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Online research grows up

04 Industry outlook: Online has come a long way in its short history, but there's still plenty of maturing to do. Lightspeed's David Day takes stock of how the medium has grown and where it needs to develop

The online access panel business is now a decade old. After shaky beginnings, it is estimated that 20% of research is now carried out online, and there are few areas of research that do not use an online access panel to reach at least some of their respondents. Consumers are segmented, concepts evaluated, ad campaigns tested and voters polled online. Even qualitative and social research are flirting more and more with the medium.

Why is this? Well, cost for one. It is, in most developed markets, substantially cheaper to use online data collection than face-to-face or telephone research. Secondly, it is getting increasingly difficult to get people to respond via traditional data collection techniques due to ex-directory listing, decreasing use of fixed line telephones and people's increasing reluctance to stop what they are doing and answer a bunch of seemingly random questions.

Despite this success, online is not without its growing pains, and there's a lot of maturing still to do before we can say it has really grown up.

The question of quality

Quality is one of the main debates in online research, and there are two main elements to it. The first is the various technical measures that can be used to verify panellist identity and determine that they are not duplicated. At Lightspeed we have invested significant sums in addressing quality issues and we are currently working with key players in the industry to establish best practice and to continue to improve the quality of deliverables. This includes implementing primarily technical measures such as unique machine identification, postcode verification, IP address checking, filtering out robots and de-duplication of panel members. It also involves a rigorous checking programme done by software and by our own research specialists who spot unusual patterns on actual survey results and investigate them.

The second element is the panellist experience. It is only by offering respondents a rewarding experience that the market research industry will be able to secure the ongoing co-operation of increasingly time-pressed consumers. The most important aspect of the online research experience for respondents is the survey itself – and this continues to be a challenge for panel providers. Despite the experience of the last 10 years, some client companies and agencies still insist on scripting surveys for face-to-face or telephone and submitting them unchanged for the online methodology. Getting the most from online research is a specialist skill. It may offer some cost savings against other methodologies but that doesn't mean it should be considered the bargain basement option. In many cases it can be faster, more cost-effective and even more accurate than other approaches, but it is a different way of doing research. That needs to be recognised.

The basics remain critical: short, well-written surveys, easy to complete, simple to navigate, and with clear, correct routing. There is still far too much complicated