

An Interview With Our Methodology Expert

The Top Questions About Harris Interactive's Internet Research Methodology



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Leonard Bayer provides insight into the most frequently asked questions about our Internet research methodology.

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Why should my company consider Internet research?

Internet research is often an excellent alternative or complement or supplement to traditional research methodologies such as phone or mail. In fact, most traditional research can be done faster, for less investment, and with similar results through the Internet. At times, the Internet may even offer far better results. Depending on your needs, it can also be an excellent complement to traditional research methodologies (e.g., recruiting focus group participants through both online and offline processes).

Internet research often provides researchers with more reliable and discriminatory quantitative measurements and richer verbatim and qualitative responses than do other modalities. It also opens up new graphical, audio, video, and interactive research opportunities not available or cost effective in other modalities.

2

How do I know when to use Internet surveys versus CATI or mail surveys?

Knowing what type of research methodology to use depends on whom you are trying to reach, the questions you would like to ask, and the timeframe within which you need answers.

Features of an Internet methodology include, but are certainly not limited to:

- Any research involving the presentation of graphics or video or audio clips to respondents
- Longitudinal panels that can often be recruited and maintained at a lower cost than for traditional modalities
- Hard-to-find groups such as those with high net worth, those suffering from illnesses such as cancer, those who are "remote workers" or those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual
- Groups that are hard to reach by telephone or mail such as college students or frequent travelers or those who work the night shift
- Research on sensitive health, financial or other topics for which responses could be affected by the presence of an interviewer
- Research with an interactive component such as trade-off, timed exposure or card sort

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What are the advantages and disadvantages of telephone and mail research versus Internet research?

Advantages of Telephone Research versus Internet Research

- Respondents who participate in telephone surveys do not need to be able to read
- Telephone interviewers are able to clear up any misunderstandings respondents have about questions
- Access to the Internet is not a prerequisite to participation in phone research

Disadvantages of Telephone Surveys versus Internet Research

- Individuals with particular characteristics are expensive to identify
- Long or numerous response categories are not easy to present
- Ability of respondents to discriminate among response categories is constrained by memory limitations, yielding lower reliability

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- High variable costs exist
- Respondents are often rushed to formulate answers
- Personal or sensitive questions are difficult to ask
- Technology is making it more difficult to reach people
- Respondents are more likely to give socially desirable answers
- Lower reliability and validity of data collected by phone

Advantages of Mail Surveys versus Internet Research

- Low cost
- Low staff and facility needs
- Respondents can examine entire survey to gain a better idea of its purpose before they answer the questions

Disadvantages of Mail Surveys versus Internet Research

- Inflexibility of the questionnaire
- Difficult to determine if identified respondent is the one taking the survey
- Longer lead time for project completion
- Respondents can answer questions selectively, leading to higher rates of item non-response
- Little opportunity to customize the survey to the individual reducing the ability to detail answers with follow-up questions
- More difficult to manage subgroup quotas, which could result in higher incentive costs

TABLE 1: Summary of advantages and disadvantages among various data collection modes

	Face to Face	Phone	Mail	Internet
Measurement accuracy?	Moderate	Moderate	High	High
Speed of data collection?	Slow	Fast	Slow	Fast
Cost per complete?	High	Moderate	Low	Low
Survey logic flexibility?	High	High	Low	High
Representativeness?	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Visual media?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Social desirability effects?	High Bias	High Bias	Low Bias	Low Bias
Information yield/time unit?	Low	Low	Moderate	High

Source: Harris Interactive

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What about the validity and bias issues surrounding Internet survey results?

Harris Interactive has conducted more than 300 surveys with parallel components to explore this issue. Publicly available analyses suggest that parallel telephone and online studies produce similar results (see tables below). In addition, when we compared two years' worth of parallel data for attitudinal measures across a wide range of topics we found that the means obtained by phone and means obtained by online correlated at over 0.90. The following tables display data from two parallel studies. Few substantial differences exist, as made evident by the data.

TABLE 2: Comparison of parallel telephone and online health care data; replies of women with a specific medical condition (USA)

	Telephone	Harris Poll Online
Base	272	664
	%	%
Have been prescribed treatment	33	33
Filled prescription	97	94
On treatment less than 1 year	22	23
Initiated discussion with doctor	33	28
Discussed side effects with doctor	75	67
Discussed benefits with doctor	87	82
Discontinued treatment	25	24

Source: Harris Interactive (2002)

