Survey Fatigue
Best Practices & Industry Standards

www.surveyhealthcare.com

As you may have read, the **BHBIA Response Rate Task Force** recently addressed the industry concern around HCP's willingness to take part in market research. SHC is proud to have provided sample and fieldwork to help complete this research. To take it a step further, we sat down with SHC's industry veteran management team – **Anel Radoncic**, *Senior Vice President, Programming Manager,* **Anthony Howard**, *Vice President, Technical Operations,* **Mary Ellen Fasano**, *Senior Vice President, Project Services, Quantitative,* and **Christina Pereira**, *Vice President, Project Services, Qualitative* – for an in-depth, multi-perspective look into how the SHC operations team tackles this issue.

Together, they delve into some of the best practices SHC deploys to mitigate respondent survey fatigue and maintain **Perfect Data,** as well as establish top tips for clients to streamline the survey process. From questionnaire flaws to survey design issues, we invite you to discover how to optimize your overall user-experience without compromising the quality of your results.

Q: What is survey fatigue? How do you define it?

AR: *Survey fatigue is the issue which happens during survey taking where respondent becomes bored, exhausted or uninterested in the survey, which is usually due to repetitiveness of same/similar questions, poor survey design and/or survey length.*

AH: *Survey fatigue is mental exhaustion caused from either verbose questions and/or required responses or simply a poorly designed study. The consequences of survey fatigue are that a respondent might refuse to finish the study, might decide to stop doing research altogether for our panel, or worst case scenario – enter thoughtless responses to a study and corrupt the data quality for our client's research.*

Q: **How common is survey fatigue?**

AR: *It is pretty common, but more prevalent in poorly designed surveys and surveys that are longer than 45 minutes.*

AH: *Common. My team handles the help desk, so we're on the front lines getting feedback from our panelists. If there is a study with a poor design, we hear about it. Panelists are not afraid to let you know they did not enjoy a particular survey. We try to submit all feedback to the PM running the study so, if they are having struggles with a study, they can present it to the client. Unfortunately, by the time a study is in field, clients are typically against making changes to questions.*

ME: *Agree, it is quite common and it's a problem both for maintaining the health of a panel and for insuring accurate data. When respondents lose interest, their responses become less trustworthy.*

CP: *I would say more of an issue for quant. For qualitative, the issue becomes annoyance in being screened out or not scheduled for projects where they have gone through the screening process, since most of our screeners are a bit lengthy and take them through all screening before termination in case a client wants us to reach back out to a screened-out person who was close to qualifying.*

What is your primary specialty?
Select one

- Pulmonology
- ● Infectious Disease
- Critical Care/ICU Medicine
- Cardiology
- Gastroenterology
- Neurology
- Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation
- Other

Q: **What are the top reasons for survey fatigue?**

AR: *Inadequate visual design and poor survey content. Respondents want to read content that is engaging and relevant, and will lose interest if otherwise.*

AH: *Poor survey design and poor questionnaire design – plain, boring screens with large blocks of text and repetitive questions are the easiest way to run a respondent into the ground.*

ME: *Interview length, types of questions & relevant subject matter are also factors.*

CP: *Repetitive questions, too many attributes on scales, trying to drill down too much inside a quant, error message on questions that are tedious, conjoint designs that seem to go on forever, not pre-testing to see what the respondent user experience will be like.*

Q: **What is a good/recommended survey length?**

AR: *I would say the average healthcare research survey length is around 30-45 minutes. I wouldn't recommend going over 60 minutes, because then respondents would need to answer the survey in more than one sitting, and we wouldn't accurately be able to track the survey length.*

AH: *Depends on the topic and goal of the research. Generally, we find that studies over 1-hour long tend to be pretty brutal.*

ME: *I think the industry take is that an ideal survey length hovers around 20 minutes for consumer but longer, maybe 30 minutes amongst healthcare professionals. Much longer than that and you risk impacting the integrity of the data as respondents do get bored & lose interest. A couple of caveats are that if the topic is unique and/or particularly interesting to a respondent, they will remain engaged and provide valuable information for an hour +. The incentive or hono amount is also a factor. With an appropriate amount, most panel members will answer honestly and thoughtfully throughout the survey regardless of length.*

