

To Game or not to Game

An investigation of the impact of survey visualisation and gamification, by Chrissie Wells

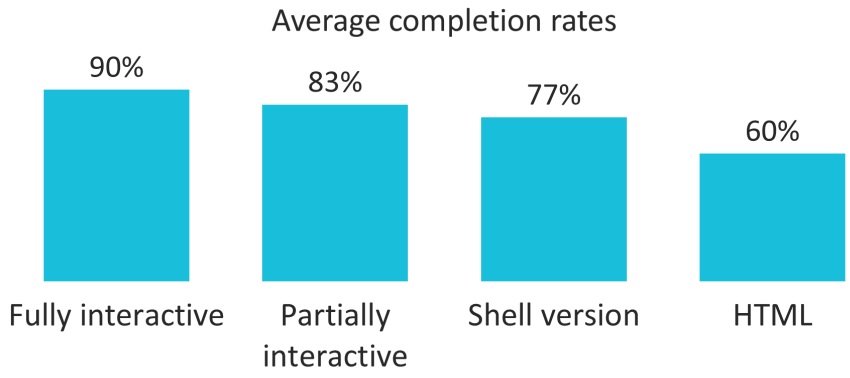


1. The issue

In recent years there's been a lot of attention in our industry on the need to engage online research participants to address declining response rates and the risk of poor quality data. The number of people available through online panels has plateaued, and we are seeing co-operation and completion rates plummet. This raises real concerns about the representativeness of survey participants who are recruited from online panels. The implication is bad data for clients, and there is no doubt that the reputation of online surveys is in decline as clients seek different sources of insight from observational approaches and greater use of "Big Data".

Gamification as a method of transforming the survey experience is not a new idea. There are companies who, with deserved success, specialise in gaming approaches – but it's fair to say that this remains something of a niche area. All the big panel companies we work with tell us that 9 out of 10 surveys they send out are not optimised for engagement, with the survey experience worlds apart from people's more typical experience online. And surveys sent out to clients' own customers are no better – indeed arguably worse as many are scripted by those who are not accustomed to put themselves in the shoes of those who complete their surveys.

The figures below from an experiment carried out by GMI and engage research show the drastic impact on survey completion rate of different levels of interaction in a survey.



This was published in 2008 and many similar experiments have followed. With such compelling evidence for the impact of more engaging surveys, why has the average survey changed so little in seven years?

I explore this important question in the conclusion to this paper - however survey context is important. There are some types of survey where there has been less focus on engagement thus far, specifically:

- B2B surveys
- Global surveys involving developing markets
- The need to provide accurate behavioural data rather than brand perceptions (which by their nature are less tangible)

To explore whether these represent true barriers to more engaging surveys, we experimented with a survey which is partly B2B, global in nature, and whose main objective is to provide detailed behavioural information. In addition, we believe this survey provides a particular challenge as the topic – purchase and usage of printer ink – is of little intrinsic interest to consumers and businesses.

2. Our experiment

Our experiment consisted, in summary, of an attempt to make an existing global tracking survey about printer ink, which has been in place for many years, more engaging and to measure the impact on both the data collected and the respondent experience.

The key features were:

- Carried out in three markets: UK, US and India
- Sample consisted of both consumers and businesses
- Three matched sample cells, with 100 interviews per cell per market

The **baseline cell** was based on the existing survey with questions presented conventionally.

The **visualised version** had each question presented in a clear and engaging manner, using visuals as much as possible and with some other features such as time limits on answers. Here is an example of the same question presented in a baseline and visualised way:

