



Web Surveys

A Quick Study in Typology

Last month's issue of *The Pulse* examined web-based surveys as a data collection method and included some of the strengths and limitations of this emerging research tool. In this month's edition, let's review four types of web-based surveys that are frequently used today and see how they measure up.

For most anyone who has surfed the web, there is some familiarity with surveys that are billed as the *question of the day* or a *webpoll*. They can be found at many web sites but are often seen at the sites of web-based media outlets and news organizations. Their purpose is mainly for entertainment and to drive online users to the web site of their sponsors. Respondents cast their vote, usually on a current topic of interest, and then view the overall results. With this type of web survey there is no pretense that the results are representative of the attitudes of the general public, and they tend to present no particular threats to legitimate web-based studies.

Volunteer panels represent a second type of web-based survey that is common today. Survey organizations extend an open invitation to online users to be a part of their ongoing panel of survey respondents. These organizations cast a wide net to recruit a large number of people. The sheer volume of respondents and the collection of demographic data give the impression that a valid survey has been conducted. But simply polling in bulk does not legitimize a survey. The problem lies in the inability to know the universe of participants, leaving the consumer of the data to make assumptions about who has taken part in the survey. Do the results span the realm of all characteristics of the population or did only computer savvy people participate?

The two types of web-based surveys described above are considered to be non-probability studies, so labeled because participation is through self-selection and members of the population of interest have an unknown probability of inclusion. Placing reliance in their results can be a gamble. On the other hand, the following two forms of web-based studies are considered to be probability surveys and offer a greater degree of confidence in their findings.

Web surveys that are conducted from a list of known web users or individuals with access to the Internet (i.e., students, employees, members of an organization) are increasingly being deployed. Because their sampling source is from a specialized population, these surveys provide a high level of assurance that coverage and sampling problems can be accounted for properly. The likelihood of being selected to participate is known, the error due to non-response can be quantified, and access can be controlled to prevent multiple completions by the same respondent.

The fourth type of web survey used frequently today provides a web option as part of a broader mixed-mode survey approach. Under this scenario, respondents may choose the method they prefer from among telephone, mail or Internet data collection modes when initially invited to participate. Potential respondents are randomly sampled from within the target population using traditional selection techniques. Individuals with a computer and access to the Internet may use the web alternative, while those without still have a way to participate through either mail or telephone. The issues of coverage and sampling are alleviated by virtue of the multiple-mode approach - or stated another way, the shortcomings of one data collection method are compensated for by the positive attributes of the other methods.

Web surveys are still in the adolescent stage of development. They offer great promise with regard to lowering survey research costs, quickening the pace of data collection, and improving respondent involvement in the survey process. But until they have had a little more time to mature, it is best to know the type of web survey being conducted before relying totally on its findings.

Survey Tip

Until the proportion of household computers and Internet access rivals the level of the telephone, web-based surveys among non-specialized populations should be used as part of a mixed-mode approach. Mixing the modes of telephone, mail, and Internet, for example, will accomplish several critical tasks. It will allow those with Internet access the opportunity to respond via the web, it provides people with no Internet access the chance to participate, it will reduce the cost of calling or mailing materials to the entire sample, and it will increase the overall survey response rate.

Did you know...

The use of business-related clichés by managers can alienate staff and leave bosses looking weak according to a recent survey conducted by YouGov. The survey, conducted among 2,900 managers and workers, found that phrases such as “heads up” and “singing from the same sheet of music” can lead to management/staff mistrust.

Forty-two percent of the survey participants believe clichés cause misunderstanding about the roles and responsibilities of workers, while nearly 40% think clichés point to a lack of confidence on the part of bosses. Twenty percent of those questioned believe managers who use business clichés are not trustworthy or are trying to cover-up something. Fifty-five percent of bosses believe business clichés are harmless.

Nearly 40% of the respondents in the survey believe that clichés such as “getting our ducks in a row” and “thinking outside the box” are on the rise. Almost two-thirds of the respondents (60%) would prefer no business clichés at work.

Source: YouGov

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