CP: *Really depends on the topic, expertise of the respondent and survey design… but 30 min max will get you best results for HCP, 20 min max for consumer. If the survey is well designed, has different question set-ups, and interesting topic for the respondent, then you can likely keep them engaged for 45-60 minutes.*

Q: **After how long do you notice survey respondents becoming disengaged?**

AR: *AR: It really depends if the content is interesting/relevant and engaging. If the questions types are visually repetitive and/or uneasy to answer, then your respondents usually lose focus and patience.*

AH: *This is tough. It really depends on the design of the study and the interest level in the topic/questions. Some clients have extremely redundant surveys and panelists unsubscribe from our panel altogether due to how poorly designed the study is – these can range from 10-75 minutes. Other times, the study can be well over an hour, but the respondent is interested in the topic, the questions aren't redundant, and the study is aesthetically pleasing. It's more about the questionnaire/survey design than length.*

Q: Is there a particular time or day that you notice respondents are more prone to survey? Is there a particular time or day that you notice respondents are more disengaged?

AH: *The mornings are usually slow when it comes to responses, but that's natural. People are at work and busy in the mornings. After the workday, responses increase. The weekends are very productive. Holidays in the US are also a very productive time. I have not noticed any correlation between time of day and disengagement.*

CP: *I agree with Anthony. I also find that around big holidays that both qualitative response and patient response slows a bit. People find it harder to give us their scheduled or appointed time and tend to have more frequent emergencies or need to be re-scheduled a little more frequently than usual.*

Q: How do you avoid redundancy when programming the questionnaire?

AR: *We provide different visual formats to present the questions to respondents. For example, if there is a question that involves rating, we can present the question in few different visual formats -- a table with radio buttons, slider rating, button rating, etc.*

AH: *Switching up the way the respondent has to answer. Card sort on one question, sliding scale on another, rank sort on the next, etc.*

ME: *This varies. If there are several similar types of questions i.e, rating or rankings, mixing up the format as noted above is very helpful. Within a list of attribute ratings, however, client may intentionally ask the same question with different wording. This is in part to validate results but also to make sure respondents are paying attention.*

CP: *The options noted above are good for quant. We don't really mix it up in a screener for qual. It isn't needed.*

What is your primary specialty?
Select one

- ◯ Pulmonology
- ⦿ Infectious Disease
- ◯ Critical Care/ICU Medicine
- ◯ Cardiology
- ◯ Gastroenterology
- ◯ Neurology
- ◯ Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation
- ◯ Other