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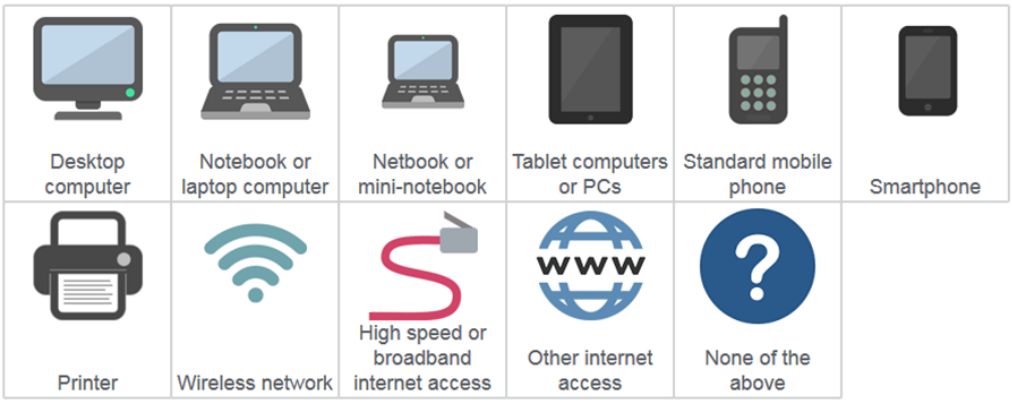
Thinking about technology products, which of the following do you or a family member own and use at home?

Please select all that apply.

☐	Desktop computer
☐	Notebook or laptop computer
☐	Netbook or mini-notebook (defined as a portable computer, with a 7" to 11" screen and smaller keyboard than traditional laptop computers). Examples include Asus Eee PC, Acer Aspire One and HP Mini 1000)
☐	Tablet computers or PCs (such as iPad or Samsung Galaxy Tab)
☐	Standard mobile phone
☐	Smartphone (such as an iPhone, Blackberry, Android phone etc.)
☐	A printer. Please include any multi-function (combined printer, copier, and scanner) devices and any stand-alone devices for printing photos from digital cameras.
☐	Wireless network
☐	High speed or broadband internet access (e.g. ISDN, ADSL, T1).
☐	Other internet access (e.g. dial -up over a conventional telephone line)
☐	None of the above

Which of the following are used at home and owned by you or a family member?

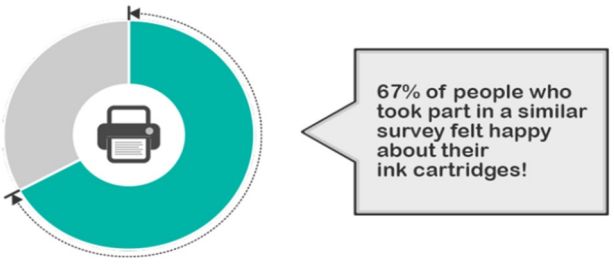
Please select all that apply.



The **gamified** survey was the same as the visualised version but with some additional quiz-type questions dropped in – here's an example:

Do you think most owners are happy with their ink cartridge?

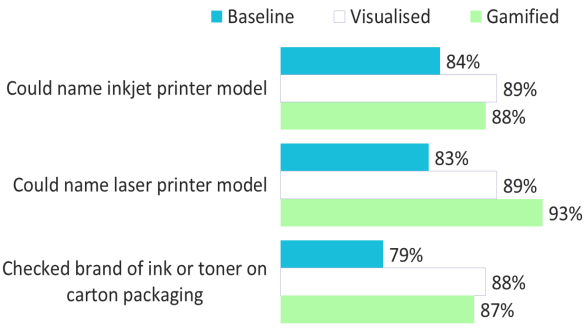




3. Better quality data

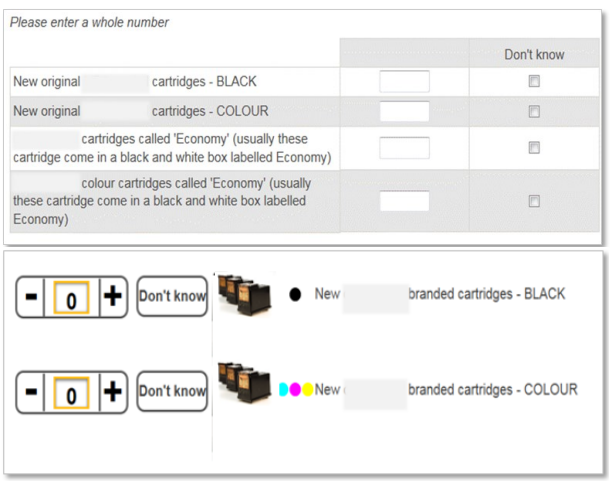
Throughout the survey we found that our visualised surveys gave us higher levels of participant co-operation, and hence better quality data than the baseline.

