

Will Online Market Research Replace Traditional Methods

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Will online market research replace traditional interview methods in the pharma sector? Pharma marketers have long relied on quantitative market research among doctors to gauge brand performance post-launch, map out a marketplace pre-launch or understand likely reactions to the latest marketing plans or product developments.

Traditionally, such research has been conducted either by telephone or structured face-to-face interviews. In the late 1990s, however, the internet emerged as an alternative methodology. Online surveys initially faced many obstacles and provoked objections over sampling issues, security and over-reliance on technology.

Nevertheless, the potential benefits in terms of cost-savings and speed were obvious, as was the likelihood of internet use increasing among the public in general and doctors in particular. To some, it was just another pin with which to prick the internet bubble, but for others it was a methodology worth pursuing.

Coming of age

At the start of 2004, however, online market research has well and truly come of age. It has gained credibility among pharmaceutical marketers and researchers for the following reasons:

- doctors now have very high levels of internet access, with over 90 per cent connected either at home or work

- online surveying has become an established part of doctors' online activities, with feedback from early surveys showing a preference for this method over telephone interviews

- online fieldwork has proved faster and, with a more streamlined post-fieldwork 'back-end', surveys are being turned around more quickly

- images and concepts can be shown, randomly or in sequence, as stimulus material within a survey

- lower project management costs and the lack of interviews has made online market research competitively priced

Online research is now being used by several major pharma companies to evaluate competing product concepts, advertising executions, positioning statements and product profiles. It is being used for anything from a two-minute omnibus survey through to complex bespoke surveys covering a broad range of topics.

In addition to doctors, online market research is also being used to gather the opinions and behaviours of sales reps, patients and practice nurses through tools such as online diaries and tracking studies.

Most types of quantitative questions work well online. For example, scales and lists are easier to understand when presented visually and recall questions (such as when a doctor is asked to recall the number of prescriptions written for a given product over the past month) have validated more closely against IMS data than the same questions asked over the telephone.

Flies in the ointment

Despite all of the benefits, there are of course pitfalls! Designing an online project has its nuances. For example, people are often surprised at how different a questionnaire can look online, compared to print, and it is always worth allowing a reasonable amount of time for the design stage.

An online survey also requires self-completion. If something looks odd or fails to operate as the respondent anticipates, there is no immediate help to hand. Everything needs to be sufficiently obvious for even the least computer literate people to be able to point, click and type their way through the survey without encountering any problems.

Respondent fatigue can set in quickly, with the danger that they will not complete the survey. As a general rule, even well rewarded surveys should take no longer than half an hour to complete and honoraria should be set at about the same level as for an equivalent telephone survey.

Open questions in search of a more detailed response are best avoided. One or two per survey can work but only when the questions are genuinely engaging. This type of question works best when helped along by a professional interviewer in a face-to-face environment.

It is wise to be cautious when considering an international online survey, as internet usage among doctors in countries such as Italy, Spain and Japan can be quirky and encourage biased samples. The UK, France, Germany and the US have so far proved to be the best countries for conducting online pharma research projects.

Finally, there are technical issues to consider like programming and survey set-up, which can spell disaster if not thoroughly checked and double-checked. There is nothing worse than setting up a poorly programmed survey and losing some or all of your data as a result!

The future's bright

Online market research is now used in most quantitative ethical pharmaceutical contexts, with a few common-sense exceptions. It does not, and may never, offer a genuine alternative to qualitative research but is proving more effective than telephone surveying at the equivalent job.

As a marketer, you can expect online research to be more-cost effective and faster than telephone or face-to-face

interviews but you should resist the temptation to sacrifice the quality of design and analysis for an even faster turnaround.

While it is too strong to suggest that the internet has made telephone and structured face-to-face surveys redundant (there will always be specific applications for these methodologies), it is surely only a matter of time before the internet becomes the dominant methodology in the pharmaceutical sector.

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