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Sunshine Act shines light on need for creativity in survey incentives, says Raghavan

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US— Researchers may have dodged a bullet with the passing of the Physician Payment Sunshine Act, but one pharma sector specialist worries that survey payments to doctors will become an issue again if the industry doesn't pursue smarter approaches to incentives.

Madhunika Raghavan, a senior vice president at Market Probe, warns that ever-increasing cash incentives will ultimately draw the attention of lawmakers who seek to minimise any undue influence drugs companies and medical device manufacturers have on doctors purchasing decisions.

"I have been in the business for a number of years now," says Raghavan, "and I have only seen incentives go one way. They started out as modest payments, but have gone up. Once we start to pay hundreds of dollars [per interview] incentives will come under scrutiny again."

The federal Sunshine Act, which was [signed into law last week](#) as part of President Barack Obama's healthcare reform package, calls for mandatory reporting of payments made by drugs companies and medical device manufacturers to doctors. Initially it threatened to include survey incentives, but industry lobbying efforts helped secure an amendment to the bill that excluded thank you payments for taking part in surveys provided the company sponsoring the research is unaware of the respondents' identity.

Raghavan believes the industry "sure came close to a cliff" with the Sunshine Act. [Research she co-authored last year](#) suggested that almost one third of physicians would have been put off participating in market research studies had the law passed in its original form.

According to the research 91% of doctors surveyed listed incentives or honoraria as one of the main reasons they take part in MR studies – but that was alongside a desire to be 'in the know', to better understand patient needs and because they enjoy contributing ideas. In Raghavan's view, it is high time the industry came together to consider ways of capitalising on these alternative means for encouraging survey participation.

"We learned from our survey that there could be other ways to motivate doctors – sure, honoraria in cash is most preferred, but there was a willingness to consider other options, should the language in the Sunshine Act have prevailed," she says.

One popular alternative to cash payments presented in the survey was charitable donations. Another approach, tested by Market Probe itself, is to feed back snippets of topline data to respondents so they can understand where their views sit in comparison to their peers. "I do not think that we can completely do away with cash incentives," says Raghavan, "but this offers an opportunity to explore more creative ways to encourage participation in this finite, valuable population."



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