
Public Sector Use Of Internet Surveys And Panels

By Kevin Sharp, *Decision Analyst*

Increasing use of the Internet in market research is driven by three factors: speed, quality, and cost. With a cost differential that is usually significantly less than traditional modes of data collection, private sector marketing research managers are finding that the Internet provides more information per dollar spent than other methods. Companies are also finding that in a dynamic business environment they can no longer take weeks or months to get feedback from the market. And while telephone is still widely used, dramatically declining response rates continue to cast doubt on the representativeness of what was once widely viewed as the gold standard of marketing research.

Meanwhile, the Internet is rapidly becoming representative of the U.S. population. Currently, over 70% of U.S. adults have access to the Internet at home or work. Among younger age groups (ages 18 to 54), Internet penetration at either work or home is over 80%. The challenge, from a market research perspective, is to manage this emerging medium so as to overcome potential representativeness and reliability problems.

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would-be marketing research suppliers. We believe, however, that the best research will come from those firms that predate the dot.com revolution; that is, those firms that are raised in the methods and traditions of high-quality marketing research.

Decision Analyst, an innovator in research methods for more than 25 years, started building its Internet research capabilities and systems in 1996. Since then, Decision Analyst has become a global leader in Internet-based research systems by developing secure, scientifically valid, technologically advanced, and carefully integrated software and systems. Decision Analyst has conducted hundreds of online surveys using proprietary research systems. The surveys are typically conducted via a worldwide online consumer panel with access to more than 5 million people, and premium panels of executives, technology professionals, physicians, healthcare professionals, and contractors, as well as specialty panels of “creative” consumers and youth. We also conduct surveys using client-supplied lists of people who have agreed to be contacted by email.

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already has with the commercial sector. Specific areas where we expect special Internet surveys to play a key role include:

- Concept testing of new product/service ideas.
- Advertising research—tracking ad recognition and recall, testing creative concepts, etc.
- Product testing—to improve or test new products and services.
- Employee and customer satisfaction evaluation and tracking.
- Competitive analysis—strengths and weaknesses of existing and potential products and services

compared to others in the same category.

- A range of qualitative techniques such as online focus groups and depth interviews.

Just as private sector companies are finding, the federal government will discover that the quick-turnaround/low-cost/high-quality Internet options will enable the agency to test and refine its product and communications strategies rapidly and to dramatically cut time to market for new products and services.

Current OMB guidelines may have to change to fully take advantage of Internet technology for quantitative

marketing research purposes. We are confident, however, that this will happen because of the overwhelming advantages of the Internet for many applications. Until then, there are a number of Internet research options available to federal government agencies, such as employee satisfaction surveys, customer satisfaction surveys from agency-provided lists, and online qualitative research. Decision Analyst has the resources and expertise to help federal government agencies employ the most appropriate research design.

➔ To contact the author, Kevin Sharp, please call [1.800.262.5974](tel:1.800.262.5974) or email him at ksharp@decisionanalyst.com.