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Cell Phone Research – things to consider

Cell phone research should be considered carefully prior to implementation. At SMS, we have been testing cell phone research options for more than four years, and we have some answers. But it was only after extensive testing that it has become a standard SMS service. We have learned some of the major issues that must be considered when undertaking cell phone research, and have also learned how to manage them.

THE CELL PHONE SEGMENT

“The portion of homes with cell phones but no landlines has grown to 18 percent, led by adults living with unrelated roommates, renters and young people” according to federal figures released on December 17, 2009 (source: CDC). The major growth of cell only households took place in the past three years. If your research *PRIORITY* segment is the younger population, then cell phones should be considered as part of your sampling plan. However, if they are only part of your audience, in most cases you will still have enough younger respondents segment groups as part of your standard random sample landline only survey.

SOME KEY ISSUES WITH CELL PHONE SURVEYS

Sample Validity

Clients and researchers recognize the importance of an accurate sample. The sampling issues with cell phone samples are numerous.

1. **There is no source of random cell phone numbers for a specific geography, such as the state of Hawai'i or O'ahu.** Unlike landlines, where the lines do not move, and where the number of prefixes by geography can be quantified (thus allowing for random sample generation), cell phones are mobile. In Hawai'i you are as likely to dial a 615 long distance prefix to talk to your friend in Kailua, as you are to dial an 808 prefix. Furthermore, you cannot designate the area of a cell phone number area of residence by the long distance code or prefix.

The implications of these issues:

- Generation of random cell phone numbers for Hawai'i is a complex process
 - The cell phone sample will not capture ALL potential respondents and therefore is may no longer be a random sample by definition
2. **Is the cell phone survey being completed at a cell only household or simply a cell phone user?** It is estimated that there are 898,372 cell phones in Hawai'i (conservative estimate). However, SMS estimates that only 68,414 are cell phones households—or about 7% of all cell phone users in Hawai'i. So if the survey is undertaken with every cell phone owner who is willing to participate, some issues arise.

The issues that arise:

- Is the survey being undertaken with a resident of a household where a landline survey has also been completed?

- Is the survey being undertaken with the appropriate “household member”, or is the survey a personal interview rather than a household interview?

These are some of the important factors that need to be understood for accurate weighting and balancing of the data.

Other considerations:

Is the goal of cell surveys to interview the estimated 15.8 percent of residents who live in households with no landline or is the objective simply to include a cell phone sample? Prior to implementing the research, identify the objective of this phase of work. It is a complex issue and should be reviewed accordingly.

Survey design is different. The cell phone survey design has to be different to achieve optimum participation. Yet, it must provide a data set that is statistically valid merging with the landline survey component.

Safety of respondent is critical. It is imperative that company policy stipulate when a cell phone interview can be undertaken. As an example, should an interview take place when respondent is driving along Saddle Road on the Big Island?

Cell phone charges. Many respondents will incur a charge for the minutes required to answering the survey. Do you reimburse them for this cost or not?

Participation rates differ by landlines and cell phones segments.

Analysis and reporting:

The completed interviews from the two data collection processes (landline and cell) cannot simply be combined. Like all multi-mode, the data must be merged with specific weighting and balancing considerations. Weighting and balancing factors that reflect the type of cell phone user must be clearly understood to accurately report the data.

Plus:

The cost for each completed cell phone survey is at least three times the cost of a landline survey

CONCLUSION

Though everyone is talking about cell phone research, be sure that it is required in your individual case.

SMS has tested cell phone methodology for more than four years prior to implementing it as a standard add on for specific projects. **We now undertake cell phone surveys on a daily basis—but not with all projects.** We have the policies in place to overcome the issues described in this document, as well as other issues not mentioned in this note. We have the statistical know how and experience to ensure accurate data output and actionable intelligence.

Please call us, and we will be happy to further discuss our approach as well as answer any questions you may have. If you are interested in a more statistical perspective, please review Mr. James Dannemiller’s article on cell phone research sent out in September.