Conference notes

‘Online Research: Now & Next 2011’ (Warc), King’s Fund, London, 1 March 2011

These are two summaries based on presentations from the above conference, both concerned with improving engagement in the research process. The first, from Jon Puleston, discusses ways to engage more effectively with respondents in online research. The agenda proposed by Puleston includes the application of methods used in qualitative research, and computer games – usually termed ‘gamification’. The second, by Niels Schillewaert, discusses ways to engage more effectively with all the key stakeholders in market research, around an ENgagement and ACTivation (ENACT) framework. They provide further perspectives on this key theme of ‘engagement’ following on from the Conference Notes published in IJMR Vol. 53 Issue 1, based on presentations from the ASC conference held last September.

Improving online surveys

Jon Puleston

Market research faces a dramatic problem. Response rates from online surveys have fallen by more than 50% in the last five years, and the pool of respondents has shrunk, with those leaving not being sufficiently replaced by fresh participants.

The blame for this rests firmly with our industry. When asked why they no longer take online surveys, people mostly answer that they are boring.

This decrease in interest is reflected not just in response rates, but also in the quality of data that online surveys now deliver. Respondents are becoming fed up with surveys made of endless banks of tick-boxes and grids, and so pay less attention to the questions, and take less care with their answers.

To reverse this trend, the industry needs to radically up its game and create surveys that can compete with alternative forms of online activity. From start to finish, survey designers need to keep in mind that an engaged respondent is a valuable respondent, and a bored respondent almost worthless.

So what can be done to improve online surveys?

Over the past three years, GMI has conducted extensive research into how survey completion rates and data quality can be improved (see Puleston 2009, 2010; Puleston & Sleep 2008; Puleston, Brechin & Mintel 2011). The following summarises our main findings.

1. Start by looking at a survey as a form of creative communication

Someone giving a PowerPoint presentation to a group of 50 people might be expected to use images and animation for interest, use a variety of font sizes and colours for emphasis, avoid pages full of bullet points, and perhaps even get professional help with its design.
Almost none of this is true of a typical online survey, even though this might well be delivered to an audience ten times as large. Surveys are commonly delivered in 12-point plain text, with little or no imagery or animation, and with respondents asked to digest 20 or 30 options on a page, and almost no thought for design aesthetic. No wonder so many find them boring to complete.

Applying a few basic design considerations to a survey can have a dramatic effect. In experiments, we reduced dropout by up to 75% simply by making surveys more visually attractive.

2. Engage respondents from the beginning
We have found a strong relationship between the degree of thought put into engaging survey respondents, and the time and effort respondents put into completing that survey.

Effectively engaging respondents is a huge topic, but one important point is that the process must begin with the opening message. Any good qualitative researcher knows how important it is to ‘warm up’ focus-group participants, and the same applies to online survey respondents. These are often expected to begin a survey by reading a large block of text, but our experiments have found that less than 50% do so properly. Breaking the information into sound-bites, telling a story, adding some imagery and humour, results in respondents investing more time in the survey and giving more thoughtful feedback.

3. Adoption of more creative questioning methods
The industry needs to move on from traditional ‘pen and paper’ questioning techniques, such as repetitive tick-boxes and grids. A wide range of more creative questioning techniques has been developed in the last few years, and evidence shows that using these can dramatically reduce straight-lining and neutral scoring, and radically improve respondents’ enjoyment.

4. Understanding the critical role of imagery
Images are not only a useful tool to increase respondent engagement: they also activate memory and imagination, and are crucial when asking people to evaluate brands and personalities. An image can trigger 20% more clicks, can be used to generate 100% more ideas, and, used carefully throughout a survey, can guide respondents through the experience and increase response rates. Imagine if TV only had text!

5. Learning from social psychology
Error messages and forced conditional-ity of open-ended responses are often very counter-productive in online surveys as they simply annoy respondents. Far better to use social compliance techniques like showing them a good example of what someone else has written, to establish a social benchmark that they copy. We have found this can help stimulate twice as much feedback. Asking respondents if they want to do a voluntary part of a survey can be an extremely powerful technique, too – rather than reducing the volume of feedback it can result in an increase in the time and care spent on the answer. Again this is a basic piece of applied social psychology. I would recommend anyone looking to improve their online surveys read a book on neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) to learn how language can be effectively used to not just encourage more enthusiastic responses.
but more honesty and candidness (e.g. Knight 2002; McPhee & Terry 2007).

