

The skinny on online research.

An increasing number of users of marketing research are turning to online surveys. There are many advantages to this technique. But it is important to put this tool into the proper perspective so that its use does not lead to poor decision-making.

Researchers and users of marketing research have become increasingly concerned about the efficiency and statistical validity of telephone interviewing.

The increasing use of telephone answering and screening devices and ill will created by telemarketers make it harder for researchers to reach respondents. Poorly designed interviews, push polls and ill-mannered interviewers have created an environment in which a public that was once anxious to share its “two cents” now sees marketing research as a nuisance.

Some clients see these factors as merely a cost consideration. Researchers share this concern, but worry even more about the diminished the quality of survey samples.

The next big thing.

Almost as soon as online communications became commercialized, some researchers and their clients jumped on the digital bandwagon to replace telephone and more costly in-home interviewing with electronic interviewing. Despite wildly biased and opportunistic samples, they declared the online medium to be the next big thing in research.

Early applications took the form of e-mail questionnaires, round-robin online focus groups and listservs. Later on, “chat” technology brought online discussion groups into real time. More recent software advances have substantially enhanced the ability to create more

efficient, flexible and user-friendly online surveys.

Today, more and more researcher users are migrating from telephone to online. The allure is obvious. The number of Americans who are “wired” is growing by leaps and bounds. Switching to online surveys can allow some clients to save significant amounts of expense. And the appeal of the immediacy of looking at survey results in the online environment is unquestionably seductive.

And to be sure, there are situations where online surveys are an excellent tool.

Not so fast, buddy.

But some of the same concerns that bothered researchers when online research began to be used continue to be relevant and worthy of consideration.

The whole premise of survey research is that a proper random sample will reveal an accurate and statistically valid reflection of the larger survey universe. The oft-used analogy is that need only stir a pot of soup and taste a sample to get an idea of what the whole pot tastes like.

Despite millions and millions of users, the online “soup pot” still doesn’t reflect the whole population. Some researchers like to tout that 40 million or 90 million people now use computers. But this is one of those cases where quantity, no matter how large, doesn’t mean better if the quality of the underlying logic is flawed.

Garbage in. Garbage out.

As in many things, what you get out of any kind of survey is only as good as what you put into it. If your initial sample is not proper, the results you get from the survey, no matter how many interviews you complete, will be no more valid, and may even be completely misleading.

Where respondents come from is vitally important. Surveys samples created from researchers' web sites and pop-up advertising should be avoided. They're no better than depending on "professional" focus group participants whose perceptions are so jaded and conditioned that they are no longer normal.

Lessons learned.

So just what are the right applications for online surveys? We've had great success with online surveys where:

- All target audience members can be identified and have equal access to, and are comfortable with computers. Examples of this include employee groups, members of an association, or members of a listserv.
- Qualified respondents are people who naturally congregate online and are who are more predisposed to interact in the impersonal online environment than with real people. Examples of this include computer programmers and online game players.
- It is accepted that sample members need not necessarily be random. Examples of this include young trendsetters and persons with certain medical conditions.

Situations where online surveys are *not* appropriate:

- Where not all members of the target audience have access to and are comfortable with online media.
- Where one is trying to achieve a completely random geographic, demographic or customer sample.
- Where one is trying to reach an audience that is not predisposed to use computers.
- Where the context of the online interview—e.g. the checkout counter at the hotel or the home center's customer service desk—does not allow the respondent to reflect upon the entire experience.

It may walk and quack like a duck. But it still might not be a duck.

There are a couple of other things users of online research need to know about. One of these is the difference between a random sample and a panel.

Mail and telephone panel studies have been used for many years. They consist of groups of people—sometimes hundreds of thousands of people nationwide—who agree to take part in an ongoing series of studies in return for payment or some other benefit.

Panel studies are very valuable, especially when you are tracking perceptions or behavior over time. But even if they reflect the demographics of the larger population, they are samples of *convenience*, not random samples, because all of the other members of the larger population did not have the opportunity to be included in the research.

The danger in online panels is that you may be throwing your lot in with people who like the pay or who are anxious to have a platform from which to share their “expertise.”

Or, in you want to think about it in more vivid terms, it’s like letting the viewers of the Fox News Network or the readers of the *New York Times* serve as the barometer of what “American are thinking.” You’d get lots of interviews. But you just wouldn’t buy it.

Some researchers like to point to the fact that they have created online panels that mimic national or other demographic characteristics. One firm even touts, “We have more than ten million survey takers covering most demographic profiles.”

What could be easier, right?

Don’t be fooled. Creating a panel that looks like the nation is not the same thing as creating a proper random national sample. It’s an *opportunistic* sample because it did not give all qualified respondents an equal opportunity of being included.

This probably sounds like we’re picking nits. But in fact it is the entire basis of the legitimacy of survey research.

What’s in it for me?

There is also the issue of bias that comes from paying panel members to participate in research studies on an ongoing basis. The problem is that people who have been paid to answer questions about products, services and media become less “natural” in their attention to products, services and media.

Looking ahead.

So what are we to do?

There’s no doubt that online research will increase in usage. At the very least, the perceived economies and immediacy of this method will drive growth in the short term.

Many researchers also believe that the quality of online sampling—that is, the extent to which online samples accurately reflect the larger universes from which they were drawn—will improve in time.

Some believe it will take the creation of the next generation of “next big thing” in telecommunications, a new melding of personal computing devices and telephones for this to happen.

But for now, the research user is cautioned to ask questions. Ask how the online sample was created. Ask how frequently online panel members are asked to participate in studies. Ask what they’re getting in return.

Listening online and off.

The best ideas and insight come not just from asking the right questions and from listening carefully, but also from knowing how and when to employ the most appropriate research techniques.

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