

# UNDERSTANDING INTERNET SURVEYS

Dr. Sachin S. Kamble\*

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## Introduction

Information needs are changing in both developed and developing countries. Established markets in industrialized countries are becoming more geographically integrated, as direct vertical links and information flows are established between customers, retailers and suppliers. As a result, there is a growing need to conduct research spanning country boundaries, in order to identify regional or global market segments, or to examine opportunities for integrating and better co-ordinating strategies across national boundaries. At the same time, speed in collection and interpretation of results from multiple and geographically diverse sources become imperative in order to anticipate market changes and devise an effective response strategy.

The rapid expansion of the Internet and other interactive communications technologies has opened up significant new opportunities for the provision of public services, conducting of business and conveyance of personal transactions among ordinary people (Brown *et al.*, 2001; Dutton, 1999). These communications technologies have widespread potential to change the way institutions; corporations and individuals conduct their day-to-day business (Dutton, 1996). The public sector has exhibited a significant drive towards applying information and communications technologies to a growing range of services (Dutton, 1999; Taylor *et al.*, 1996). On-line research is an efficient way to survey individuals with higher levels of education, slightly higher incomes, and greater probability of spending. These "consumers who spend" (i.e., better-educated, higher-income individuals) are people with the money and the mind-set that make them the important buyers of most product categories, including packaged goods products. The Internet is proving to be the best route into the minds of these consumers. A well designed, thoughtfully executed, Internet-based marketing research sample delivers your most important consumers, faster, better and cheaper. Almost every sort of quantitative or qualitative research done conventionally can now be done on the Internet. Examples includes tracking customer satisfaction, focus groups, package testing, copy testing, and nearly all other kinds of marketing research Nadilo(1998). As more consumers begin to use the Internet, more research will be conducted on-line. Companies that start taking advantage of on-line research now will be better placed to use Internet research to reach the even larger population of future Internet users.

## Trends in Internet Surveys

The latest developments in Internet research are very client-oriented and are technological rather than methodological. Most of them have the logistic tools to deal in the Internet medium but have no knowledge in terms of methodology of marketing research. Mititelu 2003, has observed the following trends in Internet-based surveys ;

### Total transparency:

The current tendency is towards total transparency to the client. This means that the client agency can monitor the time/times of the e-mail invitations and the questionnaire completion status. In addition, the drop-out rate, the number of completed interviews, pending interviews, interrupted

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1. Faculty, Kousali Institute Of Management Studies, PG Department of Business Management, Karnataka University, Dharwad-580003. Cell No. 9448037421., E-mail: kambless@yahoo.com

interviews, the total e-mail invitations, etc., are all available in graphical representations from some Internet-based research agencies.

### **Less use of cookies;**

The use of cookies turned out to have a few disadvantages: respondents whose PCs are cookie-disabled could be interviewed twice. The respondents have to be warned about the insertion of cookies, as the response rate drops dramatically due to the well-known reluctance towards cookies. The new respondent identification techniques do not rely on cookies, are much safer, and do not admit multiple interviewing of the same respondent.

### **History options;**

This new identification technique allows history tracking. What does identification mean here? This means that the respondents are associated to unique serial numbers. This helps the data processing analysts to check for possible multiple questionnaire completion by the same e-mail account holders. The history option permits a respondent who started the questionnaire but interrupted it for different reasons to restart the completion right at the point of interruption.

### **Real-time distribution of responses;**

This can be found as a separate module of the Web survey software or as a complementary service from the company that hosts and implements your survey. Client companies want more and more to have field control at any survey stage. Sometimes this is detrimental to the way the data collected online are analyzed and interpreted. Internet data need to be validated and only then reported and interpreted. Few such services or software programs apply corrections on data collected from biased samples or with high non-response rates.

### **Media protection;**

Since many copy tests are run on the Internet, it was compulsory to guarantee the security of the media shown. In pre-tests, run before campaigns are launched, one big demand of the advertising agencies but also of the campaigns' beneficiary is that creative ideas and messages remain secret. Following the pressure of the clients, especially advertising agencies, there has been real progress in terms of preventing media download or media copying.

### **Reception accuracy;**

The size of the commercials are reduced for better reception and upload speed without diminishing the quality of the sound and image.