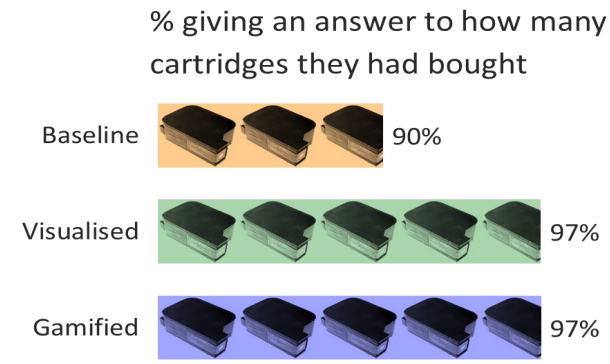
A couple of examples are in the chart below – we need to know what model of printer people own. Most people would have to go and look for this information – by making this a timed task and challenging them to do it as quickly as possible we got more valid answers rather than don't know responses. Likewise we asked people to go and find their toner packaging to check the brand – and again with a time challenge we got notably more co-operation.



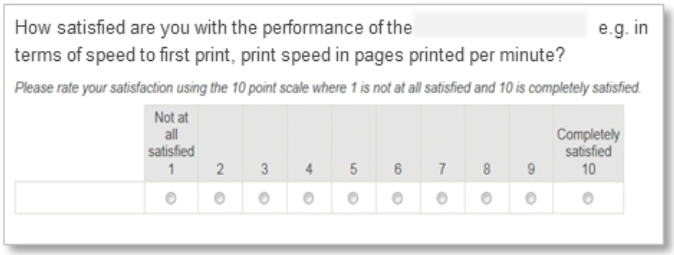
We also needed to know how many cartridges of different types had been bought – and by using a more visual approach with an incremental counter we got much fewer "don't knows" than with a conventional question.

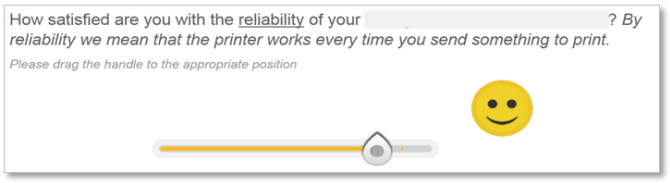
Visualising and incremental counter



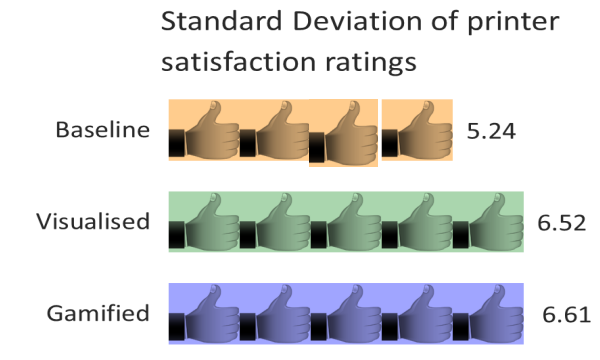


And here's an example of the impact on rating scales. We changed from a grid-type question to a sliding scale – the expression on the little yellow face changes as you drag it. As a result we got a better distribution of responses across the whole scale, as indicated by the standard deviation. The higher standard deviation means that people were using the rating scale more fully, giving us





better accuracy and more sensitive data.



Open-ends also gave us more in some markets. Here is a typical answer from the baseline survey in the UK explaining the satisfaction score given:

> ***"Has never let me down, so easy to use."***

And here is a typical answer from the gamified survey, giving us much more detailed insight:

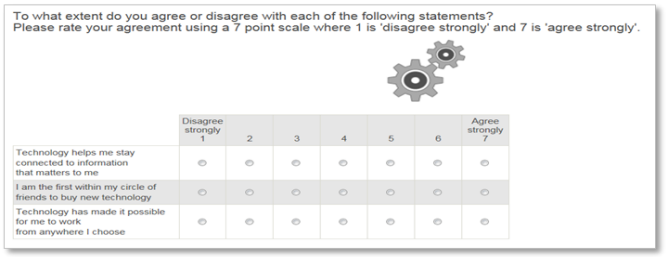
> ***"It doesn't use a lot of ink compared to my other printer. Prints about the same speed but doesn't take as long to process the print job so starts faster than my other printer."***

