

NET RESEARCH ● Rules of engagement

# Eight tips offer best practices for online MR

By RICHARD KOTTLER

"You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."—Bob Dylan, 1965

Four decades ago, Bob Dylan's lyric was a call for dynamic individual thought. Today, it can be interpreted more literally: You really don't need a weatherman, you just need a Web browser. As we progress through the second decade of the Internet Age, the sheer

## Special report

ubiquity of the Internet as a consumer and business communications medium is absolute, and it is providing a dynamic means to get visibility into your customers' often-changing thoughts.

It has also altered the way we market and are marketed to, primarily by providing that same ubiquitous access to information and communication for marketers. In 2005, companies will spend more than \$1.1 billion

on online market research, a 16% increase over 2004, according to *Inside Research*.

The advantages of online research are self-evident: There's no need for data entry or interviews, and responses are collected automatically, saving time and money while eliminating coding errors and interviewer bias. Also, respondents may feel more comfortable in answering sensitive questions with their anonymity ensured.

With the increasing prevalence of online research, a handful of tips can begin to out-

line the best practices for maximizing the efficacy of conducting surveys via the Internet. Some of the tips outlined in this article, such as suggestions on planning, are equally relevant to offline and online research. Others are specific to the online realm.

No. 1: Planning—real-world common sense for the online realm

If you are planning an online survey, do you know why you and your organization want to conduct it? If so, use these reasons to develop your survey's mission. Once developed, the mission should drive everything throughout the survey process to make sure that every action taken supports it. If you're uncertain as to why you are conducting your survey, or if your answer is, "We do it every year," dig deeper for the real reason before you begin plotting steps toward implementation. Once your survey is drafted, test it on a sample audience and include questions that elicit feedback on how the survey can be improved before it is put into play. And make certain your sample size maps to your budget and time constraints and the type of analysis to be conducted.

No. 2: Understand your population  
Clearly, the population influences the entire research

process—methodology, layout, content, incentives; everything is driven by their influence. The inability to properly define your population has serious ramifications.

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No. 3: Use the correct medium to contact participants

Researchers can use a variety of media to invite participants to take part in online surveys, such as e-mail, Web links and pop-ups:

- ◆ E-mail notifications work best for a well-defined audience, and a well-written missive provides a cost-effective means of reaching existing customers and prospects.

- ◆ Web links provide an easy means to elicit general feedback from Web site visitors. However, it is more difficult to target particular respondent profiles using Web links.

- ◆ Pop-ups have fallen out of favor, particularly as federal and state legislation are limiting such windows when they are triggered by adware and spyware. Broad consumer dissatisfaction, coupled with free blockers from online properties such as Google and Yahoo!, has led to a veritable pop-up rebellion.

No. 4: Keep it simple

Creating a short survey to answer a few questions is easy ... and it's easy to create a long survey to answer many questions. The challenge is finding the balance between survey length and depth of questions and answers. The holy grail is the short survey that's long on answers. Here are some tips to make that happen:

- ◆ Keep questions and answer lists short and to the point.
- ◆ Use pre-existing questions when possible (the tried and true).
- ◆ Avoid using double negatives.
- ◆ Avoid double-barreled questions.

- ◆ Avoid leading questions.
- ◆ Avoid using loaded questions.
- ◆ Avoid vague quantifiers such as “few,” “many” or “usually.”
- ◆ Don’t assume knowledge about specific topics or issues.
- ◆ Consider the location of open-ended questions.
- ◆ Remember the audience for each particular question, not just the overall survey.
- ◆ Always offer a “prefer not to answer” on sensitive questions and topics.
- ◆ Pretest whenever possible.
- ◆ Get feedback early in the process.

No. 5: Set expectations—then reset them

The top two respondents’ questions are “How long will this take?” and “What will I get for doing this?” We’ll answer the first question here and the second in No. 8.

- ◆ Briefly state the purpose of the survey and how long it should take to complete.
- ◆ Make sure the length of the survey is appropriate for your audience and purpose.
- ◆ Let your respondents know their progress throughout the survey using a bar or percentage section.

No. 6: Utilize the power of open-ended questions

Traditionally, researchers think of closed-ended questions when drafting a survey, meaning you provide response choices for participants. Traditionally, they provide two major benefits: They’re easy for respondents to answer, and they’re easier for surveyors to tabulate. However, they do limit the breadth of responses to predefined answers.

Now, new text mining technologies are emerging that make it possible to harvest data and knowledge from open-ended questions by exploring a greater breadth of respondent attitudes and preferences.

There are two types of open-ended questions: those with a predetermined set of answers and those with a nearly infinite range of potential answers. For example, “Which soft drinks have you enjoyed in the past month?” allows the respondent to answer the question without supplying a list, yet there are only a certain number of beverages on the market. However, “Are there additional features you’d like to see in our products?” will generate comments that are not as quickly classified as a simple list might be. However, it may uncover views or

preferences that were heretofore unimagined.

Place open-ended questions at the end, as it gives you greater flexibility and more room to record verbatim responses. At the same time, be certain not to overuse open-ended questions. They do take more thought and time from the respondent and a slew of early open-ended questions may cause your respondent to quit.

No. 7: Monitor the field

Be prepared to make changes, if necessary. Monitor for the following:

- ◆ If the completion rate is low, why?
- ◆ Is there a pattern to respondent dropout?
- ◆ Have the respondents been appropriately screened?

- ◆ If the survey is media-intensive, have you screened for connection speed?
- ◆ Is the survey taking longer than stated?

Offer respondents a chance to rate their survey experience in a closed- and open-ended question.

No. 8: Make it worth their while

Offering an incentive helps motivate people to take part in your survey. When choosing incentives, though, think about how these might influence the types of participants they could attract, or ultimately, deter. No one wants a cadre of survey respondents who are the online equivalent of the trade show swindlers who load up on shopping bags full of free vendor T-shirts, pins and hats, with no intention of becoming a customer any time soon. At the same time, it’s

important to match the relative value of an incentive to the effort required to complete the survey.

With the Internet, time is on your side. Data from a Web survey can be collected in a few days or a few weeks, while a survey via the mail adds at least a month to the process. By using online surveys, you’ll save on postage, printing and wages for interviewers, and minimize the costs of data entry and data cleansing.

Ultimately, the Internet, if used properly, can provide the quickest path to valuable insight into your customers’ minds. ■

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