



action line

occasional news and notes from **action marketing research**

February 2000

WATI

Someone else may have already coined the term, but if in five years everyone is talking about WATI, you might be able to say you first heard the term here.

WATI is our acronym for Web-Assisted Telephone Interviewing. In several recent studies with technical and professional workers, we have found it productive to set up some visual aids on a Web site for them to view while talking with our interviewer. The interviewer is still in control, but this enables us to present textual or graphical materials that could not be used in a normal telephone interview.

Obviously, this is a tool that can only be used selectively. It is of little relevance in consumer research. Even businesses audiences vary widely in the extent of their online access. Web penetration falls short of 100 percent even in among the digerati, so we have a fallback: a limited number of pages can usually be faxed to people with an appointment to call back to complete the interview (FATI?).

Like everything we do, these methods involve trade-offs. A certain percentage have access to neither the Web or faxes, and/or refuse to let us communicate with them this way. In compensation, we feel that respondent opinions about products and concepts are more realistic and more credible when people have visual as well as oral cues to go on. Mail surveys also permit the use of graphics or extended textual descriptions, but most of you know that telephone research can be turned around in a more timely manner than anything involving fully self-administered questionnaires.

Margin of Error

When reputable news organizations report the results of a survey, they typically quote the margin of error as plus or minus so many percentage points.

It is better to acknowledge the existence of random variation than to imply that polls are exact. The problem is that users of marketing research not infrequently ask what the margin of error is in a study. It is a simple question, but one for which there is no simple answer.

We would remind you—and your clients—that each statistic from a survey (a percentage, a mean, a correlation coefficient) is subject to a degree of random sampling error. This margin is not only dependent on sample size, but also on the distribution (variation) of the data.

A statistician can tell you margin of error for any given statistic at various confidence levels (.05, .10). But there is no single number that applies to an entire study. For the same reason, there is no magical sample size at which a study becomes “valid.”

One of our professional obligations is to keep our clients mindful of the realities of random sampling error; don't jump to conclusions based on small differences in small samples. On the other hand, we have to help those who (try to) speak the language of inferential statistics to do so accurately.



Hail, and Farewell

We are normally circumspect about mentioning clients and individuals by name in this space, but will make an exception for our recently-retired friend, **Bob Slocum**.

Bob graced the corridors of Minneapolis advertising agency Carmichael Lynch in the final years of his long (and, he would say, checkered) career as researcher. In earlier years he lent his talents to Pillsbury, International Multifoods, and others.

Consumer researchers are becoming extinct in the advertising world, supplanted by account planners. There are many reasons for this demise, but we don't think that Bob was one of them. He was not enamored with the fancy (but often shallow) research models that rattled around the advertising world in the '70s and '80s. Bob had a way of identifying core empirical issues and devising quantitative research to resolve them.

Clear thinking and good judgment will never go out of style, so it is with some regret that we see an able practitioner of both walking off the stage. Thanks for what you've given us, Bob.

Latest Thoughts on Web Surveys

We are doing more of this kind of research but continue to believe—quite strongly in fact—that Web-based surveys must be seen as a very specialized research tool.

The most credible use is as means of studying a Web site and its visitors. Links or pop-up windows invite the visitor to the survey site. While the resulting samples are inevitably self-selective, the problem is no worse than for other data collection methods we sometimes rely on.

We also see some potential for Internet-based research panels, on which the big players are working. If/when they achieve appropriate demographic balances and if the topics are appropriate, we would consider using such a panel.

But as a ready substitute for other data collection methods on any topic—don't hold your breath. The old adage still applies that you can only have two of cheap, fast, and good. Opting for a Web survey only because it is cheap and fast would be counter to everything we (and, we hope, most of you) believe in.

Legally Protected Research

Once in a great while, our clients need to do surveys in which the results will be protected by attorney-client privilege. Information so privileged is protected from subpoena or discovery during litigation.

To preserve this privilege, strict procedures have to be followed. First and foremost, all communication must flow between your research supplier and your attorney(s). That includes questionnaire drafts and any and all results—tables, reports, etc. Since internal researchers and managers must be out of the loop, you must be able to trust the supplier.

This is not exactly a fun mode of research, but if you must use it, you cannot be too careful.

Dumb Question

We recently received a questionnaire about a catalog from which we made a Christmas purchase. It included one of those classic, ambiguous questions: "What were the main reasons you ordered from the XYZ catalog in 1999?" The marketing manager probably hopes for answers like "Because of your wonderful selection" or "because of your divine pictures."

One could as easily and honestly answer "Because my wife didn't have time" [that's why I ordered] or "Because that's when the catalog came" [it wasn't 2000 yet] or "Because this catalog was on top of the pile." Moral: Put yourself in the consumer's shoes before posing any question.