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# Strategic Sample Blending: The Premier Sample Methodology for Tracking Studies

EMI Research Solutions

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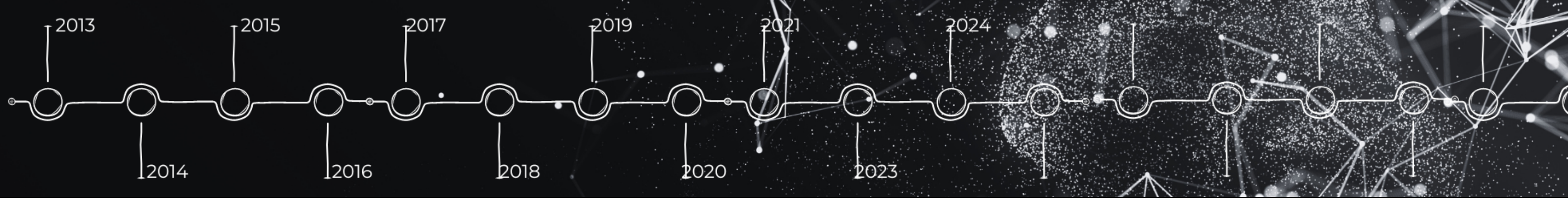
# Introduction

The most important factor with any longitudinal or tracking study is consistency. Consistency ensures that results can be compared to previous waves. It also allows brands to be confident that any changes in their key metrics are due to marketplace activities (i.e. marketing activities, advertising, public relations, etc.) and not because each wave of the study is run differently.

In the online quantitative research world, it can be very common for sample providers to “fall short” on providing the agreed-upon number of completes for a survey, even with tracking studies. Most of the time, this may not be entirely the sample provider’s fault – it’s because the study specifications that were assumed prior to launch don’t match what has occurred in field. It’s common for the incidence rate to come in lower than expected, the length of the interview to be longer, or a quota to be unexpectedly tough to fill.

Researchers are often left scrambling to get the completes they need to close their study. On an ad hoc study, they may throw new sample providers on as quickly as possible in hopes that they get the needed completes quickly so they do not miss their deadlines. That may work when data consistency isn’t a high priority, but with tracking studies that is not the case. Many researchers managing trackers face a dilemma - hitting their deadlines or ensuring data consistency.

How can you trust your tracker data in this situation? What can a researcher do?



# History of Sampling

In the old days of sampling, meaning more than ten years ago, leveraging a single sample source was generally considered best practice. The philosophy being that by using the same single source, you ensured data consistency wave-to-wave. Sample companies generally maintained similar panel management, ensuring that their panel was relatively similar over time.

However, over the last few years, the perception of using a single sample source as a best practice has ended. There are a variety of factors that drove this change – technology advancements such as programmatic sampling, mobile apps, the interwovenness of providers because of API integrations, higher levels of fraud, providers just plain running out of target respondents, etc. Bottom line: the use of a single sample source is no longer a best practice.

There have been many changes in the industry over the last decade, from industry consolidation to technological advancements, and more. All of the changes have led to a shift in market researchers using multiple sample sources for their online quantitative studies.

Industry consolidation has also played a big part in the changing sample landscape and why using a single sample source is no longer a viable option. Some of the recent acquisitions in the past few years include Cint's acquisition of Lucid, Sago's purchase of Market Cube, and DISQO's acquisition of Feedback Loop. Roughly five years ago we saw Research Now and SSI, arguably the two largest sample providers in the industry at the time, merge and rebrand into Dynata – and purchase Critical Mix along the way.

Mergers and acquisitions can certainly change other aspects of the panels – did their recruiting practices change? Is their recruiting budget the same? Something seemingly as minute as a survey invitation or incentive can play a large part in response rates and loyalty.

In 2020, a new source of volatility hit the world in the form of COVID-19. The pandemic upended many industries, from airlines and hospitality to retail and consumer goods – and with it, came a fast and dramatic shift in consumer behavior the likes of which we had not seen before. Consumers made radical changes to their purchasing behavior almost overnight.