### **Issues Involved In Internet Surveys**

Online surveys are more than the simple transference of a standard self-completion questionnaire or interview schedule into an electronic environment. Online research has distinctive qualities and these alone may be sufficient to yield quite different results from essentially the same research conducted in an offline environment. The key differences between online and offline research has been found to relate to sampling of respondents, project design and operational procedures, response rates, and the quality of data obtained. The issues identified by *Gunter, Nicholas, Huntington and Williams (2002)* have been examined in the following paragraphs;

### **Sampling issues;**

One concern with online data collection has focused on respondent sampling. Online interviews or self-administered questionnaire distribution are restricted to individuals who have access to the

Internet. Hence, data collected online are not representative of the general population - most of whom still do not have Internet access. One reason why telephone surveying did not take off until the early 1970s was the problem of missing those who were not yet connected. The value and acceptance of online data therefore varies with the market information needs of client organizations and the types of markets within which they operate. Thus, businesses whose products or services are aimed at target markets known to have widespread Internet access can consider using online research in the knowledge that such markets are well represented among the Internet-connected population.

Cobanoglu *et al.* (2001) compared a standard postal survey approach with fax and Web-based self-completion surveys. They found that ordinary postal surveys gave better coverage because the general public and even members of organizations and company employees did not always have a fax machine or e-mail address. According to these authors, another complicating factor was that people change their addresses from time to time. While they may be in the habit of leaving a forwarding address for standard postal delivery, that might be valid for up to 12 months, this behavior is not so often followed in relation to e-mail. Nonetheless, the technology exists to facilitate the forwarding of electronic post

### **Operational and design differences;**

The starting point for the launch of any new research, regardless of the platform on which it is administered, requires researchers to give full consideration to such basic issues as the key questions that are being addressed, the required sample, and the kinds of data that need to be generated. In addition then, there are other considerations that need to be borne in mind when conducting research online. Online surveys carry different design and operational implications from offline surveys.

Postal surveys are easy to construct, but it can take many hours to prepare them for distribution. Copying, labelling, folding, stuffing the envelopes and preparing the return envelopes takes considerable labour and financial resources. Fax surveys, if conducted with a modem-capable computer and mail-merge program such as Microsoft Word, can be prepared in minutes and the transmission of faxes can even be done automatically. With Web-based surveys, the initial set-up takes some time, although the transmission of thousands of survey questionnaires can be done in minutes. Respondents usually complete and transmit the answers immediately while they have the e-mail open on their computer and can easily retrieve it. In addition, Web-based surveys are coded automatically as respondents enter their answers, while mail and fax surveys have to be coded manually.

A further feature of online surveying, using electronic distribution systems, is the ability to present questionnaires in multi-media formats. Text can be accompanied by images that can serve as prompts or stimulus materials. Of course, it is possible to use high-quality images and complex graphs with postal as well as Web-based surveys. With the latter, however, audio, video and animated graphics can also be included to clarify questions or illustrate response options (Bachman *et al.*, 1999).

### **Response rates;**

Response rates in e-mail surveys are often poorer than for offline surveys (Dommeyer and Moriarty, 2000; Cobanoglu *et al.*, 2001), though this is not invariably the case (Opperman, 1995; Parker, 1992). Repeated contacts with respondents and use of reminders can push up response rates for e-mail surveys (Mehta and Sivadas, 1995). Overall though, the evidence on response rates is far from consistent.

Kiesler and Sproull (1986) compared response patterns to a paper questionnaire and an electronic questionnaire. They found that returns were lower for the electronic questionnaire (67 per cent) than for the paper questionnaire (75 per cent). However, the e-survey was returned more quickly on average than the paper survey (9.6 days versus 10.8 days). Respondents who answered the e-survey made

