



action line

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

February 2003

Ten Years—and Counting

We are half way through our tenth year of operation. Much has changed in the research environment during that time, but our fundamental principles are what they always were:

- A bias toward the actionability of the work we do.
- A commitment to working with our clients in a cooperative, collaborative manner.

This formula has served us (and you) well we think. At least no one has requested research that is not useful or that we become more obnoxious. Our actual anniversary is in August, and we are pondering what we might do to mark it with you.

At the Podium

A paper written by Paul Riedesel was selected to be part of the program at the AMA's prestigious Advanced Research Techniques Forum this coming June. We reported on this research in the December **action line**, and copies will eventually be available. Paul will speak about an alternative to discrete choice conjoint, its advantages and drawbacks.

Ten Years Ago

. . . we had a computer modem but rarely needed it.
. . . we did a number of large mall intercept studies.
. . . Custom Research and Winona were still independent firms in the Twin Cities.
. . . the Dow Jones closed about 3500.
. . . WordPerfect and Lotus 1-2-3 were viable alternatives to Microsoft Office.

Online Research

"So what kind of online research can you guys do?" That's a question we hear with some frequency. Briefly, we have the capacity to do most anything you need of a quantitative nature. In some cases we program and host the surveys ourselves; in others we use the good services of the Harris Interactive consumer panel. In all cases we look critically at what the best choice is for you. Our work in this field falls into a few main groups.

- Surveys of low to moderate complexity with customers, employees, or others of whom you have good e-mail lists. In most cases we will program these and handle the e-mail invitations.
- Surveys of moderate to high complexity with a national panel of consumers. These include conjoint studies. The panel size permits efficient research low-incidence populations. You may consider buying into the frequent omnibus surveys to screen for very low incidence consumers.
- Web site "intercepts." If your site has a high volume of traffic, we can set up a link to a survey. We do not recommend this for most research, but it is perfect for studies about your web site.
- Surveys of low to moderate complexity with consumers. We have access to lists of consumers who have opted in to doing research but are not part of a regular panel. We would host and program the survey.

And then there is our WATI (Web-Assisted Telephone Interview) method in which business respondents view a web site while being interviewed. Not on our list are mass e-mailings to random lists of people. Yuck!

Usability Research

Usability research is a current focus of Action Marketing Research. Its purpose is to improve the user experience with web sites (or software, PDAs, remote controls, etc.) and to make them more productive. There are two basic types of companies working in this field: 1) Architecture/development firms which test and tweak the technical aspects of sites and software as part of a (re)design. 2) Marketing research firms which assess the experience from a consumer behavior point of view often to prioritize redesign efforts/ options. That's where we come in.

Both work toward the same goals, and use similar processes. But the specifics and interpretation are slightly different.

Usability studies look much like one-on-one interviews, but the sessions revolve around "tasks" and task completion. (For example, can a person get items of interest into a shopping cart and then check out?) Usability labs have the capability to superimpose the face of the participant onto the corner of a monitor that shows the computer screen with which the person is engaged. This makes it possible to see what participants are doing as they talk.

We have found the following from the work we have done:

- With relatively few individuals (6-10), it is possible to get a pretty clear picture of what works and does not work well on a web site.
- It is typical to exclude those with very little experience with computers and software, in general. If not, the study ends up testing participants' ability to manipulate the mouse rather than interact with the site.
- It is important to have specific issues/options to test and often more than one site/section is included.

- The non-verbal findings show "what happened", but the discussion gets at "why". The fundamentals of standard group moderating are also required to lead a balanced discussion on usability.
- It is often difficult to give a person a pass/fail mark for each task, but this is not essential for the study to be successful.
- Usability research is not the best vehicle to "get to know your customers" (i.e. much of the learning comes from observations of the clicks and posturing.) Those tangentially involved may not be entertained or enlightened.
- Some of the sessions that are the most painful to watch can yield the most information!

Usability studies should be used to understand more than the efficiency of the site. An article in the latest edition of User Experience (the journal published by the Usability Professionals' Association) illustrates this by contrasting fast food restaurants (which are efficient and easy) with higher end bistros (which are anything but). They conclude this example by saying: *"If you are dining at Chez Marseille, qualities such as pace and presentation take on a new dimension. In this instance you are paying to linger over the wine and absorb the ambiance. If your server could bring out your meal with the same efficiency and speed as the counter person at Burger Bob's, you would likely be disappointed."*

Web Bytes

A number of our opinions and pithy comments from previous issues of this newsletter are available on our web site at www.action-research.com/bytes.html

They include comments on business practice as well as statistics and measurement. Also available are past editions of this newsletter.