# Panel sources they had engaged for a study were falling short.

The problem is that this shift to multiple sample suppliers didn't happen because of mergers, COVID, or because it was the best way to get sample for a study – rather, researchers started using multiple sample sources out of necessity. Panel sources they had engaged for a study were falling short and they had to bring on additional sources to “top-up” the study. Demand certainly outpaced supply.

There are even times when a client or a researcher may have thought they were using a single source, but the supplier brought in other providers to fill needed completes their panel couldn't achieve. The advancement of technology made it very

easy for sample providers to buy and sell sample to each other and it has become commonplace.

## Sample Aggregation Methods

The first, and most basic method of aggregating sample is known as “stacking”. In this approach, suppliers are used because a single sample source cannot provide all the completes needed on a particular study. Additional sample sources are added at the end of the study to gather the rest of the needed completes. There is no magic number of sample sources added with this method; sources are simply added until the study has all the completes needed. Using this method can make closing studies feel like fire drills. It almost takes control of your project away from you. As additional sources are added, it might not be transparent as to where they are getting their sample, and the threat of duplication increases significantly.

The other method of using multiple sample panels on a study is called “blending.” Sample blending is the process of using multiple suppliers, but with a more planned and intentional method. It usually means using 3 or more different panels and setting limits on the number of completes each panel can get, so no one panel gets more than 50%.





# The Myth That All Sample Is The Same

One of the biggest myths in the market research industry, specifically the online quantitative portion, is that all online sample is the same. No matter what panel or provider you use, it's all the same, even when using the same demographics. Essentially, a commodity.

The problem is that this couldn't be farther from the truth! Online sample is a complex entity that has a variety of intricacies and specialties.

First off, all panels are different from one another, just like snowflakes. That's a fact. How, you ask? Great question! Here's how:

## **1. Recruiting Methods**

One of the primary ways panels differ is because every panel has different recruiting methods. Due to new technology available today, there are a variety of ways to recruit respondents. Some are using a phone, some use Facebook, many have proprietary relationships with certain websites, some recruit via other

in-person methods, and the list goes on.

## **2. Panel Management**

Every panel manages their operations differently – from the number of survey invitations they send, how they are sent, how respondents are incentivized, incentive redemption, how respondents access surveys, the list goes on. All of these factors (and more) can impact the data that a panel provides.

## **3. Panelist Tenure / Attrition / Turnover**

The average panelist takes only 2.1 surveys. Think about that – 2.1 surveys. That is not many at all. With that in mind, panels must be constantly recruiting to add new panelists as others drop out. Coupled with weeding out respondents who have been flagged for fraudulent behavior, a panel could turn over its entire roster of panelists every couple of years. When new panelists are added, it's not as though panel companies are looking at a list and trying to match up what they lost – they

are trying to recruit as many new panelists as possible. This means you could have had a 35-year-old married woman respond to one wave of your study, but they leave and are replaced by an 18-year-old Hispanic male.

#### 4. Quality Process

Every panel manages quality differently, from how they stop fraud, to keeping panelists engaged. This means there are different methodologies, technologies, and more in play.

#### 5. Client Needs

Panels are not built to match the census. They are built because there was a need in the marketplace. Some have special partnerships or agreements with other organizations to recruit from, like credit card companies, whereas others recruit for a specific profile because they have a client that needs to reach a specific target audience.

#### 6. Investment

Managing and maintaining a panel requires a significant investment. That doesn't take into account the costs of any upgrades or new features a panel may want to add for its panelists. Any upgrade to incentives, user interface, etc. all cost money, and not all panels can make top dollar investments in their panels.

#### 7. Market Factors

Another major element that causes differentiation in panels is overall market factors like mergers, acquisitions, and new technology. As panels merge or are acquired, how they had been run changes, whether it is incorporating panelists into a different panel, to migrating it to the same back-end technology as a company cost-saving measure. Changes like these due to mergers or acquisitions can change a panel.

Changes in technology also play into how panels are different. Many panels use a portal for panelists to take surveys, others do email invites, newer panels are app-based only. This impacts the make-up of your panels and the data it delivers.

