

# on-line surveys

## what respondents say about them!

by Jason Ten-Pow



Increasingly, more market research buyers and suppliers are turning to the Internet for research data collection. Compared to traditional methodologies such as mail, in-person and telephone, Internet-based research is only just beginning to mature. While many best practices have been developed for “older” methodologies, the Internet presents researchers with a host of po-

1. Questions should be presented one-at-a-time.
2. The number of clicks should be reduced as much as possible.
3. When offering incentives, a greater chance of winning one of a number of smaller prizes is more desirable than incentives that offer a small chance at a big prize.
4. Keep surveys short and simple.

---

### Two-thirds of respondents prefer to have only one question presented at a time on the screen when completing an Internet-based survey.

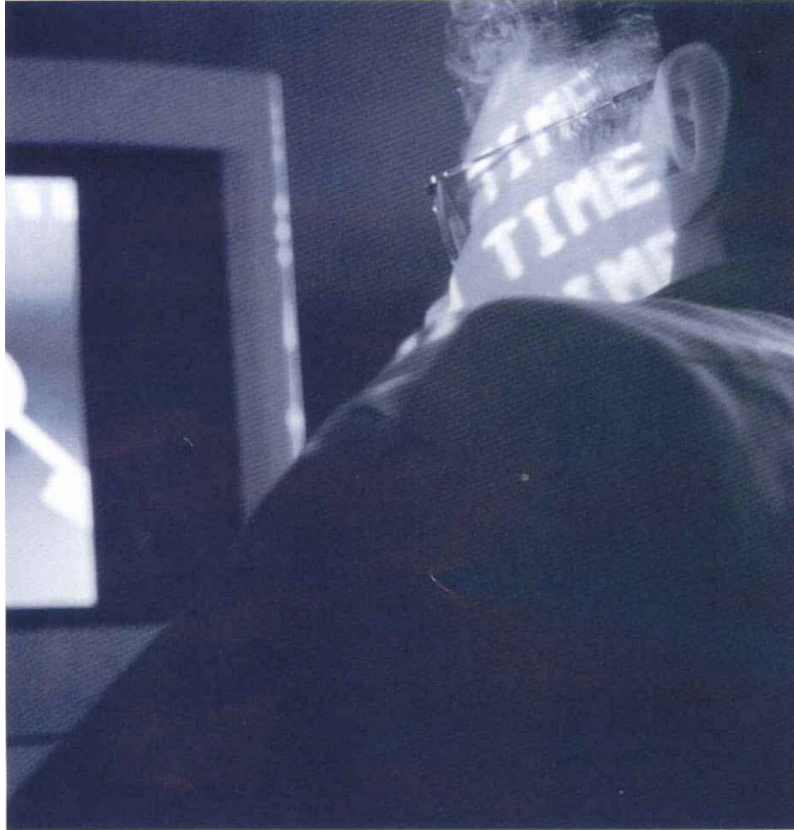
---

tential pitfalls. There is seemingly no limit to the complexity that can be built into this new research medium. To this point, Internet survey design “norms” have been the result of practitioners continuously trying various approaches, often in the self-interest of the practitioner (i.e., what is easiest to program, what is the cheapest). But how does one preserve that all-important resource: respondents’ willingness to participate?

To better understand the impact of on-line survey design on the most important ingredient in the market research process – the respondent – OnSurvey undertook a study<sup>1</sup> to examine the preferences of on-line survey participants. Here is what we learned.

#### 1. Present Questions One-At-A-Time

Two-thirds of respondents prefer to have only one question presented at a time on the screen when completing an Internet-based survey. Many researchers use tables to display multiple questions on a page as an alternative to presenting questions one-at-a-time. The perceived advantage the table format presentation of questions is that it makes it easier for respondents to select answers quickly. Unfortunately, this also makes it easier for respondents to click through questions without reading and increases the probability of collecting invalid data. Some may argue that rotating the order of the questions reduces this. But in fact, rotation compounds the problem by



randomizing this type of error rather than reducing it. The one-at-a-time survey question presentation approach is not only preferred by respondents, it is also a methodologically sound approach.

in HTML and presented one-at-a-time, respondents are required to click an extra button to load the next question (which results in extra clicks for each question in the survey). However, surveys built using dynamically driven

### **Respondents prefer a smaller incentive with a greater chance of winning than a larger prize with a miniscule chance by more than two-to-one.**

#### **2. Reduce Clicks**

Minimizing the number of clicks to allow survey completion with minimum effort from respondents can be very difficult to accomplish when using the preferred one-question-at-a-time approach. While this presents a bit of a trade-off, there is a technological solution available. When questions are programmed

server side technologies can be programmed so that when a respondent clicks on his/her answer, the next questions loads automatically on the screen. Web development platforms such as Active Server Pages (ASP) are recommended, since it allows questions to be presented one-at-a-time without increasing the number of clicks a respon-

dent must provide to complete a survey. While this feature can be difficult to program, it does simplify the respondent's survey completion process tremendously.

Respondents do not like using drop down menus, the keypad or the number pad to input their response, since it increases the time spent completing a survey (a key reason for mid-survey dropouts). A total of 92% of respondents prefer to use check box or a radio button to enter their response.

