



Online surveys have been the fastest growing segment of the market research industry in recent years, with speed and low cost being strong attractions. However, there are also disadvantages for the unwary, with unrepresentative samples and unreliable data being two of the biggest dangers.

Web surveys

There are several standardised online survey programmes such as SurveyMonkey that enable you to create an online survey, post live and invite individuals to complete. This is fine if you're happy just to invite responses from people you know already or to post a link on the web and see who responds, but there are some key problems with this:

- Existing customers will certainly tell you how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with what you're doing and highlight areas where you can improve but there's a lot of information you can't find out just from your own database such as:
 - Why non-customers don't use you
 - Awareness and attitudes about your company in the marketplace
 - Market trends
 - New product/concept testing.
- Since response rates for online surveys are lower than for some other data collection methods (e.g. telephone interviews), you may struggle to get a statistically reliable response, especially for drilling down into sub-groups, unless you have a very large customer base and a lot of email addresses.

The best way to take full advantage of the benefits of online surveys is to use a panel.

This is a large group of people who have agreed to take part in online surveys in return for rewards. The rewards are usually monetary, varying according to the time/difficulty of the task. There are two types of panel, independent and in-house.

Independent panels

YSP is a typical example of an independent panel. Its key advantages are that you can quickly and easily get a representative sample of the UK population or a representative sample of a targeted group e.g. people who live in London, are in full time employment and have a household income over £30,000. Since panel members' demographic details are known, quotas for different sub-groups can be set ensuring that the final sample is always representative of the target group. In addition, panels such as YSP conduct regular omnibus surveys, enabling organisations to ask as little as 1 question if that's all they need or they have a limited budget. (An omnibus survey is where the questionnaire is made up of questions from quite a few different organisations. The idea is that it's like a bus that departs every Wednesday that you can just jump onto and occupy one seat.)

In-house panels

Some organisations prefer to have their own panel. The reasons vary but include:

1. Consultation

They may want to be seen to be consulting their residents, council tax payers, donors or supporters.

2. Tracking

They may want to track the evolving views

Research

of exactly the same people over a period of time.

3. Branding

They may want everything about panellists' online experience to feature their own branding.

4. 2-Way Communication

They may want to use the panel for two way communications to build relationships with their target audience (rather like a social networking site) or to send out promotional or informative messages.

Panel Recruitment & Management

Recruiting a panel of relevant people who are willing to take part in surveys and other consultation activities can be very time consuming and costly. Managing the panel to minimise defections and maintain panellists' enthusiasm for participating in consultation or surveys can be even more challenging. This is why organisations are increasingly turning to online panel providers with experience and expertise to recruit and manage their own branded panel of relevant people. This helps avoid costly mistakes and enables their staff to focus on their core tasks.

YSP can build a bespoke panel by drawing relevant panellists from the YSP panel and/or invite individuals from an organisation's contact database. If required, surveys can be administered and additional services provided such as help with questionnaire design, analysis and reporting and other tasks. ☑



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