

GUIDELINE ON INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION IN MARKET AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

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Background

Market and social research companies sometimes offer an incentive to participants who take part in a research project. This may take various forms, for example cash or a gift given at the time of interview or participation in a prize draw on completion of fieldwork.

This guideline reviews researchers' responsibilities when offering an incentive to participants. It covers all forms of research, whether commercial or social, with individuals, businesses or other organisations.

Incentives and the AMSRS Code of Professional Behaviour

Researchers must ensure that any incentive they offer complies with the AMSRS Code of Professional Behaviour (the Code). Throughout this guideline, reference is made to any applicable Rule of the Code with which a researcher needs to comply.

Legislative requirements

The incentive must comply with any relevant legislation. (Rule 1) For example, if the incentive being offered is alcohol, the researcher must first check that all participants are aged 18 years or over.

If the incentive involves any element of chance - eg participants' names will be selected at random for a prize draw - then it is deemed to be a trade promotion lottery and there are regulatory requirements that must be followed. For example, a permit may be required or certain goods may not be allowed as prizes.

Note that each state and territory in Australia has different regulatory requirements for trade promotion lotteries. These are detailed in the AMSRS fact sheet 'Market and social research and trade promotion lotteries'.

What can be offered as an incentive?

The client's products or services, or vouchers for them, must not be used as an incentive or as the prize in a prize draw as this provides a selling opportunity for the client from the research project. This contravenes the Code as the research could then be seen to be associated with the marketing of a client's products or services. Rule 9 states that market and social research must be clearly distinguished and separated from any marketing activity directed at individual participants.

Handing out a client's product samples or other materials after a project (for example, giving leftover products to participants after a group discussion) is also inappropriate, as it could be seen as commercial activity on behalf of the client.

The exceptions to this are when participants are:

- members of an ongoing panel, where rewards and incentives are often agreed though the terms and conditions of the panel or
- members of an ongoing community, recruited because of a specific interest or behaviour; for example supporters of a sports club or arts organisation, new mothers or frequent travellers. In this case, incentives linked to the reason for participation may be appropriate, as they relate to the interest or behaviour and may be anticipated by participants. The incentive, however, should be proportionate and clearly represented as a gift for participation and not a direct marketing approach.

The incentive must not lead to any perceived harm or adverse consequences to the participant. (Rule 8) For example, if the incentive is a price discount on a product and the participant has to spend more money to get the benefit, the participant may be seen as being adversely affected. If participants are offered a choice of incentive, then all incentive options should be of equal value, to avoid any adverse affect to the participant by their choice.

Incentives should be proportionate to the project being undertaken, so they cannot be seen as a form of inducement or bribe. For example, a longer interview or fieldwork that takes several days may require a higher value incentive.

They should also be appropriate for the participants in the project. Particular care must be taken when determining what incentives to use for children and young people. If the permission of a parent or responsible adult is being sought for the interview, then they should be told what the incentive will be.

Is an incentive appropriate?

The offer of an incentive is not appropriate for some types of participant, for ethical or legal reasons: for example, some business or government representatives. Some organisations may have regulations forbidding the receipt of gifts by employees.

What does the participant need to know?

The participant must not be misled in any way when being offered the incentive. (Rule 2) Researchers should fully inform participants about the incentives associated with a research project, including:

- The exact nature of the incentive
- When they will receive the incentive
- Who will give out the incentive (the researcher, the client or a third party)
- Whether any conditions are attached to receiving the incentive.

Participant anonymity

A participant's anonymity must not be compromised as a result of receiving the incentive. (Rule 10) For example, if they have to provide personal details in order to obtain the incentive, these should be held securely by the researcher. If the client is handing out the incentive, the details must not be passed on to the client without permission from participants.

Researchers must ensure that the client does not use these personal details for any other purpose.

Fieldwork conducted overseas

If the research project is being conducted in several countries, researchers must ensure that any local laws are followed when deciding on what incentive to use. The incentive should also be culturally appropriate.

In summary

When choosing an incentive for participants in a market or social research project, researchers must ensure that they are following the Code and that any incentives are appropriate and proportionate for the project being undertaken.