TABLE 3: Comparison of telephone and online political and other survey data

	Telephone	Harris Poll Online
Base	1006	12864
	%	%
Called, written or visited elected official	32	38
Written a letter to newspaper, magazine, TV station	16	18
Called into a talk show to express opinion	10	11
Attended a meeting where politician or elected official spoke	37	35
Worked on political campaign	10	11
Display campaign paraphernalia	35	36
Believe news contributes to violence	39	40
Believe video games contribute to violence	47	45
Believe television contributes to violence	58	54
Believe movies contribute to violence	57	57
Believe lack of supervision contributes to violence	90	92
Believe easy availability of hand guns contributes to violence	65	60

Source: Harris Interactive (2002)

All modes of research can suffer from biases. For example, both RDD telephone and Internet surveys can suffer from coverage error from, respectively, no phone or cell phone only households or no Internet access. And both RDD telephone and Internet surveys can suffer from sample selection bias from, respectively, call screening and blocking or self selection into online panels. Telephone research is no longer the “gold standard” by which all other modes should be judged.

Harris Interactive is the leader in conducting dual-mode studies. We are experts in using statistical methods to correct the bias in sampling methods.

5 Are time and budget constraints truly relieved by the benefits of Internet research?

All else equal, Internet research is less expensive than telephone research, primarily because of the reduced cost of data collection. In addition, Internet studies can be completed more quickly than studies that rely on telephone or mail methodologies. Although Internet research can be more expensive than mail research, it is far more flexible in a variety of ways. Rather than receive the lower cost benefits, clients often choose the option of keeping the budget constant, and increasing the sample size or complexity of the survey, yielding the ability to perform analysis at subgroup levels, or having the project fulfill more objectives.

6 What code of standards and ethics does Harris Interactive abide by?

Harris Interactive abides by the Council of American Survey Research Organizations’ (CASRO) Code of Standards and Ethics for Survey Research, as well as the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Code of Professional Ethics and Practices.

Harris Interactive abides by the principles set forth in the Safe Harbor framework as set forth by the U.S. Department of Commerce regarding the collection, use and retention of data from the European Union.

Harris Interactive is a licensee of the TRUSTe Privacy Program.

Harris Interactive staff is highly conscious of avoiding conflicts of interest by forming distinct project teams to handle research for clients who are direct competitors.

7 Does giving an incentive to a respondent introduce a bias to the respondent’s answers?

If the content of the survey is correlated with the incentive used, it may bias respondents’ answers. For example, if the survey explores attitudes toward different airlines and frequent flier programs, then those who participate in the survey may be more favorably disposed toward the airline whose miles are offered as an incentive. In most cases, however, incentives do not bias respondents’ answers.

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How long can an online survey be?

There are no technical limitations on survey length. However, we recommend limiting the length of surveys to 15 minutes. This is the equivalent of a 20-minute telephone interview. We have examined the impact Internet survey length has on cooperation and have found that the suspend rate tends to increase substantially at the 15-minute mark and respondent ratings of the survey experience also decline with longer surveys.

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What makes you better than your competitors?

Harris Interactive offers many features that translate into key benefits for our clients. Some of these features include:

- Dedicated project managers who know your industry, your projects and your work style
- Years of Internet research design consulting
- Seasoned programming staff – more than 160 programmers and growing
- Use of advanced statistical techniques to correct for self-selection bias and learning effects
- Ability to produce information that can be generalized to online and non-online populations in many areas
- Ability to offer online and traditional methodologies, depending on the research objective
- Use of proprietary tools to combine online and telephone interviewing in a single study without introducing additional labor costs or error risk; thus giving us the ability to use the best data collection mode (traditional, online or mixed mode) to satisfy the research objective.
- Experienced panel management team able to identify the most efficient way to obtain responses from a client's population of interest, which may result in reduced data collection costs
- Our many specialty panels that exist to serve the needs of clients who require access to low-incidence populations, such as new car buyers, or those with chronic medical conditions
- Our expertise in panel recruitment, which may be used to produce custom panels for long-term commitments to ongoing research needs
- Our extremely large Harris Poll OnlineSM panel, which provides sample source for many Internet research projects. Our understanding of this panel and our knowledge of attitudinal and behavioral bias allow us to project Internet research to most populations of interest. It is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this level of projectable confidence with "list based" convenience samples or names obtained from uncontrolled sources.
- Advanced research on research in survey design – one of the few companies actively dedicated to discovering more reliable and valid ways of collecting information online
- Our 40+ member methodology team, including statisticians, modelers and marketing scientists who use the most advanced research techniques available for solving our clients' business problems.

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What should the research industry know about Internet panel, technology and methodology?

Harris Interactive has been conducting online research since 1997. We've learned a lot along the way so we have the best practices to refer to and build on when tackling a new application for a client. We take great strides to minimize all potential sources of error that are associated with Internet surveys, and we produce credible, trustworthy information.

*This information is current as of May 2006
and may not reflect ongoing developments.*