What is your primary specialty?
Select one

Pulmonology

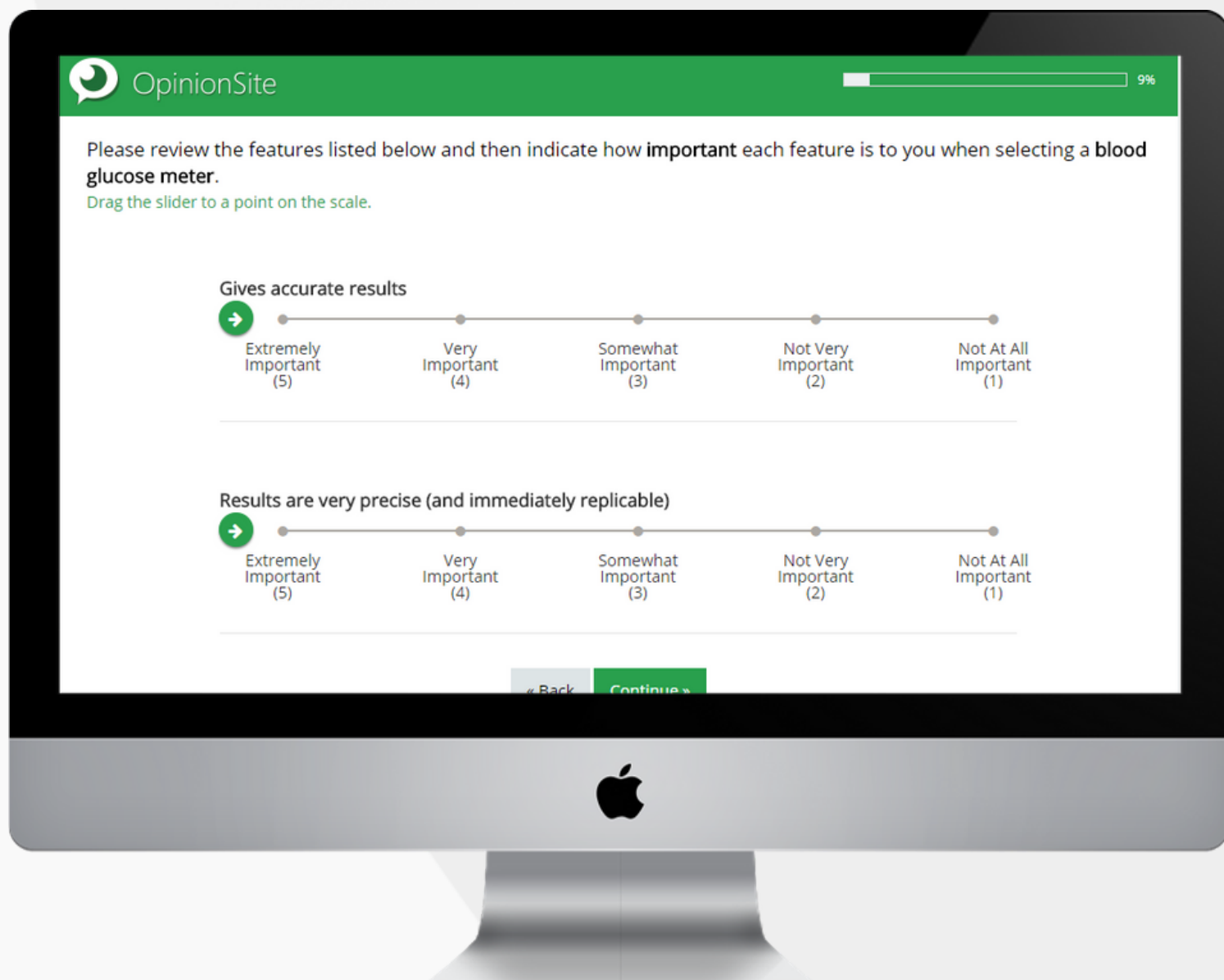Infectious Disease

Critical Care/ICU Medicine

Cardiology

Gastroenterology

Q: Talk a little bit about the importance of making a survey aesthetically pleasing.

AR: At SHC, we keep the survey page very simple and easy to read to avoid any distractions from the main focus – the content. Our surveys are screen-centered, and are designed for optimal user-experience, with the question on top, answer choices below, followed by the "next button". (Example below)

AH: The need for an optimized survey interface is crucial. Luckily, web design and the like is going through a minimalistic stage, so we don't have to be super flashy with the presentation, but nobody wants to look at bland, boring questions for 60 minutes. Small things such as animated sliding scales and card sorting questions really help retain a respondent's attention throughout a long study. We tend to see less "straight-lining" with studies where the presentation and design of similar questions are switched up as opposed to studies where the respondent thinks they're answering the same exact question multiple times in a row, because the question and design are so similar (we've received help desks where panelists honestly thought they were stuck in a loop).

CP: It needs to be clear and displayed neatly on the screen so they know in a glance how you want them to answer. Filling a screen with a lot of instruction and validation makes the survey tedious and difficult to go through.

Q: What is considered best practice when you receive an open-ended response that clearly lacks thought?

