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Top Features

Search Features

Net loss

Response Rates: Online research promised a return to high response rates. But, argue Lawrence Fisher and Jonathan Jephcott, poor survey design puts such hopes at risk

It is perhaps ironic that cooperation rates among online survey respondents are declining. After all, the popularity of online surveys is in no small measure due to the perception that they are a panacea for falling response rates using more traditional techniques.

There are many possible reasons for that decline, inappropriate incentive schemes and excessive questionnaire length among them. But near the top of our list would be the negative impact of questionnaires written with little or no regard for the ease with which respondents can complete them.

Without a net

The problem is that with an online questionnaire there is no safety net for the would-be respondent. If he or she can't understand a question, they must make do – or consign the study to the trash.

Despite all the programming and data-processing advantages provided by online fielding, the indispensable leverage exercised by trained interviewers to facilitate face-to-face recruitment and to direct the interview process itself is lost with a shift to self-administration.

It follows that to compensate for what has been lost, the clarity of an online research questionnaire necessarily must increase dramatically in importance. Don Dillman expressed this point three years ago: "When the shift is made to self-administered surveys, then the question of how to get respondents to provide any answer, the role of question wording, and the trappings of how questions are delivered, pose new issues that need to be understood."

Unfinished business

There is much at stake here. Online panel members are kept fairly active as potential respondents and are invited to complete at least two or three surveys each month by typical online panel operators. As a result, online respondents know what to expect and have sufficient experience to identify, avoid, or even undermine unpleasant survey assignments.

And as William MacElroy and Michael Gray reported to the Interactive Market Research Organization (IMRO) in 2003, having interviewed 7,500 on-line respondents, poorly written online questionnaires contribute to unacceptable drop-out rates, defined as the percentage of invitees to a study who start but do not complete the survey. And that can be a significant drain on the overall response rates for a study. Interestingly, Bloomerco, a panel company based in the Netherlands, reports that more than half of such drop-outs occur well before the half-way point of the survey. In other words, it is not survey length that is the key driver here, it is the framing of the questions. Moreover, there must be serious concerns about the quality of the resultant data, since we must assume that many other respondents struggled through to completion but disengaged from the process early on, something Jon Krosnick aptly describes as "compliance without engagement."

The laughing cavaliers

Words To Live By

Suggested Guidelines

- Make online questionnaires engaging, simple to follow and easy to complete
- Avoid words not in common usage including jargon of all sorts – generally use short words, not long ones
- Where appropriate, include "don't know" as a response option.
- Include 'open-ended' questions only where it is specifically required by the study and respondents are likely to have something to contribute.
- Provide explicit dispensation to respondent to choose "best answer" when "don't know" options are not available.
- Provide an accurate estimate of respondent time to complete. Follow ESOMAR and other industry guidelines.
- Keep interviews short; be mindful that the average online session lasts less than ten minutes.
- Keep respondents

Respondent fatigue is probably the primary cause for such behaviour. An online questionnaire grid asking past three-month usage for each of 130 brands across multiple family members may be designed to identify cross-purchasing. But it is highly likely that respondents will become increasingly cavalier in their responses as they wade through the endless pages.

Similarly, most online surveys conducted in the Americas and Western Europe today are designed to force the respondent to provide an answer to each and every question (unless, of course, the programmed skip patterns dictate otherwise). This would not in itself be a problem, were it not for a tendency among questionnaire writers to shun "do not know" response options.

As we know from email correspondence, this is a source of major frustration for respondents who don't have an opinion on the topic of the question, but are nevertheless forced to respond.

By not providing them with an "out" to record an answer acceptable to both the researcher and to themselves, researchers place them in an untenable situation.

Open to abuse

Another widespread fault in design is the use of often inappropriate mandatory open-ended questions at the end of each page. Of course, professional respondents know that this problem can normally be circumvented with a few random characters but this has the effect of releasing the respondent from being too concerned about following instructions.

Additionally, panel operators frequently make survey respondents report demographic information that has already been collected during the panel recruitment and maintenance process. This is inconsiderate of respondents' time. Such data can, in fact, be quickly pulled down from a master file and easily integrated with survey-specific responses.

These suggestions are not offered solely for the comfort of respondents. They are offered in the best interests of our clients who depend on quality research. Indeed, noting that "Quality/Reliable Results" has appeared at the bottom of a clients' list of reasons for using online panels, there is surely a huge opportunity here for change – to the benefit of all.

Further reading

Dillman, Don A. Presidential Address, American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2002.

MacElroy, William and Michael Gray, "IMRO [Interactive Market Research Organization] Online Survey Satisfaction Research: a Pilot Study of Salience-based Respondent Experience Modeling." *Journal of Online Research*, 2003.

Krosnick, Jon A. et al. "The Impact of 'No Opinion' Response Options on Data Quality: Non-Attitude Reduction or an invitation to Satisfice?" *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2002, Vol. 66:371-403.

Metzke, Nicolas and Katherine Allan, "Researching the researchers: the online research barometer," *Esomar Panel Conference Proceedings*, April 2005.

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