Online marketing research comes of age
Jon Rubin
Brandweek; Oct 30, 2000; 41, 42; ABI/INFORM Global
pg. 26

Online Marketing Research Comes of Age

By Jon Rubin

"Do you like Oreo cookies?"
"How often do you shave under your arms?"

Whether the first question is asked in a survey via telephone, online or at a mall, the responses most likely will be similar. However, ask the second question, and the responses likely will be very different depending on which venue is employed.

Anonymity and the ability to get cooperation from hard-to-research groups such as college students or the gay community are positive attributes that have helped elevate the Internet as a vehicle for marketing research. Its speed (field work can be completed in days), cost (finding respondents with very specific attributes—like a diamond on the beach—is easier and cheaper online) and the ability to bring visuals to the survey process (from streaming audio and video to hyper links to Web sites) have attracted buyers of traditional marketing research to online marketing research and focus groups.

As online marketing research matures and evolves, it has become possible to draw conclusions about which types of marketing research work best online and which currently don’t.

In general, online marketing research has been able to raise the bar on cooperation rates, in part due to the nature of the Internet and in part due to the fallen credibility of telephone-based research. Response rates for telephone surveys have dropped from 40% a decade ago to 14% today, while online research can achieve response rates of over 60%. Telephone response rates have plummeted in part due to the use of telephone surveys as a nuse to sell products. Couple that with the dinntime intrusions, caller ID and answering machines, and it is easy to see why telephone-based surveying is suffering.

On the other hand, Internet-based research, whether through an online panel or Web site intercepts, is non-intrusive. Respondents to my company’s online surveys, for example, opt in and join voluntarily answering questions when they are ready. This leads to responses that are well thought out. The average Internet user is online at home for more than 17 hours a week, and men and women are now equally represented on the Internet.

In addition, the anonymity of the Internet provides a comfort level you don’t get with telephone or mall research, particularly when the subject matter is about income, medical issues, lifestyle or sensitive or controversial issues. From those questions that may simply make you squirm a little (“How much money did you lose in the stock market last month?”), to those you most probably don’t want to answer to another human being, even if you don’t know the person on the other end of the line (“How often do you have sex each week?”), Internet-based surveys tend to draw more honest responses.

I once conducted the same survey in a mall and via the Internet. The question was, “How often do you bathe or shower each week?” The average answer, via the mall interview, was 6.2 times per week. The average, via the Internet interview, was 4.8 times per week, probably a more logical—and honest—response.

So, what types of marketing research work best online? While there are many types of research highly conducive to the Internet, to my experience four types have become marketers' favorites.

Concept testing. A leading soap manufacturer was working on a line extension within its liquid body wash category and wanted to understand from current body wash users the relative importance of the new product prototype’s attributes. My firm recruited the target market—primarily female heads of household aged 25 to 64—from our proprietary online community of more than 500,000 households. Each respondent was asked to use Product A for a week followed by Product B the week after. Respondents came together online to participate in a 90-minute focus groups.

Sensitive issue tracking. A major airline wanted to position itself as more attractive to gay airline ticket

(Continued on page 28)
buyers. Our online research helped the airline understand the travel needs and preferences of gay travelers and the importance of having policies that support same-sex relationships so it could better position its services to that community.

Advertising communications testing. To help Cross Pen Computing Group and its agency, Ellenson Group, test the appeal of an ad campaign for a new product called CrossPad, we assembled an online brainstorming group that ran for five days.

Web site evaluation. A company was developing an online business that allows consumers to comparison shop for home products, major appliances, and consumer electronics. Before going "live," it wanted to get Internet-representative consumer opinions to the site's features and content. We conducted a series of focus groups in which respondents were asked to go via link to the site under construction, review the pages for five minutes, then come back to the focus groups.

For all its value, online marketing research does contain several drawbacks. For one, not everyone has Internet access, so it is difficult (but not impossible) to draw samples that mirror the U.S. population. As the Internet becomes more pervasive, this obstacle will diminish.

The random-digit dialing method of sampling commonly used in telephone research is not easy to achieve online, as e-mail addresses are not published in the same way that phone numbers are, and are considered private to each Web user. Also, online focus groups currently are text-based, meaning the client cannot see the body language or facial expressions of the participants.

However, the technology should soon eliminate this drawback.

Some clients are still skeptical about the security of images, product designs, and other top-secret information contained in online research studies, fearing that hackers or competitors are more able to gain access than with traditional methods. While no system is 100% secure, online companies are building highly secure systems to eliminate this worry.

Finally, panel-based online marketing research companies must convince participants to agree to be surveyed and to share highly personal information, which all raises the privacy issue. The most critical element of successful online marketing research is a panel that provides reliable, high-quality responses that accurately mirror the opinions and attitudes of targeted demographic groups. Unless the industry polices itself and sets tough standards for privacy protection, government intervention is as inevitable as respondents' reluctance to "spill their guts" if they feel their responses are being shared with the universe. It's fair to say online research will not reach its promise unless the privacy issue is squarely addressed by the industry itself, as my company and others are vigorously doing.

As the sophistication of online marketing research grows, including the integration of Web sites and streaming audio and video that cannot be integrated into offline surveys, the prevalence of online marketing research should continue to explode, as long as the industry does a good job of policing itself and protecting its most important element: the online respondent.