fewer mistakes and answered more items. They also gave richer answers to open-ended questions. There was no difference between the two types of survey in the distribution of responses to attitude scales. There was evidence, though, of weaker social desirability effects in answers given in the e-survey. In other words, the answers were likely to have been less influenced by the desire to please or to be seen in a good light. A number of factors could explain relatively low response rates of e-mail surveys. First, most of these are conducted so that the respondent's identity must be revealed. The lack of anonymity may deter some people from responding. Second, an e-mail survey is very easy to ignore and discard. All the respondent must do is hit the "delete" button. Third, since e-mail is a relatively new survey medium, some potential respondents may be confused about how to return the survey. Bachmann *et al.* (1996) found in a pre-test of their e-mail survey that many survey respondents did not understand how to return their answers. Fourth, since e-mail surveys cannot use pre-paid incentives or cause the impression that a lot of expense and effort has gone into the survey, it is less able than other survey methods to create respondent dissonance or to make the respondent feel obligated to respond. Fifth, the flat text and constrained format of an embedded e-mail survey may make some e-mail recipients negatively disposed towards responding (see Carroll, 1994).

Experience with mail, telephone and face-to-face interview surveying has shown that the most powerful determinant of response rates is the number of attempts made to contact a respondent (Dillman *et al.*, 1974; Goyder, 1985, 1987; Heberlein and Baumgartner, 1978). Personalising questionnaires is another feature that can increase response rates in mail surveys (Dillman, 1978, 1991, 1999). A personalised letter addressed to a specific individual shows the respondent that he or she is important. This technique can be applied to e-mail as well.

### **Quality of responding;**

Differences have been found in the results produced by online and offline surveys. While electronic surveys require respondents to work through the questionnaire by themselves as with a standard self-completion paper instrument, the interactive element of the electronic survey meant that it also had something in common with telephone and face-to-face interviews in which respondents interact with the source of questions (Kiesler and Sproull, 1986). These features therefore gave the electronic survey quite a different character from offline data collection. At the same time, the interactive feature might lead respondents to be more engaged than they would be with standard self-completion questionnaires. This might, in turn, lead respondents to complete more items, make fewer mistakes, give longer answers to open-ended questions, and disclose more about themselves (Brown *et al.*, 2001).

There is a growing body of evidence that online surveys produce higher response quality than some offline methodologies (e.g. self-completion postal surveys). Online questioning results in fewer items being omitted by respondents (Kiesler and Sproull, 1986; Schaefer and Dillman, 1998; Sproull, 1986). Fewer mistakes tend to be found in online surveys compared with offline self-completion methods, because respondents are guided more closely through the questionnaire (Kiesler and Sproull, 1986). The biggest difference between online and offline methods, however, is that electronic surveys produce richer responses to open-ended questions (Mehta and Sivadas, 1995; Bachmann *et al.*, 1996; Schaefer and Dillman, 1998). Responses to open-ended questions in online surveys tend to be longer and more revealing than those generated in standard postal, self-completion surveys (Taylor, 2000). Online research may be more effective in addressing sensitive issues. Respondents seem to be more willing to reveal information about their experiences with sensitive conditions in online surveys. It is found that consumers revealed a great deal of personal information when completing a computer-mediated survey.

## Future of Internet Research

Despite the success at conducting on-line research, we still don't feel that Internet research is the ideal solution for all projects at all times. It is believed that qualitative studies will continue to be better-deployed in-person than on-line for the foreseeable future. It is also understood that although quantitative research has proven to be extremely effective when conducted on-line, there are times when it simply will not prove to be the best technique (for example, conducting research with the elderly or the poor).

Still, for most projects when clients are Internet-based or involved with high technology products, it is always recommended to conduct quantitative projects on-line. For other studies, it is suggested to use a case-by-case perspective and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each approach before finalizing a methodology.

On-line research has already been described both enthusiastically, and critically, in many different ways. "A replacement technology" is one such phrase and it will surely replace much of the qualitative and quantitative research work currently done face-to-face or by telephone. However, it will not fully replace other methodologies. Printing did not fully replace handwriting. Radio did not replace newspapers. Television did not fully replace the movies or the radio. We will continue to do in-person and telephone research, even if this amounts to a rapidly shrinking part of our work.

What is much more exciting to me as a researcher/academician is that the Internet will enable us to do many things we could not do (or afford to do) before, greatly enhancing the value of our services.

### Very specifically, the Internet enables us to:

- Survey huge samples of people;
- Survey tiny sub-samples of the population;
- Show lists, still and moving images;
- Obtain much richer verbatim replies.

### And it enables us to do this:

- incredibly fast;
- at affordable costs;
- all over the world.

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