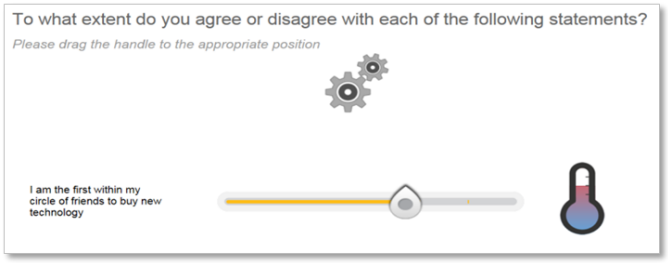
There's also evidence of more honest answers. In India, getting ink cartridges refilled rather than buying them new is widespread, but people know it's not what they are supposed to do. Here we can see that a more engaging survey leads to higher admission of behaviour that might be seen as unacceptable:

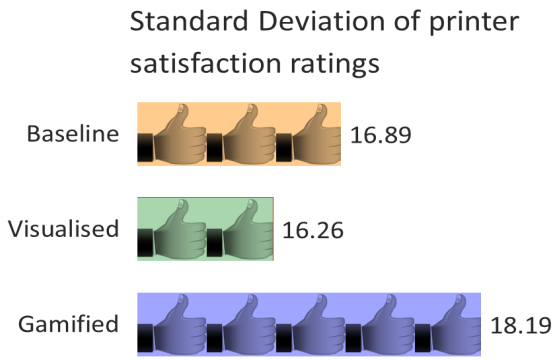
	Baseline	Visualised	Gamified
Buying printer brand cartridges	82%	71%	81%
Buying economy cartridges	33%	38%	32%
Buying cartridges refilled by shop	6%	25%	23%
Buying other brand cartridges	5%	3%	5%

The examples we've shown so far illustrate in particular the benefits of visualisation – but there were also instances of gamification having even more impact. The example below shows what happens to answers to attitude rating scales. The conventional question is a conventional grid with radio buttons. In the visualised version, the thermometer changes as the slider moves.

Visualising attitude scales







In this case visualisation alone doesn't have much impact on scale usage – but when the survey is also gamified we get a better spread of responses across the scale, In this case the question was exactly the same as in the visualised version, but the gamified context has led to better co-operation through more thoughtful responses.

4. Better respondent experience

More engaging surveys don't just give us better data, they also lead to a better experience for the respondent.

In our experiment at the end of the interview we asked respondents a few questions about their experience. On the metric of how much they enjoyed the survey we got higher scores for the visualised survey, and even higher from the

	Baseline	Visualised	Gamified
How much enjoyed filling in questionnaire (out of 10)	8.32	8.59	8.7

Respondents were invited to comment on their answers and some typical comments follow – in all three markets, and for both the visualised and gamified versions, respondents commented on how much different this was from their typical experience.

"I liked this survey a lot; I liked all the little pictures and scales. It was very new and different than any other survey I've taken!" (Visualised, US)

"I liked the facts thrown in. Some questionnaires can be tedious but this was quite fun!" (Gamified, UK)

"It was very enjoyable and interactive. Use of images indeed helped me understand the questions better" (Visualised, India)

And it's not just overall enjoyment – we got better scores on ease of understanding the questions, and the variety of question types was appreciated – especially within the gamified version.

And it can even make a longer survey acceptable. These findings from the UK show that the gamified survey took longer but there was no impact on the overall rating of survey length – and in fact the proportion who were unhappy with the length was lower for the gamified version.

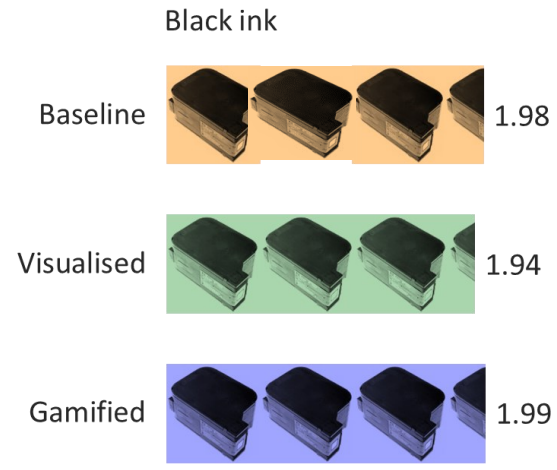
	Baseline	Visualised	Gamified
The variety of question types	8.39	8.5	8.7
The questions were easy to understand	8.87	8.95	9.04

5. Data continuity

One type of survey that's particularly resistant to being made more engaging is the tracker, because of concerns that the data collected won't be comparable. The survey which formed the basis of this experiment is a tracker, and accurate data is essential. It's the only way our client can measure their market share and huge investment decisions are made on the back of it.