AH: *This usually depends on how the client reacts. If it's clearly gibberish or a poor response, SHC points it out and throws out the respondent's entire survey. We want our client's research to be thorough and accurate. If the client is happy with the answer, though, and there is no obvious or egregious negligence, the respondent's answers are left in the data. We usually go through and double-check the rest of their responses, though, to ensure they're a quality respondent.*

ME: *Our PM's review open end responses before sending data to client. When dealing with physicians, particularly unique specialties or topics, it sometimes hard to tell if their responses make sense since we are not experts in their field. It's a bit easier to flag on the consumer side. If the responses are true gibberish, we would remove the respondents on the consumer side but if a physician, review the rest of their responses. If the rest of their info looks okay, we would let the client know to review. If the rest of their info looks out of line, we would remove from the data.*

CP: *On the qualitative side, we do not select these respondents for scheduling purposes. We only select respondents with well-thought out responses.*

Q: What is industry standard regarding having "N/A" and "I don't know" as answer choices?

AR: *9 times out of 10, the client will include an option such as 'Do not know', 'None of the above', 'Not applicable' which excludes any of the given options. It is a simple and honest answer, and we don't want to compromise the integrity/quality of the data by forcing respondents to answer something they legitimately don't know/not aware of.*

AH: *If the client wishes to include this option, we do. It's really up to what the client is trying to accomplish. Sometimes "I don't know" is an honest answer and is better than a made-up number, because the respondent is forced to enter "their best guess".*

ME: *From a design standpoint, it does make sense to include a "don't know" option at most, if not all questions. A "don't know" is often a legit response and respondents need a way to move forward in the survey rather than either dropping off or entering an invalid response to keep going.*

CP: *This is a point where I disagree with the team. In online quant research- I would not allow 'don't know' unless it really makes sense to do so on the type of question we are talking about. On 5, 7, 9 and 11 point scaled type questions where you are providing means in your tables- it is best to not include a DK option and force them to choose something on the scale. On other types of questions that are more behavioral than opinion, then the 'don't know' option would make sense. The reporting team on the client's end should make these decisions based on how the data will end up being reported. It is all about the stats in quant data. Sometimes a valid response would be 'not applicable' as well.*

Q: What are some leading techniques that are utilized to prevent survey fatigue?

Speed Traps:

AR: *We can actually warn a respondent during the survey, or flag their survey silently in the data so that our client can be aware of who is speeding, and can make their most-informed decision.*

ME: *From a design standpoint, it does make sense to include a "don't know" option at most, if not all questions. A "don't know" is often a legit response and respondents need a way to move forward in the survey rather than either dropping off or entering an invalid response to keep going.*

Attention Checks:

ME: *We do employ some of these when needed i.e., a long list of 10+ attributes might include an item in the middle somewhere that says something like "Enter 3 as the answer for this statement" in order to determine that they are thoroughly reading the content. (Example below)*

Please review the features listed below and then indicate how **important** each feature is to you when selecting a blood glucose meter.

Please rate the importance of each feature on a scale from 5-1, where 5 means "Extremely Important" and 1 indicates "Not At All Important"

	Extremely Important (5)	Very Important (4)	Somewhat Important (3)	Not Very Important (2)	Not At All Important (1)
Easy to use	○	●	○	○	○
Gives accurate results	○	●	○	○	○
Is a brand I trust	○	●	○	○	○
Meter has an appealing design	○	●	○	○	○
Offers good customer service	○	●	○	○	○
Helps to identify trends and patterns in my blood glucose results	○	●	○	○	○
Meter readings can be easily accessed, analyzed and shared via mobile device (e.g., smartphone or tablet) or computer	○	●	○	○	○
Small blood sample required	○	●	○	○	○
Results are very precise (and immediately replicable)	○	●	○	○	○
Allows me to make informed decisions about diabetes management	○	●	○	○	○
Availability of test strips in benefits	○	●	○	○	○
Second chance attempt to apply more blood to the test strip if the first sample was not enough	○	●	○	○	○
For this row please select rating 3	○	●	○	○	○
Reliable – meters or strips do not fail or malfunction often	○	●	○	○	○
Cost of testing system (meter /strips) is affordable	○	●	○	○	○
Prompts me to mark results pre- and post- meal	○	●	○	○	○
Testing system (meter /strips) is covered by my health plan	○	●	○	○	○
Better technological features (e.g. bolus calculator, trends and pattern analysis, etc.)	○	●	○	○	○
Availability of test strips in DLO	○	●	○	○	○

