StarTips
...a resource for survey researchers

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Internet Surveys (October 2009)

★ **What is an Internet survey?**

Put simply, an Internet survey is a questionnaire hosted on a website. These surveys are designed to elicit responses on nearly any research topic and may be completed by anyone with Internet access. Internet surveys are easy to complete, allowing respondents to quickly provide information crucial to your research needs.

★ **How does the process work?**

Surveys are created using a variety of programming languages, survey application packages or on-line tools. The final survey is then hosted on a web server and is accessible to Internet users via a standard web browser like Internet Explorer, Firefox or Safari.

The survey can be reached directly by entering the Internet address (URL), via a link from another website or from an email invitation. Respondents complete the survey using their keyboard and mouse, and click a "submit" button when finished. Data is posted automatically to a file on the server for further processing and tabulation.

★ **How much does an Internet survey cost?**

In many cases, surprisingly little. As we all know, the costs to conduct telephone or personal interviews can be prohibitive. Even large mail surveys can often be expensive to administer. Total administration of an Internet survey can cost as little as pennies per interview. The best part: respondents do their own data entry! However, not all types of web-based research are cost-effective. Some respondent groups may be especially hard to find or hesitant to cooperate. Just like other methodologies, some studies may be well suited for this medium, but not all.

★ **Where do the respondents come from?**

While it is true that some surveys require sample procurement, this is not always the case. Many surveys fielded over the Internet include private groups such as company employees, association members, newspaper/magazine subscribers, professional journal readers, etc. The most cost-effective sample is usually extracted from your organization's own private list, if one is available. For other general research needs, consumer and B2B panels are available. While the cost for these is not inconsequential, panels offer the advantage of quickly recruiting from a broad range of potential respondents.

★ **How long does the process take?**

As long or as short as you require. Internet surveys can be designed, programmed and launched in a matter of days. Responses are available immediately and can be "harvested" on a regular basis. There is no need to wait for data to be entered. The survey can remain on-line for days, weeks, months or indefinitely. Results can be tabulated on any schedule, according to your needs.

★ **What if not all of my target sample has Internet access?**

The key term to remember is option. You can offer an Internet survey as one of several different methods available in order to make access as straightforward and convenient as possible. This allows all of your potential respondents a means to complete the survey. In some cases, a simple postcard may be mailed to potential respondents outlining the possibilities. Other situations may require a complete survey package to be mailed to the sample, with the Internet address (URL) of the survey noted prominently. If email addresses are available, email can be used as the primary vehicle for distribution of invitations. If desired, more expensive mail or phone contact can be reserved for reaching out to non-responders at a later time.

★ **Aren't there respondent confidentiality issues relating to conducting a survey on-line?**

One of the features of the Internet that appeals to its users is the ability to acquire information while remaining completely anonymous. If not known beforehand and if a user does not wish to enter their name or contact information, it cannot be gathered. You can provide the means to learn about people who visit your site, while still assuring their anonymity. Most companies will have an acceptable privacy policy posted for respondents to alleviate any concerns. For example, see our Privacy Policy.

* **How secure is an Internet survey?**

One must consider the importance of security issues to both clients and survey respondents. Survey vendors can take a number of steps to enhance the security and confidentiality of all data kept on their servers. Where appropriate, SSL technology may be employed to encode data as it is being sent between a respondent's computer and the web server. When handled properly, data collected via Internet surveys can be as secure as other survey methodologies.

* **Isn't the Internet subject to outages, downtime and other potential failures making it an unpredictable place to host an important survey?**

Survey vendors have the opportunity to choose from high performance servers, and ultra-reliable, high capacity hosting environments. At DataStar, our state-of-the-art servers and facilities are available 24/7 from anywhere in the world. If you've experienced anything below these standards, look elsewhere for a vendor who can meet the highest of expectations.

* **Our company does our Internet programming in-house. What are the benefits of outsourcing to a survey vendor?**

Many web administrators have the programming expertise required to create and maintain the technical aspects of an Internet survey. A survey professional adds the applied research knowledge to manage all phases of a research project. Choose a vendor that employs best-practice research methods to be sure that the data you collect will provide actionable results.

* **Can our survey have the same look and feel as our website?**

This is a question we get more often than nearly any other. Our survey designers can apply background colors, logos and other design elements that create a seamless transition from your website to your survey. Unless there are reasons to avoid this (a blind survey, for example), your survey should have *your* branding, not that of your survey vendor.

* **Can a respondent complete a survey in multiple sessions?**

Most surveys include a "save and return later" feature, allowing respondents to complete a survey in more than one sitting. An instruction page should provide details on this process. Typically an "Exit" button is placed at the bottom of each survey page which will save a respondent's responses and display additional instructions detailing how to return to the survey. Upon returning, participants are able to continue where they left off, as well as review and/or modify previous responses.

* **How difficult is it to administer a survey to non-English-speaking populations?**

At DataStar, we have managed multi-lingual Internet surveys in as many as 38 languages at once, including most European languages as well as double-byte Asian languages and right-to-left languages such as Hebrew and Arabic. There is virtually no limit on how many language choices can be offered for a particular survey. We have developed technology to handle multi-lingual survey projects in a cost-effective manner using a special template that we provide to translators. As a global medium, it is not only possible, but highly cost-effective to administer surveys over the Internet in multiple languages.

* **Other questions?**

The above attempts to cover many of the basics relating to Internet surveys. Feel free to browse our website or email us and we'll be happy to answer any other questions you may have on an individual basis.