

Wednesday, 11 February 2015

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Don't forget the paper

9 February 2015 | By Jeffrey Schneider

Despite the ease and low-cost of online surveys, there is still a role for paper surveys with their ability to capture dependable data argues OSC World's Jeffrey Schneider.



In the age of digital media online surveys pop up at every turn. Do these surveys and questionnaires truly capture all of the data that companies need to grow and make strategic decisions?

Online surveys have their challenges. Traditional approaches will, in most cases, provide better information for analysis – I'm talking about the use of paper surveys and questionnaires.

The idea of conducting research via snail mail might sound out of date. However, the advantages are worth the added cost (printing and mailing) and greater effort needed to distribute, collect and process data using powerful software to analyze and ensure its accuracy; accuracy being the important point here.

Only when organisations are armed with quality data gleaned from surveys can they fine-tune their marketing, modify customer service approaches and make important strategic decisions. Information allows businesses to more effectively serve customers and deliver quality products.

The key benefits of paper surveys over their online counterparts include:

- The ability to target specific people to answer questions. There is no way to know for certain who will complete online surveys, whereas paper surveys are more directly targeted and delivered to the intended individual. The person who takes the time to fill out a paper survey is dedicating to the task. In contrast, few people power up a computer for the sole purpose of completing a survey, except perhaps people who are paid to do so.
- The opportunity to survey a broader group of respondents. People in some demographic groups are hard to reach online or are less interested in going online. Also, they may have less access to the internet, meaning that they will not be included unless paper surveys are used.
- Online surveys can be daunting because respondents don't know how many questions are involved. With paper surveys it is easy to determine the number of questions and how much time will be needed to complete the process. This improves the likelihood that a survey is completed entirely.
- Paper surveys can be longer, containing more questions. So you can elicit detailed information by asking questions in different ways, ensuring that the data gathered is more reliable and accurate.

While some surveys can be hundreds of questions, more typical is one that fills two sides of a standard size piece of paper. No matter what the size of a survey, the information on paper can be quickly scanned and digitised, processed and returned. Often paper surveys are processed and returned within a few days, but with the right technology they can be turned around in less than 24 hours.

Today powerful software analyses marks and answers on paper surveys. Software differentiates between answers, erasures and stray marks. This enhanced analysis rapidly generates accurate data.

Handwritten answers can also be recorded in a similar manner. Handwriting translation software is used to transform written words into digitally typed text. This data can be used for many purposes including gauging customer satisfaction.

Today, paper surveys are a vital bridge between traditional data collection and digital processing and analysis. Organisations that want this high quality data will have to pay more for it. Despite the growth and popularity of online data surveys, using paper to collect information still plays a critical role in organizational growth and planning.

Jeffrey Schneider is Executive Vice-President, Research & Development for OSC World

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