Everyone wants research that's quicker, cheaper and with higher response rates: Is the Internet the answer?

These days, most researchers are looking for ways to conduct research that's quicker, cheaper and with higher response rates. That's not always easy, especially thinking of that old adage "There is no such thing as quick, inexpensive and accurate research—You will only get two of the three." But is that the case now that there's the Internet? It's definitely true that the Internet provides a way to gather data quickly—gone is the time waiting for your print shop to print your surveys, as is the long wait for the USPS to deliver them. Gone is the time set aside for computer-aided telephone interviewing (CATI). And, there's no tabulating, scanning or data entry time; the database is built in "real time" as people respond to the survey. Finally, respondents seem to respond faster to online surveys than mail surveys—the point and click methodology seems to beat the tendency to push paper aside "for later."

Online surveys also come out ahead of more traditional methodologies in terms of cost. They are usually less expensive to produce as compared to mail or telephone surveys: Mailed surveys require a stamped and addressed envelope, the printing costs of the survey itself and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. Telephone surveys entail a live interviewer that is often paid by the hour, as well as the actual telephone call costs. Online surveys require none of this, and the preparation costs of online, paper and telephone surveys are virtually identical.

Internet research is considered by some to be more accurate than surveys in which the data is manually entered. With the dataset being automatically built on the backend, manual data entry errors are avoided. Plus, having the dataset automatically built has the added benefit of allowing you to examine the data as it is collected. Internet research also eliminates interviewer bias (potential for leading questions or pressure for desired response).

Sounds perfect, right? Not so fast—there are drawbacks to online surveys. The main gripe many researchers have with them is that the sample is inherently biased and not representative of the general population. Online samples skew slightly higher in income and education, slightly lower in age (although these stats are changing quickly and studies have shown that the fastest growing segment of Internet users is in households with annual incomes of less than $25,000). There is also the self-selection bias and coverage error mentioned in the last newsletter—not everyone has online access.

There is also great debate among researchers about the response rates of Internet and mail surveys. Although a few studies have found higher response rates for online surveys, most agree that mail surveys come out ahead in terms of higher response rates. Some report that this trend will only get worse because the novelty of the Web, and by proxy, Web surveys, is waning. Others say the "point and click" mentality conflicts with the time needed to complete a survey. The number of incompletes, or "drop offs," also tends to be higher with online surveys. Online surveys must be shorter than their paper counterparts—it has been suggested that surveys which consist of fewer than 30 questions/screens and last no longer than 17 to 18 minutes work best.

In conclusion, online surveys can fit into today's demands for abbreviated research timetables and lower budgets. Keep in mind, though, that simply collecting data quicker and cheaper is useless unless the data is accurate and of good quality. Only good data produces useful results and recommendations that lead to actionable, practical solutions.