



Internet Access Update

Our friends at the Harris Poll report that an estimated 73% of U.S. adults are online somewhere or another. The poll—by telephone!—was conducted in the summer of 2004. Online access from home was estimated at 65%. This represents a continued upward trend.

Of those with access, 44% now report broadband (DSL etc.) connections, up from 37% in late 2003.

All this bodes well for the use of Internet research panels which, like it or not, have become a staple tool. It wasn't always so. Harris reported only 9% online penetration way back in 1995.

We do not pretend that online panels are perfect or free from bias. The more important question is how they compare to other data collection methods available to us (primarily telephone surveys). The latter are less-than-perfect too, so either mode can be a legitimate choice for the researcher.

What Matters in Satisfaction

A recent article in [Quirk's Marketing Research Review](#) reinforces a point we have long preached about customer satisfaction research (October 2004; Dutka and Wagner). The authors write mostly about the link between problem management and satisfaction, but what we would emphasize is what their research measures.

The useful indicators are not 174 detailed rating scales ("How satisfied are you with the blueness of our corporate logo?") but factual reports of experience:

- * Did the customer experience problems and, if so, how many?
- * Were the problems resolved or not?

These exact questions may not apply to everyone who does satisfaction research, but something like them is usually more predictive of overall satisfaction and loyalty than more-vague attitude (or detailed satisfaction) questions.

Re-Thinking Copy Tests

We cannot begin to summarize the full argument made by the author, but strongly recommend an article by Spike Cramphorn in the June [Journal of Advertising Research](#) to all our friends in the advertising business ("What Advertising Testing Might Have Been, If We Had Only Known.")

If Cramphorn had his way, final copy testing would focus on how the ad alters the consumer's relationship to the brand. That is not simply awareness, registration of main ideas, or even persuasion. It has more to do with brand bonding, defined as "all the different ways the individual feels toward the brand and includes user identification, situational empathy, reliability, expectation, etc." This requires fresh approaches both qualitatively and quantitatively (goodbye clutter reels).

The ability of the ad to actually engage the person's attention is also fundamental. This can be measured in various ways, and calls for special diagnostics.

Don't believe us. Go read the article. It is very challenging and, we think, very perceptive.

Enhanced Online Research Capabilities

Having been in this business for a long time, it has been interesting to watch the changing modalities of data collection. Paul Riedesel was originally trained in door-to-door methods, and even directed one such study in the 1970s.

Today, of course, the Internet is often our best entrée to consumers and even business professionals. We are fans of Internet panels but find ourselves doing more and more online surveys that we host on our own domain. The key has been good software. We have relied almost from the start on tools developed by Sawtooth Software, and are now upgrading to a significant new version.

The list of enhancements is long (and somewhat technical) but include greater on-the-fly customization of responses, more advanced randomization of question sequences, and the ability to field longer instruments.

Several factors influence our choice of using an external research panel company versus do-it-ourselves methods. We can usually turn around the latter more quickly. This is ideal for studies with limited objectives, but more-complex projects will usually require the even more powerful survey tools that our external sources employ.

Showing Our Age

We have occasionally amused ourselves talking about research in the "old days." Writing in Quirk's Marketing Research Review, Jim Neiems asks who remembers:

- Correcting reports with "Liquid Paper"
- Paying \$900, total, for a focus group
- Paying female group participants less than men
- Calling the phone company to move phones Being proud of a new computer with 256K of memory

Why We Do What We Do

In the daily grind of the work that we researchers do—supplier-side or client-side—it is easy to lose sight of the fundamental role that marketing research should play. Fanciful definitions or departmental mission statements may be nice, but not that helpful

Textbooks, training seminars, and our very real job requirements too often keep us focused only on the nitty-gritty of turning around data. Sophisticated techniques and scientific discipline are necessary, but what are we really here to do?

We can do worse than thinking of the entire research field as a tool for risk management. Decision-making is inherently risky, as any choice has both potential payoffs and pitfalls. If we are doing our job, then our labors will help our clients make choices between alternatives, none of which are risk-free.

We can illuminate the upside potential of a good new product idea, but also slow the rush toward what would otherwise be a money-losing product introduction.

We can increase the return on marketing communications by finding out which themes, markets, or media are working (or would work) and which do not (or would not).

We can help management decide more intelligently and with more confidence which market segments are worth pursuing and which are best culled out.

In the long run, our individual prosperity and the fortunes of the marketing research field will hinge on how well we do at serving up information that is useful in making risky business decisions. If you are employed in research yet can see no direct connection between what you do and important decision making, it's time to worry. That is where our value comes from. It's not from "insight." It's not from brilliance. Our value comes from helping managers reduce their risks.