



The Pros and Cons of Different Survey Methodologies (Part 1)

Which Method is the Right Method?

Just like the carpenter who maintains a chest filled with tools designed to accomplish specific tasks, the survey researcher also maintains an assortment of data collection tools that are selected on the basis of particular project requirements and available resources. There are four primary survey methodologies used today for collecting public opinion. They are face-to-face interviews, mailed questionnaires, telephone surveys, and internet surveys. In this month's issue we will take a look at two data collection techniques - face-to-face interviews and mailed questionnaires - and examine a few of the advantages and disadvantages of each methodology. In next month's issue we will focus on telephone and internet surveys.

Prior to the 1970s, face-to-face interviewing was the most common means for collecting survey data and the methodology with the most credibility. Here, a trained interviewer travels to the home of a randomly selected respondent, sits in the family's living room, asks the survey questions and records the responses. The strength of this data collection method is the one-on-one interaction between interviewer and respondent. The interviewer can pick up on facial expressions and other reactions to survey questions. It is possible for the interviewer to determine whether or not the respondent understands the questions being asked. Face-to-face interviews also allow for the use of props, samples and other visual cues.

In addition, this method of collecting survey data is well suited for populations where no lists exist and for groups that are not as likely to willingly or accurately respond to other survey types.

The greatest obstacles to face-to-face interviews, however, are their time and cost. The physical movement from one respondent to another, perhaps blocks or even miles away from each other, can result in just a few completed interviews per day. Coupled with time, the labor cost per completed interview often places limitations on the size of the survey sample. Too often with face-to-face surveys there is a temptation to scale back the number of interviews to control the study's cost and time needs, jeopardizing the quality of the data.

Advances in technology shifted the preferred method of collecting survey data from interviews to mailed questionnaires. Mechanization of the mailing process, through the use of computerized lists and mass mail merging, allowed for wide distribution to a diverse cross-section of recipients as well as to specific demographic segments of the population. Mailed questionnaires foster another advantage not present with face-to-face interviews - privacy. Rather than providing answers to an interviewer, the survey respondent records his or her attitudes and opinions directly onto the survey form. The form can also be completed at a time convenient to the respondent.

All survey research projects strive to achieve a high response rate. This is normally accomplished through the use of multiple contacts among study participants. With mailed surveys, though, these follow-up procedures add significantly to the project's timeline due to the slow nature of mail delivery and return. Four to five contacts via mail can result in up to six weeks allocated for survey field time. Another disadvantage of mailed questionnaires is the cost associated with materials, printing and postage. Moreover, considerable time and effort go into manually assembling survey packets and entering the survey data once the questionnaires are returned. (Fortunately, NCDOT now has the capability to use scannable survey forms, eliminating much of the data entry task.)

Face-to-face interviews and mailed questionnaires have legitimate uses today and are utilized quite extensively. However, they also have some drawbacks - primarily related to time and cost. Part 2 of this article will appear next month and will examine the two most glamorous methods of data collection - telephone and internet surveys.

Survey Tip

When considering a survey, take the T.E.A.M. approach to determine the best methodology to use. The time available to conduct the project might eliminate some methods from further consideration. The effort necessary to use one method over another may not be within the boundaries of available resources. The access of the study population may be limited (e.g., no access to a computer for internet surveys). The money budgeted for a survey often prohibits the more costly forms of data collection.

Did you know...

Raisin Bran is the most popular breakfast cereal for American adults, followed closely by Cheerios. Raisin Bran was favored by 15% of adults in the nationwide survey, edging out Cheerios with 13%. Both outdistanced other cereals, including Frosted Mini Wheats (8%), Special K (7%), Honey Bunches of Oats (7%), Honey Nut Cheerios (6%), and Frosted Flakes (5%).

Age plays a role in cereal preference. Among respondents under the age of 30, Cinnamon Toast Crunch sits atop the list (11%), while American seniors (age 65 and above) favor Raisin Bran over all other breakfast cereals (21%).

Source: Zogby International

According to a recent car buying survey, consumers simply prefer low retail pricing on vehicles over five incentive-based programs. The incentive programs tested were zero percent financing, three-year lower gas price guarantee, employee discount pricing for everyone, cash back rebates, and "no haggle" pricing.

To determine consumer preferences, the survey compared "lower retail pricing" with the five types of incentives in head-to-head trials.

Source: Maritz Research

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