

The Trouble With Web Surveys

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The Trouble With Web Surveys, Written by Brian Cooper ?â€“ Managing Director, Omnisys Ltd?This paper examines the development of the web survey and the current problems the modern online research agency faces.

Background

The internet has been with us for many years now, and the World Wide Web, in its present form, about 10 years. Web surveys have been with us just as long and have developed significantly during those years. The question is â€œhave things changed for the betterâ€•? We are going to look at some of the problems with web surveys, and most importantly, what we as web survey providers feel are the solutions to those problems.

Web surveys are a key part of modern research methodology and with recent developments in technology, added sophistication in software, higher bandwidth, computer processing power, specialised internet programming languages and the skills of the web survey designers, we are seeing more and more complex surveys reaching the browsers of the humble respondent. These modern web surveys use dynamic web languages, animation, images and sounds as a way to get respondents to provide us with the answers we so desperately need. We use radio buttons and check boxes, grids and tables, drop down boxes and answer piping â€“ all formats that you would never see on a paper questionnaire. We are in danger of designing web surveys to suit our own egos and not for the suitability of the target audience. While there is no doubt that the resulting web survey looks good, does all the technology surrounding the visible screen actually make it harder for the respondent to firstly, access the survey and secondly, actually complete it? Let me put that another way â€“ do you have java-script enabled on your browser? Do you use Internet Explorer? Simply by answering â€œnoâ€• to these two questions could result in a survey not even starting. Of course, the increase in programming and the use of images and videos increase the download time of each page of the survey - have we incorrectly made the presumption that everyone now has broadband access when statistics tell us that the level of ADSL uptake in the UK still runs at just over 50%? (National Statistics, 52.4%? June 2005). Using the latest and greatest programming techniques and software may produce the best looking and most interesting web survey there has ever been, but when it takes the recipient five minutes to access an image on his 56k modem, who benefits?

A key thing to remember about the use of surveys to collect information is that they have to be a scientifically sound way of â€œgeneralisingâ€• results to a larger population, be that a country as a whole or the users of a particular product. We need to select the members of a population carefully and give them a chance to participate, and by complicating the online survey process, this population may become too skewed to be useful.

There is no doubt that some of these advanced techniques have helped the data collection and analysis process immensely. Cleaner data means infinitely more usable results. Additionally, your respondent is more likely to have trust in the survey if logic is followed, and he is only asked questions that are relevant to him, and take into account information he has already provided earlier in the survey.

{mospagebreak title=Problems and the omniWeb Solution}

Problems and the omniWeb Solution

There are many problems facing the researcher when putting an online survey through the field. Some are obvious and some not so. We mentioned earlier about the use of the latest techniques and technology without much thought to the respondentâ€™s ability to complete a survey, and this factor will of course have an impact on response rates. Respondents with older browsers that donâ€™t have the latest â€œplug-inâ€• items, older computers and slower telecommunications lines all compound the problem and can cause respondents to attempt the survey two or even three times due to browser or computer crashes. We can easily overcome these issues by spending a little time understanding the proposed respondents to a particular survey and designing a bespoke solution. The intelligent use of software packages like Photoshop to produce top quality images with a tiny file size means that a page loads quicker. If a page loads quicker, the respondent doesnâ€™t have time to become bored and frustrated and therefore much more likely to complete the survey. If you are developing a B2B survey then your introductory emails will most likely be going to a corporate email address, so just by sending out a plain text email instead of a fancy looking HTML one will vastly increase the chances of the email getting through the Firewalls that are a common feature of internet security these days.

Personal internet security is also becoming an important factor for a lot of people, so Cookies (pieces of information generated by a Web server and stored in the user's computer, ready for future access), which are used as a means of tracking a respondent and to see if they have already completed a survey, are often deleted or refused by the respondentâ€™s browser. This of course decreases the number of potential respondents but more importantly, stops someone who was happy to complete the survey from doing so.? To combat these problems we developed our own email software to work alongside our web software â€“ what Hypermail does is check the recipientâ€™s email client to see if they can receive HTML formatted emails (fonts, colours, images etc), if not, then a â€œbare bonesâ€• text-only version is automatically sent in its place, thus ensuring that the maximum number of emails get to where they are supposed to go. Cookies have also been removed from the Hyperweb system, and we only track respondents by a unique ID number allocated to their introductory email. This ID is used to record data question by question so even if a respondentâ€™s computer has a power failure part way through a survey, all their data is secure and saved and when they return, they automatically get taken to the question they were up to. This innovative solution makes the whole survey process painless for the respondent and achieves a level of satisfaction that is hard to beat.

Response rates are an issue for market research as a whole, but for online surveys there are slightly different hurdles to overcome. Longer questionnaires, no matter what the data collection methodology is, have a detrimental impact on completion rates. What we have to do as online research experts is advise our clients as to the best way to conduct an online survey, and of course, each project is unique and decisions would have to be made based on each survey.

1.?We can offer an incentive to complete the survey.

2.?We can allow the respondents to save their answers and come back another time to complete.