#### 8. Attitudes and Behaviors

The biggest factor that makes panels different is that the panelists that make up a panel are different than the panelists in another panel. They have different opinions, views, life experiences, and beliefs, all of which lead to differences in their attitudes and behaviors.

Due to these factors, the data you get from each panel can vary greatly.

**Awareness levels can vary by as much as 25 percentage points**

**Brand ratings can vary by as much as 20 percentage points**

**Concept ratings can vary by as much as 30 percentage points**

This is just an example of how big of a difference in your data you could experience depending on the panel you use. These aren't just minor variations; these differences can be the difference in million-dollar decisions, and even jobs.

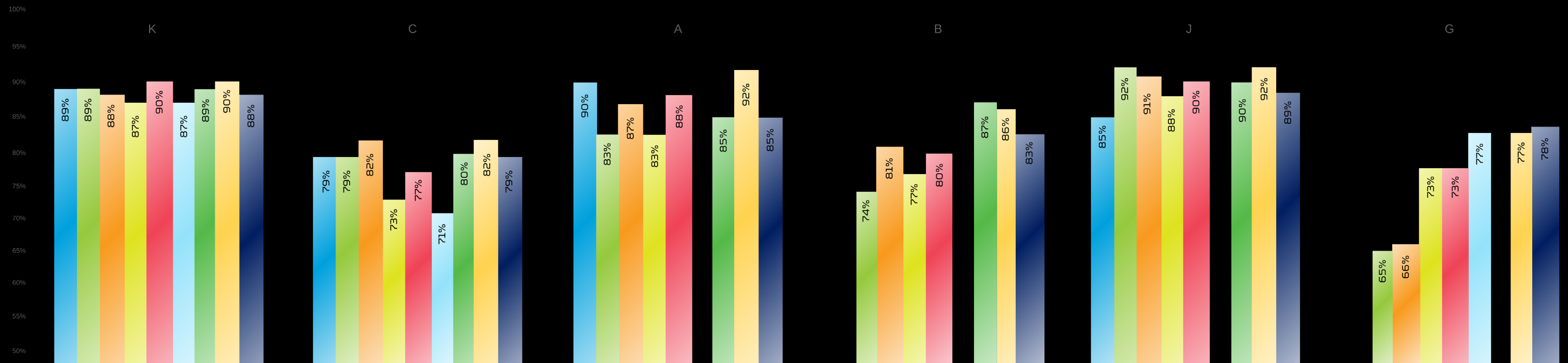
In our research-on-research, we study the brand awareness and ratings of both well-known brands, including Coke, Bose, etc. as well as lesser-known brands to understand the differences between panels, as well as how panels change over time. We also test different product concepts as well. Have you ever done an incidence check that didn't match up with in-field specs? This is likely why that happened.

# Brand Awareness



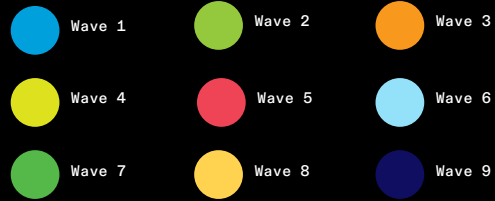
We looked at the average aided brand awareness across numerous brands to see how different panels are from one another. We found that some panels tend to have a higher average than others, in some cases as much as a 27-point difference, depending on the wave. This is really highlighted in the difference between panel J and panel G.

We also found that the results a panel provides over time change as well. Some panels like panel K are fairly consistent wave-to-wave, whereas others can have up to 13-point differences wave-to-wave, like panel B or panel G.



