



Survey Methods White Paper Series

Six Key Advantages of Online Surveys (and Three Potential Problems)

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Advantages of Online Research

There are already many advantages to conducting surveys online, and these advantages will only increase with the growing use of the Internet. According to the U.S. Census, the majority of households have personal computers and Internet access. In 1984, 8 percent of households had a computer and in 2003 this number was up to 62 percent (Cheeseman Day, Janus and Davis 2005). It is becoming increasingly popular for individuals to be reached as research subjects via the Internet.

Advantage #1: Online Surveys are Cheaper

Many researchers choose online surveys because they are typically less expensive than non-electronic surveys. They do not require interviewers, printing or transcribing. It is much cheaper to send the survey itself via email and also cheaper to send participation reminders. When researchers choose to have the postal service send these, they will probably incur the cost of letterhead, envelopes, postage and the time it would take a person to generate these items.

Advantage #2: Online Surveys are Flexible – for the Researcher and Participant

Online surveys can be relatively easy for researchers to create, and are typically very “user-friendly” for respondents. When researchers are creating these surveys, errors can be corrected easily without having to reprint or redistribute. These errors can be fixed in real time, and the survey results can also be presented in real time.

Since online surveys are self-administered, often respondents have the ability to begin the survey and pause at their convenience. This also allows them the time to think about what feedback they want to share. Giving them this chance to think about their answer will generate more detailed and accurate responses. Respondents won't feel as rushed since they are participating at their convenience. Since they have more time to respond, they can give more elaborate answers. Also, the answers will not be summarized by interviewers, which answers collected by phone often are. Similar to mail surveys, online surveys can be perceived as unobtrusive as compared to other methods, since respondents can complete them from the comfort of their home or any other desired location.

Advantage #3: Online Surveys are Fast and Accurate

Large amounts of data can be collected in a short amount of time through the use of online surveys. Hundreds or thousands of respondents can answer the questions simultaneously which can also offer a quick turnaround on reporting. As data is input by the respondent, web-based questionnaires can automatically validate their responses. If the user enters data



incorrectly, the system can be set to alert them of this error so they can resubmit. This will catch missing or out-of-range responses without the researcher having to watch for these.

Data collected from online surveys can be loaded directly into data analysis software. This saves time and resources associated with the data entry process. It lowers the probability of data errors because it eliminates the need for manual entry. It also eliminates interviewer error. In some cases such as a telephone interview, the interviewer could influence the respondent through their attitude, tone of voice, or their perceptions. Also, respondents may be more willing to answer questions based on what they think about the interviewer. This improves accuracy and reduces response time. In some cases, research companies can provide statistics automatically upon the respondent's completion of the survey. Online surveys also allow researchers an easy way to track quota fulfillment.

Advantage #4: Online Surveys are Versatile

There are a few functionality and aesthetic benefits of choosing the Internet as a means of conducting a survey. The overall structure of the questionnaire can be very complex. The online aspect gives the researcher control over the order of the questions presented, and how they are presented. It makes offering open-ended questions much more feasible because the respondents are literally completing the data entry process themselves. Online surveys can offer the capability of pull-down lists. Researchers can use branching techniques, randomization, skip patterns, and piping with simple point and click programming. There are other techniques and statistical methods that are most easily administered online, such as MaxDiff.

Another benefit, from a functionality standpoint, is that online survey questions can be set to mandatory, optional, or a mixture of both. This allows the researcher the opportunity to force a response out of participants. In some cases, it is advisable to keep mandatory questions at a minimum, but if some type of incentive is being offered to respondents for completing the survey, researchers may gain valuable information from these forced responses. Either way, having this control is a great benefit of the online avenue.

Online surveys can be very aesthetically pleasing because they can easily incorporate graphics and sound. Brands hoping to leave a lasting impression can customize brand colors and graphics onto the online survey. They can also include a function that other methods cannot. They can allow respondents the ability to visually compare different graphics. For example, visual comparisons are easily presented on screen when testing new product packaging or considerations for new car models. While it may be feasible for a focus group to accommodate new packaging options, an online approach would usually be better for comparing objects more challenging to present, such as cars. In some cases, the survey can also provide automatic completion statistics with charts and graphs that allow the respondent or the company seeking the research a visual representation of results.



