Choosing the right data collection mode

New considerations for a changing research landscape

Online, the most popular research methodology worldwide is certainly cheaper and faster than other methods. But is it better? One benefit of online is that it is a self-completion methodology like postal mail research. This puts the respondent back in control – especially in terms of controlling the pace of the interview and avoiding social desirability effects. When coupled with the power of a computer, we can start to see the massive advantages that this method of data collection has.
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Online research

If it’s so superior, why isn’t online the only methodology ever used?

The reason, of course, is that, while it has few equals in terms of data collection, when it comes to sampling, it has a few problems.

Sampling is the Achilles heel

You could describe sampling as the Achilles heel of online research. And while that might be an unexpected comment coming from a sample company, we have always been concerned about the science behind our samples, and it is clear to us where the problems lie.

The true meaning of “representative”

The research industry often uses terms like nationally representative to describe samples, and when using probability samples via postal mail, or RDD telephone, it’s almost true that we are sampling from the entire population of interest. But in fact, even with these methods, we’re still sampling from a frame. And the frame, if you remember from Sampling 101, is the list of people you can interview. Research results are only predictable to that frame. An online sampling frame, whether an access panel, or a river sample or any online source, is tiny relative to the population. Therefore if you change sampling frames by switching sampling suppliers for example, you risk changing the underlying population and therefore the results. In many countries across the globe, we also have significant coverage issues with online sample.
A good way to consider the relative merits of different sampling methods, is to think about who is excluded in each case.

With face-to-face interviewing, the interviewer makes a choice to approach an individual or not. And, faced with some members of the public, an interviewer may decide to move on to the next sample unit. Sometimes the respondent makes it difficult to be reached, living in a gated community for example. Online, in contrast, is anonymous and unobtrusive, so these omission issues should be absent. Whatever the methodology, the very rich are reluctant to share their opinions via any kind of market research, while the very poor remain inaccessible as well. In online sampling, we also have to deal with differential non-coverage. In many markets most 33-year-olds have access to the internet – but how representative of their age group is the average 80-year-old reached online?

These issues highlight the disconnect between good sampling methodologies and good data collection methodologies. All we can do is consider the tradeoffs, and make the best choice for the project at hand.
Is mobile the future, or just another tradeoff?

Currently mobile usage far outstrips fixed line internet penetration across the world, and people in many parts of the world may never access the internet except via mobile devices. Mobile phone numbers can be generated randomly, and there are clear access advantages: research shows that the average maximum amount of time someone can feel comfortable away from their mobile phone is less than one hour! Smart mobile devices have e-mail, instant messaging, SMS, and access to social networking. And if you like, you can even make a telephone call on them!

But…….Can we post our 45-minute surveys, with all the big grids on a phone? Or the surveys with flash movies?, or the interactive shelf tests? The answer is usually “no”. Obviously tradeoffs exist along with the great promise of mobile for data collection.
Breaking the access and data collection connection

Almost universally the interview is conducted immediately following the invitation - using the same mode. Thinking outside the box we might ask ourselves; "Does there have to be a symbiotic link between sampling and data collection?" What if we could use the most effective sampling method and marry it with the most effective data collection method?

For example, we could intercept someone on the street and bring them to an internet café, where they could take the survey online, privately, in their own time, with the interviewer providing guidance to inexperienced online users. Or we could do a door-to-door study (a common methodology in many parts of the world), bringing a laptop and mobile data card into the home. Again, the respondent would take the survey in their own home, in their own time. Or we might equip a bus or minivan with internet access and travel to target geographic areas.

Once we have broken the link between access and collection methods, we can also consider using different data collection methods within the same study. This allows us to reach people where they are, rather than forcing them to fit our methods. We could send an SMS message asking people to dial a voice recognition system that does the interview; or post something on their Facebook page, asking them to come to a given location on a given day for a survey. What if the respondent is halfway through an online survey on a PC and has to go out? Why can't they finish it on their mobile phone on their way to their appointment? The possibilities are endless.

Our goal could be to complete 80% of the sample at the least-cost method, and use alternate means for the remaining 20%.

Some of these ideas may sound difficult and complex. But the real difficulty we have as an industry is the lack of commitment on the part of the public to take part in research. It may be that we are just not doing enough to encourage them, or talking to them in a mode they want to be contacted in. Customizing access and data collection modes may offer us a key to build that commitment for the future .... And transform our relationship with participants in the process.
As head of SSI’s Access, Supply & Engagement team, Bob Fawson knows that, when it comes to online research, bigger really is better. That’s why he has a laser focus on incorporating a diverse multitude of sources into SSI’s respondent pool—from managed panels to social media to online communities. Then he blends them into a methodologically balanced, stable sampling frame based on people—not sources, using the advanced SSI Dynamix™ platform. So data changes reflect real-life changes—not changes in sourcing strategy.

With Bob on your side, you get best-in-class sample with the greatest consistency…highest quality…and largest capacity, for reaching both niche targets and broad audiences. So you can bring everyone—and anyone—you need to your studies. Bob would never tolerate anything less.

Bob Fawson
Just one of the people working for you at SSI.