



Remember The Telephone?

By Darren Biggs

Remember the telephone? You probably should.

With all the hot new ways to secure data, the word on the street is that telephone interviewing is going the way of the dodo bird. Instead of a professionally trained human extracting data, with all its important nuances intact, a virtual sea of respondents are now hitting a series of radio buttons in record time to get their opinions out there. But who are these people and what's really motivating them to hit all those buttons?

Whether it is online surveying, blasting Web links to panelled respondents, 'gamification', or social media, there is no denying online reach can be vast, fast, and cheap. However, is there a deeper, unseen cost on such technological reliance for securing data? How solid is the data that is being procured? Are all project questionnaires created equal? After years of inundating panellists' inboxes with survey link after survey link, there are indications that in some cases, data can be skewed, fragmented and mixed.

The online trend for capturing data has reached a point where we better understand some pretty dramatic pros and cons of exclusively choosing a web-based approach to survey target subjects.

Like any business, the bottom line plays a decidedly important and crucial role when scoping out the research methodology landscape. Clients want more for less. Thus, enter the Web. Why not? It's cheap and fast!

Fast? Maybe. Cheap? Maybe not. Blindly choosing to go with the current "trend" and hopping on a potentially misguided bandwagon of data gathering methods may lead to lots of admittedly inexpensive data, but also quite possibly bad data. From indications of differing patterns in data character, to basic questions about information quality, perhaps the telephone lines shouldn't be cut quite yet.

Obviously, there isn't any point to commissioning a research project if the data ultimately being analysed is skewed. Your clients are relying heavily on its conclusions. They are designing marketing campaigns and positioning their products to appeal to certain characteristics of their target market. If the respondents answering your questions – questions that have been strategically constructed to help your client accomplish specific business goals – are biased, over-used, or have other

background motivations to participate in your study; what is the real cost of moving completely away from the tried and true telephone interview? Sometimes you *do* in fact get what you pay for.

What seems to be quietly accepted by some researchers today is that respondents no longer need to be "interviewed" and that online surveying will garner similar results. The fact, in reality, is that no conventional method currently exists for randomly selecting individuals for online survey purposes. Take for example how online participants are typically recruited to participate in an interview. More often, an online panel comprised of demographically pre-screened participants is utilized and project invitations are emailed. However, the full nature and limitation of that panel needs to be scrutinized and understood.

First, who exactly are the panellists being invited and interviewed? Pre-screened panellists can be requested to participate in a number of studies over the course of a month or, in some cases, a week. For example, according to an 11 panel study performed by Grey Matter Research and Consulting, an average of 20.43 invitations were sent out each

month per panellist. In some cases, multiple invitations were sent out daily to the *same* individual. In addition, many of these studies contained participation incentives in the form of cash or sweepstake draws to encourage response rates. The study also noted that it was not unusual for there to be tremendous cross-usage from one panel company to the next, compounding the possibility of over-utilizing the same participants from one project topic to the next. This is “convenience sample” at its worst.

Essentially, research critical to a client’s market strategy is being self-performed by “professional” respondents – so much for unbiased randomization.

Second, the report suggests that some panellists originally recruited to be polled for a particular study weren’t actually the individuals to complete the questionnaire. A spouse, for example, may fill out responses intended for their partner based on the perception of “knowing” how their significant other would answer certain questions. If that project required specific targets for gender and age, it’s very likely that neither would have been accurately satisfied. After all, how would you know otherwise?

Another dismaying and misguided point surrounding the trend of exclusively polling online is that a number of clients seem to believe they can use practically any length of questionnaire to complete their study. This is especially true for projects with incentives attached, assuming this alone will allow for some extra liberty in terms of length. In essence, the respondent’s patience is being bought. Add to this the mentality of the perceived cost savings attached to choosing an online methodology compared to choosing another, such as telephone interviewing.

What some clients don’t seem to realize when making this choice are the hidden costs. Break-off rates inevitably increase, but even more devastating are the unseen, silent “break offs”, where a respondent has mentally tuned out of the survey and is simply hitting a myriad of radio buttons just to get to the finish line, and of course, that incentive. In

other words, that completed survey is incomplete, skewed and incorrect. As previously stated, it is not unusual for a panellist to receive and potentially perform a number of online surveys a day. According to the Gray Matter study, with the average online questionnaire running 18 minutes, and pre-screened respondents possibly doing up to seven or eight of these a day, it is easy to conclude that focus can give way to fatigue – and fatigue can give way to compromised results.

