



Considerations for Using Computer-Based Surveys

More than half of the nation is now “on-line,” according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey. In September 2001, 143 million Americans – about 54 percent of the population – were using the Internet and about 174 million people – 66 percent of the population – used computers.¹

Technological changes in how and how often we can communicate mean technological changes in how we gather data. Now, there are many types of computer-based surveys used to gather evaluation information. Three of the commonly used types are:

- Web-based surveys
- Electronic mail surveys
- Self-administered computer-assisted surveys

Before you decide to use computer-based data collection techniques, consider the characteristics of the people in your potential sample or census, as well as how available computers might be to them.

Below are just a few of the many considerations to think through before you decide to use a computer-based survey.

Internet or World Wide Web survey

With this type of survey, an individual needs to have access to a computer with Internet access in order to provide responses. He or she does not need an e-mail address, but will need the URL address to access the questionnaire. A special password may be needed to access the questionnaire.

- Do the people in the group you want to survey have convenient access to the Internet? Those without convenient access will be less likely to respond to your survey.
- Do they know how to use the web to answer a survey? Will they know what to do with a password? While it might seem easy or common sense to those who know how to use URL addresses and passwords, those who do not often become confused, even if directions are provided. The greater the confusion, the less likely the response.
- If you ask sensitive questions, can you assure them that their answers are confidential? How do they know that they have a secure connection?
- Will the responses that you receive automatically go into a database that you are able to use in a data analysis program? What physically happens to the data once a respondent submits it?

¹*Executive summary of a nation on-line: How Americans are expanding their use of the Internet.*
Retrieved October 4, 2002 from <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/dn/html/execsum.htm>

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E-mail surveys

With this type of survey, you are generally working with a group of people who have an established e-mail address.

- Do you have permission from your potential respondents to use their work-related e-mail address? Workplaces struggle with increasing amounts of “spam” or “junk e-mail” and are taking measures to try to prevent their employees from being hassled by it.
- Do your survey respondents often receive solicitations by e-mail? Because e-mails are easy to send, the format is often overused. If individuals are desensitized to responding by e-mail, you could struggle with a low response.
- Do you have accurate e-mail addresses for those whom you want to survey? E-mail addresses and providers change. If you plan to use e-mail, but have out-of-date addresses, you could wind up very disappointed by your low response rate.
- Do you have names so to personalize your appeal for a response? In other words, if someone’s e-mail address is “fuzzy617@yahoo.com” – do you know what their real name is so that you can address them as “Charles?” The more personal your request, the better your response rate should be.
- How are you preparing submitted answers for data processing? If you ask respondents to answer the questionnaire by “hitting the reply” button, formatting may be lost and responses difficult to interpret. What is an efficient way to transfer the answers into a dataset that is useful to you?

Self-administered computer-assisted surveys

With this type of survey, you generally need to provide a computer that has the survey software on it to the individuals and groups you want to respond. Sometimes, this means physically taking the computer to their workplaces or homes. All the concerns about computer literacy apply, of course.

- In what time frame do you want to have the survey completed? Do you have enough time to take computers into the field? Do you have enough support staff?
- What are convenient times for potential respondents to work with your staff? What will you do if potential respondents are not there when they said that they would be?
- Will your potential respondents feel comfortable using the computer with you present, or will you need to make arrangements to pick up the computer at a later time? If you intend to leave the computer with the respondent, is the computer insured against wear, tear and theft?

Further reading:

Dillman, D. (2000). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method*, 2nd Edition. New York: John Wiley & Sons.