In this case, other than encouraging more honest answers as we noted earlier, the key behavioural measures did NOT vary across the three surveys as the following example shows:

Average number bought



6. Market differences

The impact of both visualisation and gamification were seen across all three markets, however we did see some differences. Overall we found less impact from visualisation and from gamification in India than in the other two markets. We'd put this down at least partly to less burnout from taking more surveys. The participants in India had a lower tenure on the panel, and also had done far fewer surveys than in the other two markets so had had less of an opportunity to become fatigued by unengaging surveys.

We saw slightly more of an impact, particularly of gamification, in the UK rather than the US. This is a bit harder to explain given that both sets of participants were equally experienced. Perhaps here in the UK we have a more light-hearted culture, or perhaps there was something a bit more British in style about the survey wording and quiz questions.

7. Conclusions

There's no doubt that survey visualisation with all the other simple tricks, gives us better data and our participants a better experience. This experiment supports a huge body of evidence of that, and shows that it is equally valid for all types of survey. So what's preventing these principles being adopted more widely?

One influence is that we have got out of the habit of putting ourselves in our respondent's shoes. We must stop believing that everyone is as interested in our category as we are, and will happily spend 20 minutes or more filling out a lot of grey grids on the topic.

Furthermore, the research industry has been its own worst enemy in recent years. We've taught our clients that online research is cheap and quick, and in the search for ever cheaper, ever quicker, we've lost the ability to really think about what we are doing. Fortunately however, if we really get behind this new approach there's no reason why it should cost a lot more, nor take much longer than a standard survey.

When it comes to trackers we can't dismiss the continuity issue completely. There is always the possibility of data discontinuity when any aspect of tracker methodology is changed. Outside of this experiment, we have seen the impact of changes in question wording on responses – particularly to attitudinal questions. However that's not sufficient reason to continue with bad practice. Nothing in business lasts forever. Over time many trackers migrated from face-to-face interviewing to telephone, and then from telephone to online. In the same way trackers should change from boring to engaging survey design – calibration is always an option for those for whom continuity is fundamental.

It's fair to say that from this particular experiment the case for gamification is less obvious. However, gamification can be taken a lot further than we did in this case - in fairness we might describe our approach as gamification "lite" version. A fully gamified survey can be made more integral to the survey theme, with gaming rewards being linked to full and thoughtful answers – and there's plenty of evidence that this can be highly impactful.

We've seen that gamification impacts more on enjoyment and engagement in more "burnt out" markets and, we suspect, in over-researched categories. Engagement will certainly become more important the more surveys people take, and there is a growing need to be ever more different, ever more creative rather than relying on visualisation alone. The need for gamification can only increase.

There's a hint from our experiment that we might need to tailor gamification to different cultures, one indication that it's trickier to do.

So gamification faces the same barriers as visualisation, but in addition we are only just starting to understand how best to go about it and exactly what will and will not work in different situations. It's important to keep on experimenting and not forget that very useful tool that's too much overlooked these days – namely the pilot survey.

In the meantime we've taken a step-change to the way we carry out online research. Visualised and engaging surveys are the norm for us, not an additional option. So that we can do this within the cost and time parameters that the market expects, we've developed a suite of question types that we know will work and that can quickly be adapted to any specific survey context.

We've also made all of our surveys method-neutral so that they will work on any type of device.

Finally we're recognising that even with better surveys we need to be respectful of respondents' time, so we are making every effort that each survey is not a minute longer than it needs to be.

We urge all those involved in carrying out or using online research to do the same – for the sake of our industry as well as yourselves.

We would like to acknowledge the help of Lightspeed GMI in designing and carrying out our experimental survey

If you want to find out more about how market research can help you genuinely connect with your customers please get in touch.

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