6. Learning from qualitative researchers

Leading on from this, the online survey industry can learn a great deal from qualitative researchers, who spend their lives talking to human beings. The way they ask questions is very different from the language used in many online surveys, which has really failed to evolve from the type of wording used in face-to-face quantitative research.

Phrases such as ‘On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is strongly disagree and 10 is strongly agree …’ might be useful in a face-to-face survey, where there are no visual clues. But they are unnecessary if the question options themselves are clearly labelled, and can be alienating for the respondent.

There are also many qualitative techniques that can improve the responses of online surveys. Notably, we have found that projection methodologies and tasking exercises, like mood-board building, work brilliantly. Respondents tend to enjoy performing more intellectually involving tasks, and placing questions into a more imaginary framework stimulates their imaginations and can lead to much richer data.

For example, we asked respondents to evaluate a new product idea as if they were a judge on a game show called ‘New Product Factors’, and this quite literally trebled the volume of insightful feedback.

7. The value of piloting

Piloting an online survey is quick and easy, and can be extremely valuable, but this does not yet seem to be generally recognised: less than 5% of research projects we run are piloted to test the effectiveness of the questionnaire.

This might be an attitude left over from the days of face-to-face research, when piloting a study was prohibitively expensive and time-consuming. The benefits of piloting online, however, are clear to anyone who has done so. Observing how questions are answered by a test sample of 50 respondents eliminates the guesswork in judging how the overall sample will do so. Mistakes can be spotted and corrected, and the framing of questions and options refined, eliminating redundancy and increasing quality of feedback.

As an example of the power of piloting, we have just finished completing the piloting process for a global ethnographic research study for Sony Music. During this process we conducted seven waves of pilots, the questionnaire design was gradually improved, along with the use of imagery and engagement techniques outlined above, which resulted in an increase in respondent feedback from 130 words to over 400.

8. The power of game-play

In the future, we believe that successful survey design will incorporate many techniques developed through an understanding of game-play. This does not necessarily mean ‘shoot ’em up’-style surveys, but developing an understanding of why people treat some tasks as games, into which they will pour time and effort for little or no reward, and some as work, which they might perform resentfully even when rewarded.

Completing most online surveys is currently seen as work, with the reduction in willingness and engagement that implies. But a subtle reframing of survey questing techniques, injecting fun or
competitive elements, feedback mechanisms and more imaginative imagery, can lead to them being perceived more as games. The resultant increase in respondent enjoyment leads to a marked improvement in data quality and value. In some of the game-play experiments we have conducted so far we have seen six-fold improvements in the quality of feedback and the time respondents would dedicate to a completing a task.

9. Other changes the industry could implement
Outside of basic survey design improvements, we would like to see:

• industry bodies promoting a recommended maximum online length of interview; we have found that interviews longer than 30 minutes tend to quickly lose respondents
• the addition, at the end of every survey, of an industry-standard mechanism for recording respondent satisfaction; this would apply market pressure to dissuade research firms and clients from designing surveys respondents don’t enjoy taking
• an increased promotion of excellence in survey design, through industry competitions and awards.

References

Puleston, J., Brechin, M. & Mintel (2011) Redesigning Mintel’s online brand research survey to re-engage respondents and improve data quality, winner of the ARF Great Minds Quality in Research award.

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**The future of online research: engaging and activating stakeholders**

Niels Schillewaert

*Market research is in a state of limbo*

Do you ever ask yourself the basic questions: ‘What is research good for? What is the higher purpose?’ Asking myself these questions regularly, they always remind me of the time of my PhD studies at PennState University. When I reported about the advanced statistics and maths courses I followed to my mentor Gary Lilien, I mentioned I had a hard time keeping up and understood almost 80% of it. He smiled and replied ‘as long as it stimulates your thinking, I am satisfied’. The same holds for the purpose of market research. Research needs to influence management’s decision making, but even more basically just stimulate their thinking and inspire them.

But, if we are honest, a lot of the research that is commissioned by clients does not have the necessary impact. We overly focus on data, analysis or technicalities, reliability, representativity, etc. Sure these are important, but often lead to numbers that are exactly wrong rather than approximately right (to quote J. Tukey). Research has commoditised – clients search for ‘more and cheaper’, not true transformation or added value.