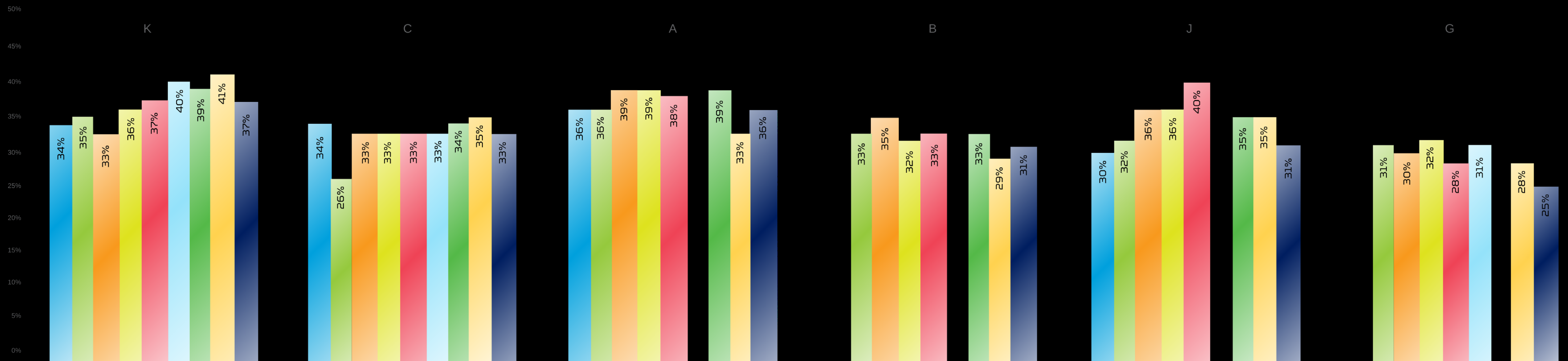
# Brand Rating

## Top 2 Box



Similar results occur when looking at the brand ratings. We also see a panel's average brand rating change over time. Some panels like panel J have a 10-percentage point difference between various waves, whereas others may have a single outlying wave but maintain consistency overall of about a 3-point difference.

Additionally, the consistency of brand rating varies by panel. Some panels, like panel A, are fairly consistent wave-to-wave, even when comparing the results across 9 waves. Then there are panels like C and A, where we see some fluctuation wave-to-wave between 6 and 7 percentage points.





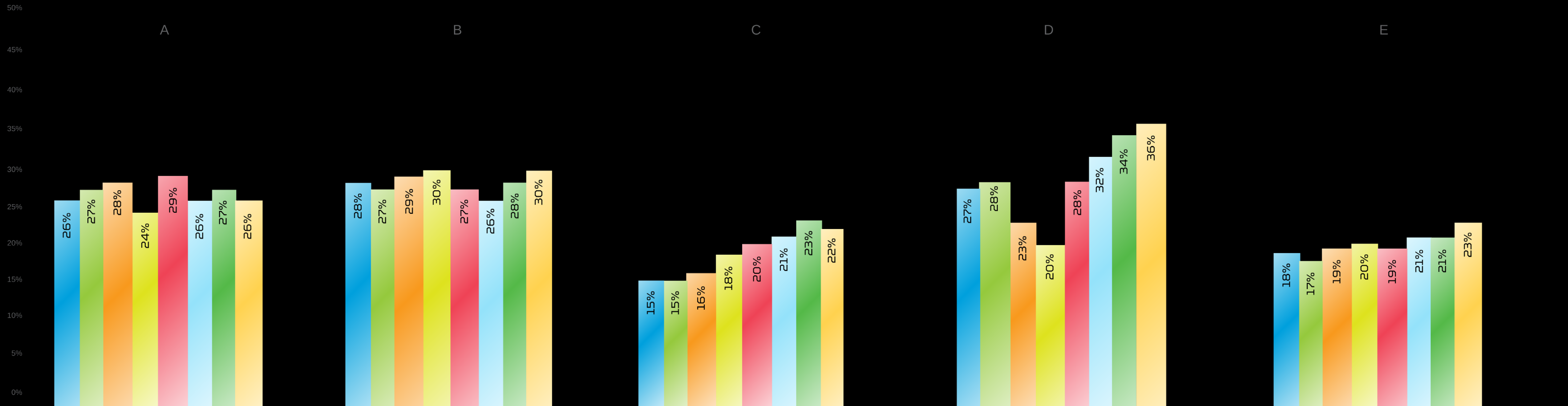
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In over 10 years of tracking and evaluating the sample landscape, we have found that each panel can vary as much as 10 points over a 3-year period.

