Point of View

Moving Offline to Online

When a research study is moved from an offline methodology to online, results will change and, because they often change in unpredictable ways, weighting the online results to match old data can be a waste of time and effort. Experience is key. As more and more studies are done online, our understanding of the differences grows, and if a study is run in parallel for several iterations, differences can be tracked and better understood. SSI has successfully supported hundreds of project moving from offline to online.

Biases exist with every methodology and when differences are seen after moving a study online, there are three likely sources:

Sample effects:

Non-coverage of cell phone households with telephone methodology or of non-internet with online methodology.

Non-response of people who won't take phone surveys with telephone methodology or of people who won't join panels with online methodology.

Mode effects:

Interviewer: With no interviewer present online, respondents may be more honest and less likely to give socially desirable responses, but may also be more likely to quit the survey without interviewer encouragement.

Visual v. aural: There is more use of end points on a scale when it is read to the respondent; more use of midpoints online when the entire scale is constantly visible.

Access: Less affluent respondents may have slower internet connections, making their survey experience different from that of other groups.

Visual cues: when switching from face to face to online, the visual cues in a home, which can provide additional data (e.g. product ownership) are not available.

Questionnaire Effects: Use of graphics, variation in question wording and pacing can cause differences (online the speed of the questionnaire is dictated by respondent, while offline the interviewer controls it.

ACNielsen has reported (www.marketingpower.com) results from parallel tests in different categories and countries, finding that while key metrics usually remain the same, some do not:
Apple juice producer, usage and attitudes tracker in the US: Top of mind awareness was almost identical at a national and a city level; unaided brand awareness was higher online, but the order in which brands were mentioned was the same. Total awareness was identical.

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Digital cameras in four Asian markets and three European markets (online vs telephone): There is coverage bias since online respondents are more likely to own and use digital cameras.
Household cleaners in Asia, Usage Patterns (online vs telephone): Attitudes and usage patterns were similar. Claimed usage of brands was lower online, and closer to actual usage.

SSI Point of View. When moving projects online:

- Facts reported by respondents are unlikely to change; reported opinions and attitudes may change.
- Spontaneous awareness measures are likely to increase since online respondents can take longer to think without feeling pressured to give an answer or move on with the survey. Prompted awareness measures are unlikely to change
- There will be more use of midpoints, and more use of "don't know" (less tendency to "agree" with the interviewer or invent something in order to appear "good" in the interviewer's eyes.)
- The "social desirability" differences will vary in direction and strength depending on culture. In countries where internet penetration is low, sampling effects due to coverage are more significant.

SSI Recommends:

- Run projects side by side for several iterations to compare results and help understand differences
- Redesign the survey instrument. Don't put a phone script up online.
- Run a small test of all or part of the new survey before launching the new questionnaire (SSI will test the survey instrument at no charge.)
- Expect differences, observe, document and understand them instead of weighting to old methodologies.