



Two New Survey Data Collection Methods Available at NCDOT

Web-based surveys and scannable forms added to mix

In addition to the more traditional methods of collecting survey data through paper ballots, telephone interviews and one-on-one interviews, NCDOT now has the capability to conduct surveys over the internet and through the use of scannable survey forms.

According to Doug Cox who is with the Productivity Services Section and is responsible for survey research projects at NCDOT, each of the two methodologies is becoming more mainstream in terms of how survey data is gathered. "Scannable questionnaires have been around for some time but historically they were better suited for standardized and repetitive projects. The development of the technology has advanced to the point where it is now cost effective to set up customized studies, which is the nature of survey research projects at NCDOT."

The use of web-based surveys has substantially increased over the past couple of years, says Cox. "As more people have gained access to the internet and, more importantly, as more people routinely use the internet for information collection and dissemination, surveys conducted online have been the natural progression."

The primary benefit of these two forms of data collection is the reduction in time that it takes to conduct a research project. Using traditional paper questionnaires, the time devoted to fieldwork can be as much as six weeks when considering the distribution of questionnaires, waiting for them to be completed and returned, and utilizing multiple contacts to improve response rates. As the completed questionnaires are returned the data must then be manually keyed into the computer's statistical software application, further increasing the project's time requirements.

Web-based surveys, on the other hand, are much quicker to carry out. Distribution to a given population is essentially instantaneous and the respondents perform the data entry task. Production and postage costs are also eliminated.

Scannable survey forms still require that project time be allocated for the distribution, completion and return of the questionnaires, and multiple contacts are used for rate of response enhancement. However, with respondents "filling in the bubble" on the form, the data entry phase is performed at that time. Questionnaires are simply scanned as they are returned and a data set is automatically created.

Every method of survey data collection has its inherent strengths and weaknesses. Web-based surveys and scannable forms are no different. Speed and the elimination of labor intensive manual data entry have been cited as advantages. But what are some disadvantages to these methods of data collection?

With web-based surveys, like many new endeavors, it can take time to gain traction. Response rates, at this time, are typically not as strong as other methodologies. Apprehension exists among some respondents as to the anonymity of electronic surveys. And not everyone has access to a computer or the internet.

The disadvantages of scannable forms fall primarily on the researcher. The forms must be designed to adhere to strict measurement standards in order to scan properly. They must also be designed in a way that enables respondents to clearly follow the question trail and know which bubbles to mark.

In spite of some disadvantages, both data collection methods offer the opportunity to conduct surveys more efficiently and in less time. To learn more about how these survey research strategies can work for you, contact Doug Cox at (919)733-2083, extension 626.

Survey Tip

An obvious advantage of web-based surveys is the ability to gather results quickly. However, there are risks associated with not allowing enough time for a population to respond. Chief among these risks is limiting the range of respondents. Early responders to surveys tend to be different than those who respond as a deadline nears. These differences include demographic variations as well as lifestyle patterns. A minimum of five days of field time should be planned for web-based surveys, with a maximum of 12 days. Including a weekend will aid in securing a broader mix of respondents.

Did you know...

A strong majority of American adults believe federal, state, and local governments should have been better prepared to look after the residents of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. More than three out of four respondents said the State of Louisiana (76%) and the City of New Orleans (76%) should have been better prepared, while 69% said FEMA was ill-prepared to respond. Local hospitals and nursing homes should have been better prepared according to 54% of survey participants, while 45% think President Bush should have been better prepared.

More specifically, respondents feel the government failed when it came to evacuation plans, tracking residents after they left the city, helping residents get medical care, and protecting medical records.

Poor communication between U.S. government officials and local officials as well as incompetent government agencies were two issues that contributed to the problems that occurred in New Orleans according to the survey panel.

The online survey was conducted in late September among a nationwide sample of 2,421 adults, ages 18 and over.

Source: Harris Interactive