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To be clear, the purpose of this article is not to bash online methods for capturing market research data. In fact, there are studies that *should* be performed over the Web. Rather, it’s a gentle reminder of the importance and special role of telephone interviewing as a sometimes critical choice when collecting data and a cue to re-establish a balanced approach when fielding research projects. The phone is not only a viable choice in the digital world, it is essential whenever projects call for a specific picture of thought and opinion.

Generally, the online trend seems to have developed with it a lost awareness of an essential point within the project creation process: all questionnaires are not created equal. Some projects call for an online approach while others are better served having a professionally trained

interviewer engaging a respondent. Online projects are typically a good choice whenever the goal is to measure employee attitudes, for example, or where short-format, aided questions will suffice. Alternately, telephone-based surveys are better positioned using long-format questionnaires, where a scrutinizing interviewer can probe and clarify responses when necessary and note important nuances that the typical radio button will miss.

Relying exclusively on online panels for every kind of research project can lead to skewed data and ultimately misinterpreted analysis. The people who respond to online surveys simply do not necessarily reflect the characteristics of the larger population. A study by Julie Pokela, Ph.D., Elizabeth Denny, Ph.D., and Ingrid Steblea of Market Street Research, Inc. found this group is more representative of a specific population of Web users that lean toward a slightly better-educated, more affluent consumer. In other words, a study requiring opinions of the general population is better suited acquiring its data by using the telephone methodology.

The study also demonstrated that a younger population tends to perform online studies and an older population will be more likely to perform a telephone study. The telephone approach is somewhat compromised because of the younger age groups being under-represented with the prevalence of cell phones as well as not being as responsive to surveys as their older counterparts, while the older groups are more likely to answer a landline and participate. A project designed to represent a specific age group may determine the choice of telephone over online.

Beyond the potential concerns surrounding online “convenience sample”, or the skewing of gender and age ratios, or the over-representation of this or under-representation of that, the average telephone study contains other notably important variables not currently found in the online arena.

Remember quality control? Seemingly

more and more overlooked, telephone interviewing allows for the consistent monitoring and recording of live calls, helping to ensure that the quality and expectation of the client remains intact. If an interviewer needs guidance, a project supervisor can move in and coach, sometimes even while an interview is in process. Smart project managers are utilizing sophisticated and innovative ways to create appointments of convenience for prospective hard-to-find respondents, which in turn maximizes completion rates for tricky research. In addition to this, completed interviews are routinely validated to ensure exact qualifications are met while troubled cases can be removed immediately should there be an inaccuracy. While these well-known facts point to the basics in good data gathering, they're becoming a dangerous secondary consideration.

Another less tangible point, given the currently common-place feel of online survey requests, is that a telephone interview can now present the respondent with a sense of importance surrounding the study at hand. If the project names its client during the call, that client has an opportunity to be

professionally represented by a qualified interviewer. This way, clients can also remain in contact with their customers while gleaning important attitudes within their market. Quite simply, data gathering becomes a personal experience again and an atmosphere of accountability is created.

The field work phase in any research project is critical to procuring quality data in order for a project to be truly successful, but this seems to be increasingly overlooked. Telephone data collection vendors allow clients to be personally involved during this very important tier in a project's life, whereas data generated online tends to be collected at such a fast pace, there simply isn't time to gauge questionnaire performance anomalies or other problems. While online methods can certainly pull an abundant amount of data quickly; they are no match for questionnaires requiring immense detail and subtle clarifications. The point is; it's important to look at each project individually and understand its unique needs and know that a "one-size-fits-all" approach can deliver with it false data upon which your client's business so heavily relies. The implications here are

immense – and possibly expensive.

There is perhaps an understandable trend that the telephone deserves be on the endangered species list of data collection methods. On the other hand, it's very possible that the telephone interview is simply a lost art; one needing to be rediscovered and used to dig down to find more difficult data and even utilized in *conjunction* with new online trends to assure quality.

With the pervasiveness of newer and newer technologies, it is possible that what was once considered old is actually becoming new again. In other words, a thousand radio buttons can't compare to the depth, honesty and ability of the expertly performed telephone interview. Integrity-driven, quality-assured, concise and classic, maybe now is exactly the time to remember the original wisdom behind a somewhat older technology – the telephone.

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