THE GAMIFICATION OF MARKETING RESEARCH

To incent participation in consumer panels, some researchers are working to engage panelists through gaming tactics

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INFORMATION AND INSIGHTS

about consumers’ purchasing behaviors and the way that media impacts purchase decisions are the lifeblood for marketers. In a world of ever-changing technology and competition for limited attention, consumer panelists must be approached and engaged in new and innovative ways. “Gamification,” the process of applying the psychological and sociological factors that drive intense game play to consumer measurement, enables us to understand the thought process behind consumers’ willingness to participate in and comply with consumer behavior and attitude measurement tasks.

Gamification is not a new concept in business. In fact, for many airlines, gamification is an essential part of their business strategies. As all frequent flyers know, the more flights booked through the same airline, the more “miles” (i.e., points) those flyers receive. As miles accumulate, loyal customers attain various statuses (i.e., levels), each of which provides the traveler with access to an increasing range or value of rewards, such as priority boarding, preferential seating, first class upgrades and free trips. Consumers are increasingly motivated, therefore, to act or comply in a way that best meets the particular airline’s business goals. The question is whether and how this concept translates into consumer measurement.

Gamification has proliferated in recent years throughout the marketing industry and, by extension, in market research. But while both disciplines seek to promote engagement for their respective needs, marketing uses gamification to keep consumers returning to a product or service, while marketing research is exploring its use to engage panelists to respond and comply fully with an information-gathering task. The collection of valid and reliable information from the public requires that consumers be motivated to both participate in and comply fully with the tasks involved in the measurement process. Traditionally, consumer panelists have been offered monetary incentives. While perhaps still necessary to initially capture the attention of prospective panelists, monetary incentives do little to engage panelists in the longer term. This is where game-based approaches may offer a new and innovative way of motivating participants.

“Game mechanics” refers to the actions, tactics or mechanisms used to create an engaging and compelling experience for the consumer. This can include the use of points, levels, challenges, leaderboards, virtual goods, gifts or charitable donations, etc., to drive the desired behavior for engagement with and ultimately achievement of a given task. In contrast, “game dynamics” refers to the motivations that are tapped into as a result of the gamified experience, thereby driving continued participation by the consumer. These include motivational elements such as achievement, self-expression, competition and altruism. The choice of gaming tactics is an important one. Researchers need to understand the motivations that they are trying to trigger so that they can use the appropriate game mechanics, in turn. As we have learned at Nielsen through several recent studies, this is not always an easy task.

One area in which we have attempted to apply game mechanics is in the capture of television audience viewing via smartphones. Given the extensive use of gamification techniques in many smartphone apps, we felt that this would be a good test-bed for applying some of these concepts to consumer measurement. Using an iOS-based television viewing application, we recruited an opt-in panel of 250 Nielsen employees, family members and friends to test the application over a six-week period. Using a classic split-sample design, approximately half of the participants received a smartphone app that included a television viewing module with several different game-like
features, including virtual badges to reward successful first completion of various tasks and for longevity in the panel. We also used a points and levels system, which provided the participants with points for completing various tasks in a timely manner and then rewarded them with increased “status” within the app. Participants could proceed through a progression of 10 different levels based on the number of points that they achieved. The levels were associated with various job types within the television production industry (e.g., gaffer or producer), and with the attainment of each new level, participants were given a description and insights into that role (i.e., access to specialized content). The other set of respondents, in contrast, received only the television viewing module for the first two weeks then had the gamification features (badges, points and levels) turned on for the remainder of the study period.

The pilot study provided a number of insights that extended beyond our original context to the broader area of measuring consumer behaviors and attitudes:

1. **Game mechanics should drive competition and reward achievement.** The features that produced the most positive results were very clear about how to achieve a badge or earn points. Positive results are enhanced if the features facilitate completion either with others, or in situations in which the consumer is competing against himself (for instance, trying to best an earlier score).

2. **Techniques work differently across populations.** People differ in the types of game mechanics and dynamics that motivate them. In particular, younger adults, blacks, Asians and Hispanics responded more favorably to some of the gaming techniques than did older adults and whites. No single approach, therefore, will work equally well across different subgroups of the population.

3. **Gamification appears to work better with a longer-term panel survey than a one-time survey.** Game mechanics appear to have their optimal impact in terms of changing the pace or “freshening” a longer-term measurement experience. Although the techniques could be employed for a standalone survey, it is doubtful that the time and cost of developing these techniques in such an instance would be worthwhile.

4. **Techniques should motivate consumers to achieve the measurement tasks but not to drive or change the behavior or attitudes that are being measured.** This is an obvious but critical insight. While marketers can use gamification techniques to directly drive consumer purchase behavior, market researchers need to motivate consumers to complete the measurement tasks without inadvertently encouraging or changing what it is that they are trying to measure.

Gamification is a powerful motivational tool in marketing. While it may one day have a similar impact on marketing research, the goals and mechanics need to be thought through carefully to ensure that consumers are motivated to comply with the measurement tasks and are not driven simply to win the “game.”

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