

Virtual Surveys?

As the technology behind web-based surveys and online virtual communities continues to march forward, it may be only a matter of time before the two forces come together as one. Is the virtual world the new age of data collection?

The modern era of survey research has existed for only about the past fifty years or so. During this time the methods used to collect public opinion data have transitioned from costly and time consuming face-to-face interviews, to mailing out paper questionnaires, then to the use of telephone interviewing and finally to today's heavy reliance on web-based surveys via the Internet. What is on the horizon for the next major data collection technique? There are any number of theories and best guesses, but perhaps one of the more intriguing ideas lies within the confines of the online virtual world.

According to Second Life, regarded as the most serious of the online virtual communities, the number of "residents" in its community has surpassed 8.5 million people worldwide. What these virtual communities allow is for us to create our own persona in the virtual world. But beyond this creation of our other self, there is also the ability to design all of the other aspects and dimensions that exist in the "real" world - buildings, neighborhoods, businesses, brands, and on and on. The motto trumpeted by Second Life, "Your World. Your Imagination" rings true for those choosing to enter into this alternate domain.

Businesses today, including those in the market and opinion research fields, are scrambling to see how they fit into a world of virtual commerce. The broad implication is that the virtual world may well allow for the trial and testing of new concepts and ideas, the capture of measurable market preferences, and the collection of valid and reliable public opinion.

What makes a virtual community so appealing to those with a product or service to market is the fact that consumers in the online virtual world are an acknowledged interactive crowd. If a "real" apparel manufacturer wants to test market a new line of clothing, for example, then setting up a virtual shop in a virtual mall could permit an assessment to be made regarding the line's acceptance by customers.

Imagine the potential for the time and cost savings realized by this method of collecting information instead of through more traditional (i.e., costly and time consuming) methods.

The attraction of virtual communities to survey researchers is the prospect of overcoming two important challenges - low response rates and escalating data collection costs - while still obtaining quality data. Because participants in the online virtual realm stand ready to be actively engaged in the experience, it appears reasonable that they will be highly receptive to expressing their thoughts, ideas, attitudes, and opinions.

Moreover, the rising costs for survey materials, printing, postage, and telephone toll charges frequently result in many projects being scaled back or, worse, not being conducted at all. Launching a survey directly into the virtual world via a web-based data collection platform offers an encouraging possibility for controlling the negative effects of high costs and low response rates inherent in many surveys.

But, before anyone gets too excited about the use of surveys in a parallel universe, it is necessary to consider the limitations and potential for survey bias using this data collection method. When a person decides to enter the online virtual world with a persona, how alike or different are the two? Some early research suggests that about one-half of those people taking part in online virtual communities create a close approximation of who they are in the real world, while the other half create a new persona. Because the virtual world is something of a fantasyland (we can be anyone we want to be), will the gathered responses reflect a creator's true attitude, an attitude that matches the feelings of the new persona, or nothing more than a "make it up as you go" attitude?

Stay tuned. As recently as a dozen years ago the Internet was largely a novelty to most people, but look at what it has become. Perhaps virtual communities will follow a similar path.

From the Field...

A summary of recent survey findings from across the country.

More than one-half of Americans recently surveyed (54%) cited identity theft/fraud as their biggest financial concern. This was followed by charges issued by banks for going over a limit (12%), unhelpful service centers (10%), unhelpful or rude tellers (9%), bureaucracy (8%) and expensive ATM charges (6%).

Source: *Opinion Research Corp.*

Coca-Cola holds the top spot this year as America's "best brand." Sony, which had held the top position for the past seven years, dropped to second. Rounding out the top five brands are Toyota, Dell, and Ford.

Source: *Harris Interactive*

Over the past two decades, outdoor grilling in the U.S. has nearly doubled. In 1985, 17% of households used their grill at least once during an average two-week period. That figure has now climbed to 32%. Summer remains the most popular grilling season, while fall, spring, and winter grilling have each grown by about 5% during the past ten years.

Source: *NPD Group*

A majority of Americans (58%) believe that political bias by college professors is a serious problem, with 39% saying it is a very serious problem. Whether or not political bias is viewed as a problem depends largely on a respondent's philosophy. While 91% of very conservative U.S. adults said bias is a serious problem, just 3% of liberals agreed. College campuses have long been cited by conservatives as havens for liberal thinking.

Source: *Zogby Interactive*