



The Pros and Cons of Different Survey Methodologies (Part 2)

Which Method is the Right Method?

Last month's issue examined a few of the inherent strengths and weaknesses of two of the four most common types of surveys - face-to-face interviews and mailed questionnaires. This month we will explore the other two popular forms of data collection - telephone and internet surveys.

Not long after mailed questionnaires emerged as a viable method for collecting survey data in the 1970s, telephone surveying began to gain acceptance as a reliable means to gather public opinion. As the number of households with a private telephone line escalated to new highs, market researchers saw an opportunity for efficient and widespread coverage of the population by wire. They were attracted to the potential for quick turnaround in obtaining survey data. Two to four days of data collection by phone was and remains a distinct advantage over the several weeks needed for mail surveys (and face-to-face interviewing).

Another highlight of telephone surveys that still exists today is that this method places a trained interviewer back into the data collection process, reminiscent of the days of face-to-face interviews. If a question is not clearly understood by the respondent, the interviewer can clarify. Similarly, if the answer given by the respondent is not clear, the interviewer can ask for elaboration.

The largest proportion of surveys conducted today are by telephone. Yet, while telephone surveys are popular and offer speed and interaction between respondent and interviewer, this data collection method is experiencing challenges. Many households today have multiple phone lines coming into the home. This creates a sampling dilemma in that all households no longer have approximately the same probability of being contacted. Add to this the increasing mobility of our society and the proliferation of cell phones and pagers. Reaching people at home on a landline telephone through random digit dialing is quite a bit different now than it has been over the past few decades.

Market researchers, not content to rely solely on past techniques, have turned to the new medium of the internet for collecting survey data. The most significant characteristic of internet polling is simply that it is *fast*. Once the survey questions have been developed, the survey is relatively easy to assemble and distribute. A questionnaire can be distributed to an internet panel today and by tomorrow the data collection phase can be wrapping up.

Unlike other methods of data collection, the size of an internet study's sample is not dictated by a budget. In fact, many would argue against sending the survey only to a sample. They would advocate distributing the questionnaire to the entire population being studied. Moreover, costly and time consuming manual data entry is eliminated with internet surveys. Respondents conduct their own data entry as they complete the form.

In the fairly short lifespan of internet surveying, however, the response rate yield has been lower across the board than telephone and mailed surveys. Research reveals this is due to several factors. First, the medium is still new so full acceptance has yet to take hold. Second, questions arise concerning the issues of anonymity, privacy of information given and overall security. And third, invitations to participate in an internet survey traditionally arrive via e-mail. These e-mail communications compete with all other e-mail an individual receives. Unfortunately, they are often sent to the recycle bin, set aside for later (eventually to be tossed out) or they are viewed as "spam" and immediately deleted.

The future foretells that telephone surveys will work through the challenges posed by multiple lines, mobility and cell phones and will continue to be popular. Internet surveys will experience strong growth and will evolve beyond the current limits of the technology.

Survey Tip

Self administered surveys (mail and internet) and interviewer administered surveys (face-to-face interviews and telephone) each call for special considerations for success. Self administered surveys require complete clarity in the questions so that they are fully understood by respondents. They should also incorporate a format that is inviting and motivates the respondents to reply.

Interviewer administered surveys are less volatile regarding the formatting and appearance in that respondents will not see the form. Still, they require that the interviewer "guide" respondents through the process of answering the questions, using prompts to signal various stages of completion.

Did you know...

With cold and flu season upon us, dirty or unwashed hands are a major source for passing infection. A nationwide telephone survey of 1,013 U.S. adults conducted for the American Society for Microbiology and the Soap and Detergent Association found that those claiming to always wash their hands before or after various activities were:

After public restroom visits	91%
After home restroom visits	83%
Before handling/eating food	77%
After changing a diaper	73%
After petting a dog or cat	42%
After coughing or sneezing	32%
After handling money	21%

Follow-up observational studies conducted in four U.S. cities at six public attractions, however, suggest that the proportion of adults who *claim* to always wash their hands before or after various activities is likely higher than the number who *actually* do. This is based on the difference between claimed and actual hand washing observed in public restrooms.

Source: Harris Interactive

Comments, suggestions and questions related to survey research should be directed to Doug Cox - NCDOT Market Research Manager at (919)733-2083.