Looking at the last 8 waves for our Bose research, you can see a 12-point difference between Panel B and Panel D in wave 8. When looking at panel D, you can also see that there is a 16-point difference between waves 4 and 8.

There are also some trends in how panels change over time. Looking at the results of the last 8 waves for our Bose headphones

concept, we noticed a couple of trends in how panels change. First, Panels C and E are slowly increasing their purchase intent for the headphone concept over time. Panel D, while having a total increase in purchase intent over time, was much more volatile.





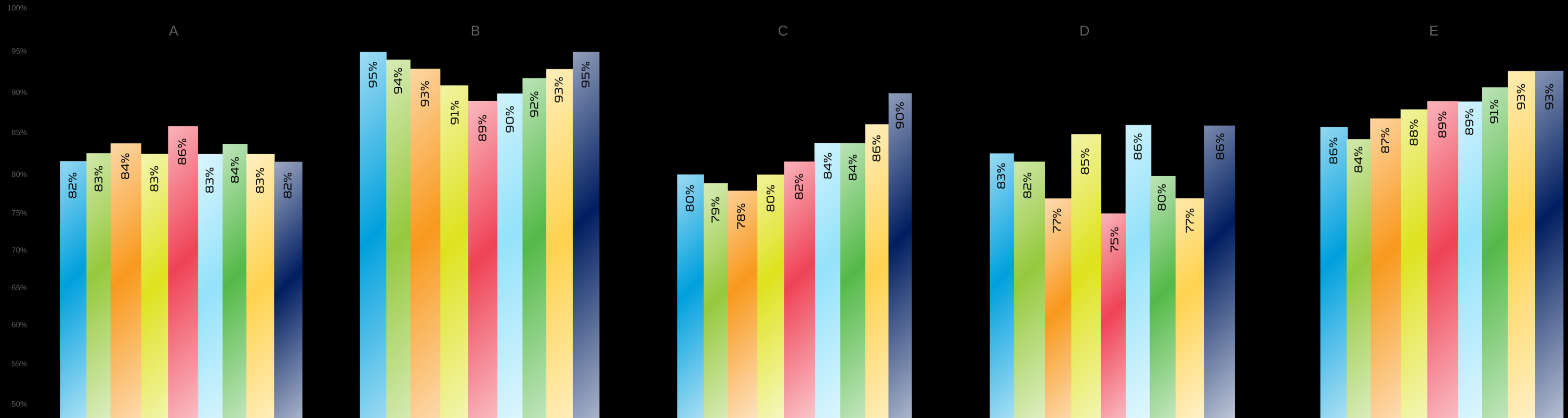
Top 2 Box

Some researchers may say that those results are isolated to the specific concept and the trends around how panels are changing would be different with a different KPI. They would be wrong. Over the same time period, we can dig into the brand awareness of Coca-Cola for the same 5 panels as the Bose headphone concept. Coca-Cola was chosen because it is a brand that should have consistent brand awareness due to very consistent marketing.

Panels C and E have a similar steady growth in brand awareness over time, nearly the same growth trajectory as with the purchase intent of the Bose headphones concept. Panel D, again, shows overall growth, but is much more volatile.

probably pulling your hair out trying to understand why your KPIs are changing so much wave-to-wave. Alternatively, you could be using a blend of panels C and E and be thinking you're a rockstar with all your KPIs going up. The reality in both cases is that it may be something inherent with what the panels that you are using for your brand tracking study are doing rather than your marketing efforts.

Think about this. If you are a Coca-Cola brand manager and you are using only panel D for your brand tracking studies, you are





# Strategic Sample Blending: Why It Is The Premier Methodology For Trackers

Now that you know how the data that panels provide can vary, you are probably asking yourself, “What can I do to ensure the consistency of my tracking study, while still hitting all my deadlines?”

The premier practice of utilizing online sample for a tracking study is to strategically blend sample. To strategically blend sample takes blending a step further. Not only do you use three or more sample providers, but the selection and blending of the selected providers is done in an intentional and controlled manner.

