



Web Surveys

Is this the new trend in data collection?

Five decades ago when the field of survey research was still in its infancy, conducting surveys was a matter of knocking on doors to do face-to-face interviews. The prosperity of the country during the 1950s and early 1960s led to more and more households acquiring a telephone. Researchers jumped at this opportunity to collect survey data faster and at less cost. Then, with the advent of business computing, mailed surveys that incorporated the merging of household database information onto all mailable materials gained prominence. Today, a new data collection strategy is shifting the focus of surveys to the Internet. Are web-based surveys reliable in producing accurate survey results? That depends.

The rapid growth of web surveys in the past couple of years suggests that they may soon overtake the more traditional survey methods of telephone and mail. Web surveys harness the power of speed and wide distribution. They open the possibility of presenting the respondent with more than just questions - they can utilize images, clips, and other multi-media content to enhance the experience and achieve more thorough research testing and measurement. And the cost to administer this form of survey is typically lower than other methods, given the same level of effort.

Yet, as with most things, there is another side to the story. The ease in which web surveys can be carried out is making it increasingly difficult to tell the good surveys from the bad. Well designed web surveys and those that have a known level of accuracy are at risk of being crowded out by the mass of web surveys that are poorly conceived and constructed. Inferior web surveys are not of lesser quality solely on the basis of what and how they ask their questions, however. One of the largest threats to web surveys is the issue of coverage - the extent to which those people we are interested in have a computer and access to the Internet. The penetration rate of individuals and households with Internet access is only predicted to be 50% to 75% - no one knows for sure. The result is data that may not be representative of the population of interest.

The other major concern with web surveys is the ability to sample. Probability sampling involves working from a definable sampling frame where each member has a known and non-zero chance of being included in the study. There are no lists that contain everyone with an e-mail account or with access to the web. Consequently, it is not possible to quantify a person's likelihood of being selected to participate in a web survey. If the probability is not known, it is not possible to say that the results represent the attitudes and opinions of the study population. All that is known are the attitudes and opinions of the individuals taking part in that particular web survey.

In spite of the concerns with coverage and sampling, web surveys provide a strong means for collecting data when working from a well defined population, such as a company's employee roster (NCDOT, for example), a university's list of students, or a membership list for a national organization. In these cases, coverage is not an issue because all members of the population are known and are accessible via the web, and sampling is not a concern because it is possible to quantify the probability of being selected to participate.

The highest quality web-based surveys that are being conducted today generally restrict themselves to these well defined populations where the level of accuracy can be determined. Web surveys conducted here at NCDOT among employees with Internet access are an example. Conversely, web surveys that attempt to survey broad populations cannot be considered representative, at least not today.

The future for web surveys is bright and will remain vibrant. New techniques for overcoming problem areas such as coverage and sampling will be developed as research continues and as more people go online. Perhaps in the not too distant future our e-mail address will identify us in much the same way as our telephone number and our home address do. That will make for even better quality results through web surveys.

Survey Tip

One of the most important points to keep in mind about web-based surveys is that they are **self-administered** surveys. Respondents are not being led through the process by an interviewer. Instead, they are entirely on their own.

The implication here is that the questionnaire must be clear in the questions that it asks and the instructions it provides. Visual cues are a critical component as a substitute for a live interviewer. Logic issues, such as question skip patterns, must also be part of the planning and development phase.

Did you know...

As the holiday season approaches, the stress level for many people can be expected to climb. A recent online survey by Harris Interactive identifies some of the major sources of stress we encounter in our daily lives.

The two areas that tend to contribute most dramatically to stress are money issues and health. Rising prices (74%), concerns about money for emergencies (53%), and not having enough money for basic necessities (36%) were prominently cited by the 2,747 respondents taking part in the survey.

Having trouble sleeping (53%), concerns about personal health (43%), and the illness of a family member (36%) also appeared as top ten stress producers.

A fairly substantial number of respondents also indicated that having too many things to do (56%), having too much information to process (33%), feeling lonely (29%), and problems at work (24%) increase their stress levels.

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.