Mental Breaks:

ME: *This is often used in surveys and with long surveys in particular. We provide a progress bar at the top of the survey screen that updates dynamically so that respondents can gauge remaining time needed. (Example provided)*
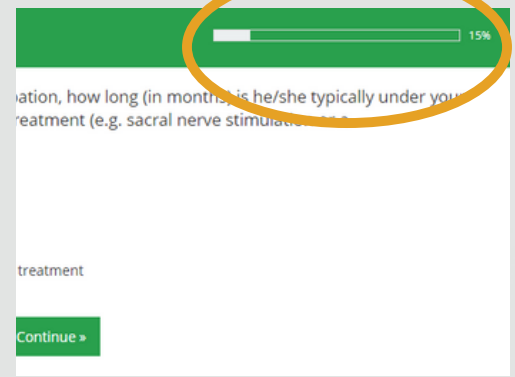
Utilize Different Formats:

AR: *We, as the experts in our field, determine optimal setup and can offer the client suggested format.*

ME: *This is determined by client based on question type (and to a lesser degree, time and budget needed to program)*

Straight Lining Precautions:

AR: *We have a script behind the scenes that will silently flag a respondent for straight lining for our clients to review and determine their outcome.*

ME: *Utilized frequently & include a flag in the data if a respondent "fails" this test so client can review data and decide whether or not to keep*

Split long surveys into a series of shorter survey:

AR: *I actually don't suggest splitting the surveys in multiple sittings – I think respondents should have one consistent mindset throughout one single survey.*

ME: *I think splitting the surveys in shorter series is often ideal, but not our call to make as the data collectors. Our clients would decide whether or not they want to ask everything at one (which is more common) or split into shorter surveys. As much talk as there is around survey fatigue and respondent cooperation rates, in the end budget & deadline are the driving factors for most clients.*

Provide "skip buttons":

AR: *Best practice/industry standard is not to include a "back" button or skip option, because that allows respondents to modify their answers, which can overall have a negative effect on survey flow.*

ME: *There is a "back" button on most screens so that a respondent can back up and revisit a question. Ideally, they are not allowed to go back too many questions otherwise it might impact the quality of the data.*

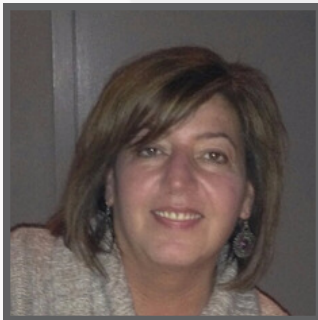**Q:** **What is the best piece of advice you would offer your clients to better streamline the survey process?**

Clients should ensure the survey content is clear, concise and easy to understand. Questionnaires should be error-free, written in a way to easy understand programming instructions and clear on any specific requirements.

Anel Radoncic
SVP, Programming Manager

Keep the LOI as short as possible (this helps with testing the questionnaire, testing the redirects, and keeping respondents engaged), vary the presentation and answering of questions. From a technical standpoint, eliminate as many variable pass-ins on entry links as possible. It takes a long time to populate on our end, slowing down the process, and it also asks for trouble. There are too many variables to keep track of, and it causes technical issues when they're not passed in as expected – I'm referring to things like city, state, first name, zip, segment, etc). Those don't all have to be passed in on an entry link. They can be loaded on the backend). These things drastically cut down setup and fielding time. Usually, by the time a study comes to my team, everyone is hot and bothered, and they're ready to go. It would be nice to make it a smoother process for everyone.

Anthony Howard
VP, Technical Operations

A few things I would say- keep the survey length down, questions should be concise and clear, vary the types of questions beings asked and the structure of the questions, be transparent about the expected LOI, respectful of respondent's time [i.e., offer an appropriate hono amount] and only ask questions that are relevant to the topic or for data analysis.

Mary Ellen Fasano
SVP, Project Services, Quant

I would also add that it is important to pre-test the quant survey and not only visualize the user experience, but talk to a respondent about their experience going through the survey to try and correct any issue before launching.

Christina Pereira
VP, Project Services, Qual