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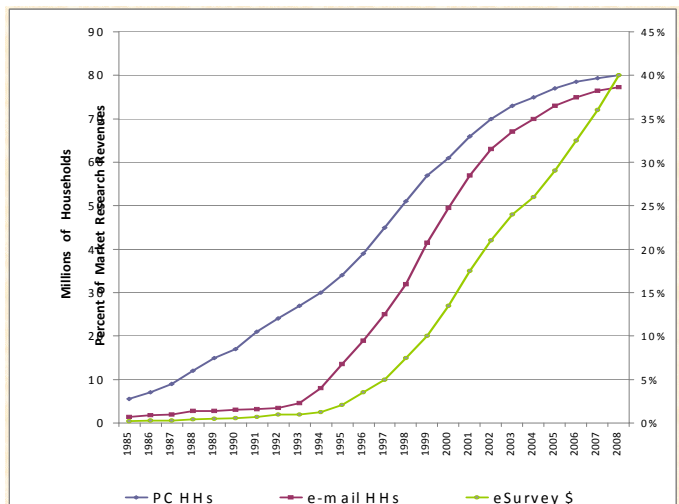
By: James E. Dannemiller

Research Series II: The Facts about E-Surveys

Internet surveys have been praised as the front wave of just about every future we can imagine. Internet surveys have also been found wanting by many users. What is the truth about e-surveys as it affects your information?

No one seems to agree just when surveys on the Internet actually began. No doubt their use in significant numbers dates to about 1994. By 1997, the software needed to conduct reasonably accurate e-surveys was widely available and the deluge began.   Serious researchers were aware of the sampling problem of course -- even the best sampling methods were useless because there was no decent sampling frame. Actually, it was worse than that – no one knew what the population of Internet-reachable people even looked like.   How could we possibly assume we had a representative sample of it?

Enter Internet Panel Surveys. They "solved" the problem by recruiting a panel of Internet users who were willing to do surveys and whose demographic characteristics were identical to those of the larger population.   The purists knew that although the sample selected for their research was a faithful representation of the panel, there was no way to establish that the panel was a representative sample of the population – even if it did have the same demographic composition. "A fine point", said some users, "not worthy of consideration".   Buoyed by its significantly lower prices, the method took off.   Quickly, all of the major national and international research firms had panels. Between 1997 and 2007, the percentage of total research revenues rose from less than one percent to 36 percent.   One source even has it as 53 percent. And if you are in the travel industry, it is notably higher than that.

Figure 2: Web Surveys – A Short History

A Series of Articles on the Research Environment

Then in August of 2006, just as we were beginning to worry about the cell phone issue, ARF held a meeting at which a representative from Proctor & Gamble announced they had just completed an experiment in which they asked the same vendor to conduct two independent surveys from its panel, asking exactly the same questions. The survey produced diametrically opposite results.

It wasn't an isolated incident. At the same meeting, ComScore reported on its own study revealing that a quarter of one percent of all Internet survey respondents produced 36 percent of all the responses. That was followed in a month or so by a travel industry experiment similar to Proctor & Gamble's, with the same results.

The problem with Internet panel surveys is not the sample, but the respondents. People who fill out Internet surveys get paid. And if you fill out three, you get paid three times. Many people have figured out the system, and there are websites to guide them directly to paid surveys. There is at least a crisis in confidence brewing. At worst, the method has been wholly subverted.

What to do?

The ARF conference resulted in the formation of the Online Research Quality Council (ORQC) to investigate the problem, come up with a solution, and report back. They met for the first time in October 2007. They have met several times since and reported on findings, but have not developed any solutions as yet. Some of the major providers of Internet panel surveys have changed advertising since October, but have made many major statements. The most common response to the issue is that providers will take extra care in trying to identify duplicate responders. Problem is, that was their claim before the ARF Conference last August.

So What?

I hasten to add that this whole issue concerns Internet Panel Surveys only. There is no problem with other forms of web surveying. If you are using the Internet to survey your own customer base, your employees, or suppliers, or any other "captured population", none of this affects that work.

So, at present, we are waiting on the ORQC. We note that the issue does not seem to have made an appreciable dent in the amount of panel research being done. In fact, in view of the substantial cost differential the method offers over telephone surveys, we are not certain that even the worst report from the ORQC would put an end to Internet panels research. SMS has decided to alert all of our clients to the issues, and offer them the choice of methods. That is, the client gets to choose. Until the Council reports out, we will rely on our own research into the issue to make certain we take every possible safeguard to protect the interests of our clients.

But we have clients who would like to apply Internet data collection to the broader population of Hawai'i, or their particular target market. For right now, we cannot recommend they do that. Hopefully the ORQC will finish its work soon and identify the solution to the Internet Panel Problem. Until then, the best we can do for you is to work out the best solutions we can on a case by case basis.

We expect some of you will have questions. You can contact Jim Dannemiller at 440-0701, or ask any of our staff. We are ready to discuss how the issue affects your information needs, and suggest ways to solve the problem.