Advantage #5: Respondent Control

Online surveys can include a unique identifier, which prevents a person from submitting a survey more than once. Each participant can have an exclusive number assigned to them that can be entered at the beginning of the survey. This can be easily tracked by the researcher, or can be left anonymous. The unique identifier will strengthen the survey because the information will be more representative (i.e. not skewed by the same people completing multiple times).

Advantage #6: Larger Sample Sizes are a Possibility

Larger sampling possibilities are a big benefit of online surveys. Not only does this allow the researcher to collect responses from all over the world (making the study more representative), but it also gives access to rare populations. These hard-to-reach populations could include people participating in deviant practices, people with specific diseases taking certain medications, or other specific criteria that are not concentrated in one area. If the researcher has very targeted intentions, online research may be the best methodological choice.

Disadvantages of Online Research

Online data collection has many features that may be appealing to researchers, but it also has its drawbacks. If the following points would be detrimental for the information you plan to attain, it may be best to stick with a more traditional collection method.

Potential Problem #1: Sampling Bias

Online surveys typically do not reflect the general population, so there will likely be sampling bias. The U.S. Census Bureau's Population Survey conducted in 2003 found that Internet users are more likely to be non-black, non-Hispanic, and under the age of 65. Respondents that had completed "some college" or had obtained a "bachelor's degree or higher" were more likely to be Internet users than those with a "less than high school" education. In addition, the 2003 study found that households earning an annual income of \$50,000 or more were more likely to be Internet users compared to those earning less than \$25,000 annually (2003).

Therefore, online surveys are best when the desired target population consists of Internet users. If the researcher is conducting employee satisfaction research, they may know that each of their employees has Internet access and time allotted to complete the survey. In some instances, they may not be certain that this is the case. Statistically, we know there are certain populations whose Internet usage is not as high as other demographics. Younger people are more likely to use the Internet than older people (Pew Internet studies). If a retirement home wants to capture information from its residents on opinions toward cafeteria food, an online survey may not be the best choice. The basic



concept here is online research is only a good method when your audience is online and can read and enter data. Another drawback is that it is difficult to know whether the person who says they are taking the survey is actually the one who took it because it is almost impossible to check a respondent's identity.

Another thing to keep in mind is that not everyone has an email address. Of those that do, many do not want to offer their personal information or even their opinions online. While online surveys are considered less obtrusive than other methods to some people, others may consider this *more* obtrusive.

Potential Problem #2: Compliancy Laws

There are certainly privacy concerns with information transferred through online portals, and these privacy laws make data collection more difficult. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) states that personal information collected online from children under the age of 13 must have consent from their parent or guardian and this consent must be verifiable. This becomes tricky because data collection agencies cannot guarantee that the personal information they collect actually had parental consent. The Privacy Act of 1974 was also created, which requires agencies to follow "fair information practices" and states that records cannot be disclosed to an agency without the consent of the individual sharing their information. As Internet data collection becomes increasingly popular, opt-in privacy policies are becoming more common. It is crucial for researchers to familiarize themselves with the voluntary guidelines and codes of conduct associated with online data collection. Many organizations reference a code of ethics and practices established by the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR).

Potential Problem #3: Operating System and Web Browser Consistency

Other things to consider are how the survey will support multiple platforms and browsers. Oftentimes web surveys will look different depending on browser and computer monitor characteristics. Some people keep their web browsers at full screen, and others keep their window smaller, which means the survey will look different to different respondents. When designing a survey, it is usually the researcher's intent to keep each screen of the survey as short as possible, and avoid forcing the respondent scroll. These scroll bars give the impression that the survey is long, and attrition rates will be higher. This makes online surveys tricky because unlike paper surveys, it is difficult to know exactly how the survey will appear on different screens. The best way to test this is for the survey designer to set their monitor resolution to a very low setting (the lowest common denominator). This will give the designer the best idea of what the majority of respondents will see.

