies that are purchased in the boardroom, implemented in an IT department and used by everyone.

This is certainly the case at Epicor, one of Morar's long-term clients, which supplies enterprise research planning technology that, in effect, runs the businesses of mid-sized companies,

especially manufacturers. Epicor and Morar are on the company's tenth global survey since 2010, says Tabita Seagrave, director of communications at Epicor.

"The surveys and research we do are very targeted. We need to understand what kind of roles people have, because we don't sell to everybody in every role in every company."

This means the flexibility to reach boardroom respondents, as well as to target users of the software, who may be informal drivers of purchasing decisions.

For Seagrave, one of the most important aspects of the survey is that it allows Epicor to be precise about who the respondents are, what jobs they do, and where

they are. Although it is a global company, it sells to a multitude of sectors in various countries, and the sales process changes in different contexts, because industries and countries report unique pain points.

The longitudinal aspect of the survey has one surprising aspect in common with consumer research: demographic change. In many mid-sized companies, Seagrave explains, control is passing from an older generation to a more digital-native group of managers, and the attitudinal shift to technology is a focus of the research.

"Most of our customers are going through a big generational shift. The new generation of

managers is automating, and there are lots of big digital changes happening within the industry at the moment."

One of the satisfying aspects of the global survey programme, says Seagrave, is that it is done only because it is useful.

She personally reports the results to the CMO, and these are then used in strategic planning and marketing, and to direct sales.

"In B2B organisations, there is a lot of transparency inside an organisation, so all the research we do is measured and tracked, and we have KPIs for everything."

It means Epicor is constantly looking for actionable information that others have missed.

assignment, Stork researches the elements and the language of the jobs she will be observing, so she can speak to workers in their day-to-day language. This, she points out, also helps her to recognise what, precisely, is going on in the workplace.

“You need to have your emotional radar on. I think you do need to have a business demeanour and try to speak their language to do this type of research,” she says. “I always say to them: ‘Treat me like an informed layperson.’”

But clients already have a group of informed laypeople doing continuous research into their customers – the sales team. There’s a reasonable case to be made that a sales call is equal research by another name. Then, B2B has both an opportunity and a responsibility. On the one hand, accessing and aggregating that internal reservoir of internal insight can be a valuable source of understanding – but the

responsibility to challenge the accepted point of view of the sales team, if the research points that way, can be politically delicate.

As an ‘informed layperson’, Stork argues, a good qualitative interviewer can do that job for a B2B relationship. “It’s being able to ask the ‘stupid question’ that really allows people to be a bit more honest – a bit more frank. It’s one of the reasons it’s a good idea, in the first place, to use qual for B2B clients,” she adds.

A different type of research, a different type of researcher

Because the requirements of B2B are often so different from those of consumer research, not every researcher may be suited to it. “We’ve pretty much stopped recruiting people with a research background,” Dalglish says. “We either recruit them straight out of university or from management and

marketing consultancies. Those candidates are trained in business rather than in research, and it is relatively straightforward to learn research – whereas it is not straightforward to learn business.”

Dalglish’s three-stage recruitment process includes a round that tests the business acumen of applicants specifically. “To do this job, you need to be interested in the worlds of business and commerce,” he says. “That’s because – in B2B research – you have to be able to unpick a complex environment, in which different businesses are interacting with each other, and come up with commercial recommendations.”

“I try not to take an approach where you can say: ‘This is where the research bit fits in,’” says Bates, of Customer Champions. “When I look at this [B2B research], I always think: ‘This is not really market research – this is much more about understanding a few really, really, really valuable customers.’” ■

FINDING A REASON TO RESPOND

Respondents are a market researcher’s raw material. Without them, an industry focused on exploring people’s opinions would have no opinions to explore.

Sourcing these raw materials is a challenge for B2B researchers. Respondents are a scarce resource, especially when niche or senior-level roles are the focus of the study. What’s more, securing the support of these individuals is notoriously tough. They can be protected by gatekeepers, they are time pressured, and their primary responsibility is to further their employer’s business, not yours.

But, with the right approach, B2B respondents can be persuaded to take part in research. So, what’s the trick? It’s all about incentivisation; you need to give respondents a compelling reason to support the research.

The most powerful of these incentives are ‘soft’. There are exceptions, but most of the time in B2B markets people are buying from people. What’s more, this relationship tends to endure

beyond the sale through to activities such as product tailoring, service delivery, account management and ongoing support. The result is that, in B2B markets, buyers and sellers often forge a human bond; leveraging this relationship is the most powerful incentive when persuading someone to take part in research.

Another powerful soft incentive is to appeal to people’s sense of curiosity or desire for mental stimulation. If the topic of research, or the way in which you are exploring it, can be made to sound interesting, then people are more likely to see value in giving their support. If you also emphasise how participation will benefit them and their employer through innovations or service improvements, all the better.

A third soft incentive can help to smooth the way. Remember that B2B respondents are time poor, so you’re more likely to gain their support by placing as little demand on their time as possible and making participation easy.

These softer factors aren’t always available, or may not be powerful enough on their own. So sometimes a more tangible incentive is needed – and a common approach is to offer a financial reward for the respondent’s time. However, this is quite controversial, with critics citing three main objections. First, exchanging cash for opinions can seem distasteful in a business context, and – in some circumstances – may fall foul of corporate bribery laws or policies. Second, putting these ethical concerns aside, it’s an expensive approach, especially when senior, well-remunerated roles are the target. And third, not everyone is convinced that making such payments improves response rates.

If you share these concerns, there are alternatives, most notably charity donations, prize draws, or information – usually a short report based on the survey findings. These aren’t all equally powerful, though.

To explore the impact of these incentives on response rates,

Circle Research divided a database of more than 23,000 business people into several groups, then invited them to participate in a short online survey. Group one, the control group, was offered no incentive; the remaining groups were offered one or more incentives. The results were clear cut. The most powerful ‘hard’ incentive was to offer a charity donation: 53% of all survey respondents in this experiment came from just two groups – those who were offered a charity donation in exchange for their time (29%) and those who were offered this charity donation in conjunction with entry into a high-odds, low-value prize draw (24%).

So, if you’re looking to persuade B2B respondents to participate in research, use a mix of soft and hard incentives. Leverage the relationship, appeal to their curiosity, make it easy to participate, and seal the deal with the offer of a charity donation for their time.

Andrew Dalglish, director,
Circle Research