

Transforming Telephone Research into Your New Power Tool



Game-Changing Advances for Mixing Modes, Maximizing Response and Reaching **DIFFICULT TARGETS**



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Experts agree that telephone remains the most representative and methodologically-sound research tool. No one would argue, however, that powerful trends are radically changing the telephone landscape. From exploding cell-phone ownership to declining response rates, telephone researchers today face daunting challenges. New technologies, fresh interviewing approaches and breakthrough techniques for combining online and offline modes, however, can ensure you optimize the potential of telephone research while overcoming the hurdles.



The old dilemma of whether you should choose online or telephone for your study has transformed into new questions: How do you successfully combine modes to get the best results? How can you most effectively use mixed access approaches? And how can telephone interviewing overcome the inherent weaknesses of online for reaching B2B and health-care audiences?

In this article, we answer these critical questions, with a compelling look at how you can use telephone and online together to enhance outcomes. We share new techniques for pairing telephone and online to increase the validity of B2B and health-care studies—and proven approaches for improving multi-mode effectiveness. In addition, we reveal how to resolve today's key telephone research issues, including security concerns.

Isn't Telephone Research Dead?

To paraphrase the old joke, rumors of telephone research's death have been greatly exaggerated. In fact, telephone research is still broadly used throughout the market research and public opinion research communities. We've known for years now which kinds of research could migrate successfully to online approaches—and that migration already has happened. We've even seen it start to reverse, in some cases. For certain types of research focused on specific target populations, we actually are starting to see a return to telephone as the preferred mode.

What Are the Primary Advantages of Telephone Research?

Telephone-based data collection remains the most effective method for estimating population values. It's still the only economically viable way to measure population values with a known confidence interval

and margin for error. With telephone research, we can define the universe or the population that we're sampling and apply the right selection methods. We also can make valid assumptions about how accurately the values of our sample represent the real values of the total population we're studying.

Going back to some basic sampling principles, we know that if we take a number of samples from a population, the population mean—the true value that we're measuring—will be found somewhere within those sample means. In fact, when we do it right, we know what the confidence interval is (which speaks to accuracy), and we know what the degree of error is (which speaks to precision).

To make it simple, consider this example. Imagine a shooter at a firing range. The confidence interval represents how closely the shooter gets to the bull's eye. It reflects the shooter's level of accuracy. If the shooter fires multiple times, precision speaks to how tightly those shots are grouped.

Telephone research achieves both accuracy and precision. Going back to our shooting example, it tells us both how close the shooter is to the bull's eye and whether the shots are tightly grouped together.

We have not yet achieved that with online methods, though, as an industry, we are working on it. The best we can do today with online methods is control precision, which we achieve through data consistency. Researchers who want both accuracy and precision should consider telephone to support for their projects.

How Should Researchers Pair Telephone Research with Online Approaches to Authenticate Respondents, Particularly for B2B and Healthcare Targets?

Online research has increased our ability to reach difficult populations—including B2B and healthcare audiences—economically. It presents a challenge, however, in terms of assuring the external validity of our research. For example, how can we be sure that the doctor we're surveying is actually a doctor and not his or her nurse or office staff? We face similar issues with B2B research, where we find some panellists inflate their titles or overstate their decision-making authority.

We've discovered that an effective method for overcoming these hurdles is to combine telephone research with online approaches. Pairing online and telephone allows us to achieve both cost-effective expansion of our reach and real-time validation of our respondents. Savvy researchers combine both methods to create the right balance between their budget constraints and their validation requirements.

What Concerns Are There around Telephone Data Security?

Data security is becoming an increasingly critical issue. Concerns over protecting personal, identifiable information continue to grow, and legislation around these concerns continues to strengthen. Suppliers of live interviewing services must be aware of laws and policies, such as HIPPA in the US and safe harbour requirements in the European Union. Beyond just knowing what the laws are, suppliers need to be sure they have an IT infrastructure that can pass the most rigorous security audits.

Some buyers of telephone interviewing services neglect to ask about a firm's IT systems, including security and business continuity plans. They often equate robust IT systems with online providers. Telephone research, however, is supported by the same kinds of technology. It's important that buyers confirm telephone research providers have secure IT networks able to protect customer data or other potentially personal, identifiable information.

Considering Response Rate Declines and the Rise of Cell-Only households, Can Telephone Research Still Provide Accurate Estimates of Population Values?

The answer to that question is a resounding "yes." Certainly, the number of cell-only households has dramatically expanded to reach almost 30%. At the same time, however, our ability to identify and reach those households also has greatly increased.

There is a persistent myth that contacting cell phone users is much more expensive than calling landline numbers. The fact is that, while there's a slight rise in operating expenses, the cost increase is actually marginal. Blending cell phone numbers into sample frames is not cost prohibitive.

How Can Telephone and Online Research Complement Each Other? And How Can Researchers Effectively Use Multi-Mode Approaches?

To answer that question, we have to look back about a decade to when online research started to become a viable and attractive method for researchers—and telephone providers saw it as a threat. Today, that view is a false dichotomy. Researchers should look for sampling and data collection vendors that provide both online and telephone methods, because that enables them to be truly diagnostic—and to fit the best method to each project. Too often, when companies offer only one method, they start to treat it as a business model rather than as a data collection mode. As the saying goes, "When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." As an industry, it's important we get to a place where we can look across the full spectrum of data collection methodologies and choose the best approaches—or combination of approaches—for each project's goals.

Conclusions

As we look into the future, online and offline modes are creeping closer and closer together. Successful research depends on learning to view them as complementary rather than mutually exclusive approaches.

Consider this example. The other day, a colleague was discussing future approaches to research. He held up his iPhone and asked, "Am I holding, a phone or the Internet?" Of course, the answer is both.

We continue to see tremendous advantages to focusing equally on online and telephone—and fitting the best mode to each study. Used together, both modes can give us sharper insights—and we'll continue to see them growing closer in the years to come.

To download free Jeff's recent podcast on live telephone interviewing, just click here.