Survey Methodology Comparisons

As a follow-up to this account of the online approach, the following table offers a short summary of the characteristics of mail, telephone and in-person surveys, as well as focus groups. The following information can aid your decision should you still be unsure about using the online route after reviewing these pros and cons.



For example, since mail surveys are self-administered, interviewer bias is avoided. Respon-

<u>Methodology</u>	Pros	Cons
Mail Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No interviewer bias • Can be repeated • Respondents have time to produce thoughtful answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low completion rate • Poor turnaround time • Inability to probe for reasons for responses
Telephone Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast turnaround time • Ability to probe • Good response rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility of interviewer bias • Difficult to reach certain populations
In-Person Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can ensure a qualified respondent • Ability to probe • Good response rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility of interviewer bias • Travel can be expensive • Poor turnaround time
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for brainstorming • Can include product demos/visuals • Good starting point for qualita- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be expensive • May not be representative
Online Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typically cheaper than non-electronic surveys • Easy to create and user friendly • No interviewer bias and data can be collected very quickly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not be representative • Research must adhere to compliancy laws

dents have time to construct their answers, much more time as compared to some other methods. However, mail surveys yield a relatively low response rate and a long turnaround time. This method does not allow for the ability for interviewers to further probe respondents, which is an advantage of other methods such as in-person surveys and focus groups. Telephone surveys are a reliable way to acquire information quickly and typically have a good response rate, but certain populations will be difficult to reach. Face-to-face surveys also have a good response rate, but in-person surveys are typically more expensive. If the researcher wishes to include product visuals or demos, focus groups can be a good starting point before beginning quantitative research. However, these focus group samples are typically very small and therefore cannot be generalized to larger populations.



Method #4: In-Person/Household Surveys

Until the 1970s, face-to-face survey was the dominant methodology for data collection. However, with technology to cut down cost of interviewer's travel expenses, time, and training, why would you need to conduct face-to-face surveys? In the article "Intensive One-on-One Surveys" by Granite Bay, in-person or household surveys are most commonly used when interviewer and respondents are discussing personal situations with extensive probing and exploration. Respondents are able to reveal themselves and tell a story that is more genuine and pointed. The interviewer can record the responses into a computer or tape the interview while determining whether the respondent is giving false answers to the questions from his facial expressions and body language, etc.

In-Person Surveys

Pros	The completion rate is high. Respondent is unlikely to "drop off" before completion. The interviewer can acquire more qualitative data, and explore answers with
Cons	Cost is very high due to interviewer training, traveling, and offering respondent incentives. Face-to-face surveys have almost become extinct due to cost compared to telephone or online methods. It has the highest degree of interviewer bias, in verbal and also in this case, non-verbal. Also, respondents may feel reluctant to share truthful answers to sensitive topics and give a more socially acceptable response to the interviewer

Now that you have the knowledge of four basic survey methodologies, we have to ask general, but insightful questions to determine which approach is most appropriate for your situation:

- 1) Depending on what you want to know, who should be in your sample and who should respond to the survey? Do you have the phone numbers, addresses, or email to reach your respondents?
- 2) Do you need the results right away? Time frame is an important factor to methodology consideration. Do you need to consider hybrid techniques and increase your cost to collect the data you need and as soon as possible?
- 3) How complex are your questions? Do they require probing from the interviewer? Does your survey need to show graphics and/or audio?



- 4) How many responses do you need to feel confident about the results? For example, at a 95 percent confidence level, the margin of error of $n=200$ responses is ± 7 percent. This means that if 60 percent of your respondent answered to having a preference to Coke over Pepsi, you can be 95 percent sure that 53 - 67 percent of your entire sample population actually does prefer Coke over Pepsi. Depending on your ideal confidence level, you can increase or decrease your sample (n) to increase or decrease the margin of error.

All these factors taken into consideration not only affect the accuracy of your study, but also your budget. However, budget should never overweigh selecting the best option to achieving your research objectives.

For more information about survey research methods, please visit our website at <http://www.researchlifeline.com/> or call us at 1-855-244-3500.



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