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Mail Surveys: Is there a place for them in a Digital Age? (January 2014)

We live in a Digital Age, there's really no denying that. Computers, tablets and smartphones are the "norm" for most people. So why should you dedicate any of your valuable research budget or other resources to a snail mail survey? The key phrase here is "most people." Online surveys are an excellent way to quickly reach a broad audience and efficiently gather data. We should know - we pride ourselves on being the "Survey Specialists," especially for web surveys. As such, we understand that it is important not to be one dimensional. Even in today's fast paced e-world, mail surveys are still an effective way of reaching a wide audience and collecting valuable data.

Although the collective "we" live in a Digital Age, it is important to acknowledge that there exists a large number of the general population who do not have access to any digital means of responding to a survey. For example, focusing research methods on online data collection could potentially omit a vast majority of elderly and low income households, thus skewing results toward a younger, more affluent demographic. Choosing to mail a paper version of your survey can increase the likelihood that those falling into these groups will be included in your results. In turn, your analysis will better represent all ages and incomes.

The use of old fashioned mail can also increase the chances of your survey being seen. E-mail is a great tool for communicating, so long as the message reaches the intended recipient's inbox. Spammers and hackers are finding more creative ways to bypass spam filters, increasing the amount of undesirable mail we all receive. This reduces the probability that your target audience will ever be exposed to your survey, as the invitation may be immediately marked for deletion without a second thought. E-mail is very easy to delete, done with a simple click of the mouse and often based on it coming from an unknown sender, or having a less than stellar subject line.

Paper is also a convenient way for a respondent to participate in your research project. There is no need to boot up a computer or mobile device in order to take part. E-mail is instantaneous and often encourages an immediate response, whereas a paper survey allows a respondent to respond at their leisure. With a physical document to hold, there are no hidden surprises - what you see is what you get. The survey length is clear right from the start, which, if properly designed, may prompt a respondent to complete it right away.

While we encourage you to realize the potential of administering a paper survey, our intention is not to make light of the use of technology in today's research environment. Depending on your sample, or even subject matter, it is often advisable to consider a "mixed media" approach to encourage participation, and possibly boost your overall response rate. Adding an online option to a paper survey by inserting a URL into your document is an easy way to incorporate the best of both worlds, while giving your respondent the choice of responding by paper or via the Internet.

In the next edition of StarTips, we will share our experience for designing and managing mail surveys which is sure to help make your next research project a success.