Both these options cause concern. If we offer an incentive, what kind do we offer: a prize draw or payment, in cash or vouchers? If we allow a respondent to save their position and come back, historically they do not, unless the incentive is deemed substantial enough! This brings us on to how we source our consumer respondents

Due to recent data protection laws, we can no longer just email people to ask if they want to complete a survey in the way we can with the telephone. There is a distinct difference between the laws governing the use of personal data for telephone and email research. With telephone research, we have to "opt out" of being contacted by placing our phone number on a national register, but with emails, we have to "double opt-in" to a panel list. Double opt-in means that you give your details to a panel company indicating that you wish to be contacted to complete surveys. Then you will be emailed with a request to confirm online, for example, that you have agreed to be placed on the panel. As an incentive to be on the panel, cash and/or vouchers are offered for each survey completed. Have we arrived at a point where online consumer surveys are only for professional respondents? If so, how can we be sure of the validity of our data? We don't offer telephone respondents money to complete a 30 minute survey, but we manage to get the interviews, so why should we have to pay online respondents to do something in the comfort of their own home? If online research is going to grow to the levels predicted (5% in 2004 up to 40% in 2006 " source BMRA), are we really going to have the number of respondents available to complete this number of surveys? This may seem a little extreme, but as researchers we have to be aware, if not a little concerned, about what we tell our clients at the end of a project.

Let's look at the example of "John Smith". John Smith has a broadband connection and is pretty well web savvy, he's online for 5 years now and knows his way around. He's seen the adverts for "Paid Surveys" and has joined 25 of them ticking every box for his interests as he knows that the more he indicates he's interested in, the more surveys he will get. According to the rules of these panel providers, John can only do one survey per month in each area of interest, but John is interested in a lot of things. Replicate this across all 25 companies John has registered with and you see the scale of the problem.

Recent research (Research in Business " Profiting From Online Research , September 2005) shows that UK based online research agencies are becoming more and more aware of this problem and 77% indicate serious investment in their own panel expansion over the next three years. Only by using their own managed panel can research agencies control the standard of their respondents and their subsequent data. Many of the panel companies we have to buy samples from at the moment are not market research companies " they are marketers which means they don't understand the nuances of the research industry and therefore the quality of their respondents could be held into question. We wouldn't trust a call centre to conduct a 40 minute telephone survey with GPs regarding a new drug or a Financial Director about the latest changes to the UK corporate tax laws, so should we trust a panel compiled by non-researchers? Survey length and complexity are key issues when completing an online survey. In the same way we adjust length and complexity of traditional methodologies depending on the subject and the respondent, we need to do the same thing online too. Make it too long and you lose the respondent " potentially in two ways. 1. You put a progress bar on and the respondent gets 60% through and realises it's already taken him 20 minutes. 2. You don't put a progress bar on and the respondent gets to the second to last page before closing as it's taken him 35 minutes and he has to go out. We have a Catch 22 situation, and the only possible solution is just to make the surveys shorter and simpler to complete. Complexity has a profound effect on response rates. Of course, John Smith doesn't really mind how long the survey is " to him, the longer it is the more he gets paid!..but does he fill them out properly? There is real danger in these "professional respondents" clicking through a survey as rapidly as they can to complete as many paid surveys in the shortest time possible.

As a serious online survey provider, we utilise a statistical solution to this problem " we plot a bell curve (not physically, but using our software!) of response times so those that have filled it in too quickly are removed from the database. We can also produce reports on individual questions so if a respondent has skipped over every open ended question, then we can make a decision about the validity of their other responses. These methods are safety nets that we need to make sure as an industry are in place, either as part of our quality procedures or as part of the software we use. Another technique is the drop out report: we can isolate which questions incomplete records dropped out at and make a judgement along with the client about what to do with that question.

The beauty of collecting data instantly is that we have the power of an office based CATI system without the overhead costs of running a telephone unit, but the drawbacks of postal surveys still apply. We don't have the benefit of interviewer contact, where guidance can be given to the respondent if necessary and most importantly, you are trusting the respondent to fill out your survey accurately and thoughtfully, and not just in order to get paid.

{mospagebreak title=Build it yourself on-line surveys}

Over the last few years there has been an explosion in "build it yourself" on-line web surveys. Whilst in some cases, these online solutions can be good and provide excellent value for money, they have been designed and built by software and web developers. The beauty of most key market research software, be it CATI, online or tabulation packages, is they have been designed for researchers by researchers. How can a web survey portal advise you on the positioning of a question or even the legal validity of your ethnic origin question? Trust your online survey to agencies with whom you would trust your face or telephone project.

A particular problem in these days of cost cutting and lower research budgets is to presume, often incorrectly, that an online survey is vastly cheaper than any other methodologies. Of course, this is often the case, but there are some variables to consider.

??Sample list â€œ if you do not have a contact list and are attempting to fill certain quotas or interview quite specific people, then costs for sample can be substantially higher than telephone costs.

??Length of survey â€œ it is easier to keep respondents on the phone when conducting a long survey than an online version-keep your online surveys to less than 10 minutes if possible.

??Development time â€œ a survey that is highly designed and fairly complex can easily take twice as long to program as a CATI script. CATI software has no need to look good as it is the interviewers who see the screen, not the respondent and the tendency, as mentioned above, to â€œover designâ€• can cause delays in putting a survey live and increase costs. A point to always remember when conducting research â€œ cheaper does not always mean better. Use the right methodology first and foremost.

Conclusion

As online survey providers and web survey software developers, we have a keen interest in seeing online surveying grow but we also have a deeper understanding of data capture and research methodology in general. We believe that a â€œone size fits allâ€• scenario can not work in todayâ€™s mature research market. Different methods will always be required in order to get the best information for our clients, and even though online surveys can offer fantastic value for money, the proof will always be in the accuracy and quality of the results.

Beware of over complicated, over designed surveys â€œ keep it simple and let the questions speak for themselves.

Avoid using non-research based sample companies â€œ build your own if budgets permit or use one of the well known large agency panels. The costs may be higher but your data will be more robust.

Software solutions â€œ DIY online surveys may be cheaper but there is still no substitute for a properly designed survey from a MRS agency.

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