Providers are selected to complement one another, while reducing the overall sample bias and any potential behavioral or attitudinal impacts a panel can have. This ensures not only the accuracy of your tracker’s data, but that it is truly representational of demographics, behavior, and attitudes of your target audience.

Additionally, by strategically selecting your providers and managing their allocation, you can increase your overall feasibility for the life of your tracker, avoiding the dreaded “top-up” situation that can skew your data.

Strategic sample blending has several advantages over the other aggregation methods.

### **Improved Feasibility**

The first is improved feasibility. When you use a single source for all your sample, your feasibility is limited to that of your selected source. With tracking studies, this can be very problematic, primarily if you have limits on the number of times you can have the same respondent enter a wave, especially if the tracker needs a large number of completes on a frequent basis.

Some think that by aggregating or stacking panels that they get around the feasibility problem of a single source – and you do – to an extent. Feasibility is still a problem as the entire reason you are stacking panels is because the main sample source you engaged didn't have enough overall feasibility. Because of that, you are trying to make up for the shortfall by throwing all panels on the study to get the completes you need. While this does solve the feasibility problem when talking about completes, it causes a different problem – one that strategic sample blending solves from the start.

### **Consistency**

Data consistency, specifically wave-to-wave, can be a problem if you are aggregating suppliers. When you throw a bunch of different sample providers on at the end of a study to get the remaining completes your original partner was unable to get due to insufficient feasibility, it can cause your data to change.

This change then makes it difficult to compare results over time and look for changes due to a company's efforts rather than because of the panels that were used.

This is especially evident if you see a sudden spike or a sudden drop in your results in a certain wave. If you stacked panels to get the needed completes, how can you be sure that your results are because of the efforts your organization took, rather than because of one of the panels you added to get more completes that wave that was never used before? That makes a market researcher's job a lot harder when trying to defend the data to their client.

Strategic sample blending can ensure that you maintain the consistency of your data,

especially with each wave of a tracking study. This is because, with strategic blending, you build out a plan that utilizes three or more different panels and distributes the number of completes across the panels, so that you are only using a fraction of their overall feasibility. You also build in back-ups at the start so that if any of the panels were to fall short, you have already strategically selected a partner to fill in the gaps.

### **Reduce Risk**

Another benefit of strategic sample blending that goes hand-in-hand with maintaining data consistency is reducing risk. By using a single source of sample, you are putting all your eggs in a single basket, hoping that it will all work out. By stacking sample providers, you might end up with a bunch of panels that are the same attitudinally and it will skew your data. The risk you incur with this strategy is two-fold – first, you risk your data consistency if you end up having to bring on additional panels if you fall short.

Second, and probably more importantly, you risk incorporating sample bias into your results. Sample bias is the potential data

bias you can introduce by using a specific sample panel for all or a vast majority of the completes. Strategic sample blending reduces your risk by ensuring that no single panel will account for 50% or more of your study's completes, which not only reduces the risk of inconsistent data, but also the risk of sample bias.

### **Field Timing**

Finally, strategic sample blending improves your field timing. By engaging multiple sample panels at the same time for only a fraction of their overall feasibility, fielding takes less time. With using a single source or aggregating, you are waiting to get your completes from a single source, and then spending additional time essentially re-fielding when you have to bring on additional panels to get the remaining completes. This can extend your field time by several days – days that are invaluable to clients.

By strategically blending your sample, you can ensure the consistency and reliability of your tracker and the data it provides, allowing you and your organization to make the best business decisions possible.



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EMI Research Solutions is a leading online sample and quantitative research consultancy. Since 1999, we have managed more than 100 tracker studies for full service market research firms, large consumer brands, and other Fortune 500 organizations. Our patented methodology of strategically blending sample, IntelliBlend®, is the best way of blending sample in an intentional and controlled approach in the industry. Combined with SWIFT, our proprietary sample management platform, and our world-class customer service, EMI can craft you a custom solution that will ensure the long-term feasibility and viability of your tracker study.