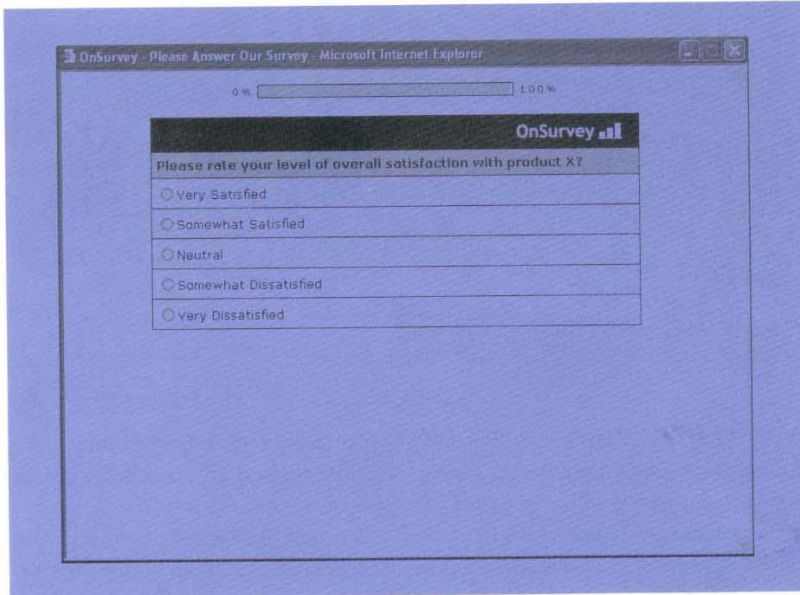
Maximizing the use of close-ended questions and building surveys using dynamically driven server technology, thereby reducing clicks, helps reduce respondent fatigue and increases the likelihood the respondent will complete the entire survey.

#### **3. Offer Incentives**

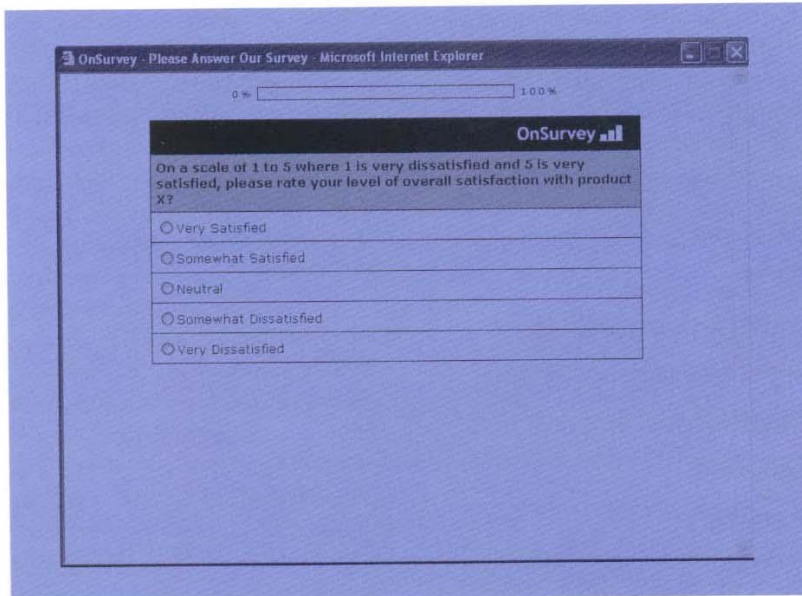
As in traditional research media, providing an incentive can be a strong motivating factor for participating in an on-line market research study. However, merely having an incentive may not be enough. The odds of winning the prize can influence willingness. Respondents prefer a smaller incentive with a greater chance of winning than a larger prize with a miniscule chance by more than two-to-one. For practical purposes, it is better to provide survey participants a chance to win one of ten \$100 prizes rather than one \$1000 prize. Like most weekend gamblers who head to the blackjack table because it has the best odds in the casino, respondents prefer higher than lower odds for their incentives.

What is the effect of incentives on the respondent's tolerance for survey length? Our study shows that incentives help to reduce survey abandonment. If no incentive is offered, only 16% of respondents would complete a survey that takes longer than five minutes. However, if an incentive is offered, 46% of respondents indicate that they would be willing to complete a survey that takes over 5 minutes.

The On-line Best Practice



The Telephone Way



4. Keep Surveys Short and Simple

As much as researchers want to think that respondents give serious and deep thought to each and every question asked, almost two-thirds of respondents report reading a survey question only once. Therefore, each on-line question must be as short as possible and easy to read.

A common error made by researchers is to design on-line questionnaires as

they would a telephone questionnaire.

For example: a typical telephone survey question would read as follows:

“On a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is very dissatisfied and 5 is very satisfied, please rate your level of overall satisfaction with product X?”

While this is suitably phrased for a telephone survey it is not appropriate for an on-line study. This question has

more than 20 words and our survey results show that most respondents would prefer that questions be phrased in 20 words or less. Telephone-style wording may contain needless verbal complexity. The on-line medium is a visual one. One can take advantage of this. In the on-line environment, scales can be clearly anchored so that there is no need to explain them in the question text. This helps reduce the effective question length and allows the respondent to focus on the meaning of the question.

There are a number of ways to enhance the on-line survey experience of respondents, thereby protecting the most important research resource, the willingness of a respondent to participate in a survey. Ask questions one-at-a-time and design surveys, whenever possible, using dynamically driven server side technology rather than HTML. This technology helps to minimize the clicks required to complete a survey when presenting questions one-at-a-time. Offer incentives that include a greater chance of winning one of several smaller prizes instead of one chance at a large prize. Keep surveys simple. Take advantage of the visual power of the on-line environment to keep questions short. Keeping these principles in mind when designing on-line surveys, will help preserve participation among those who are on-line.

2  
1  
1  
2

<sup>1</sup> An e-mail invitation with a URL link to an on-line survey was sent to 1,500 individuals across North America who had completed at least one on-line survey within the past twelve months. A total of 354 individuals completed the survey. Data was collected from July 17th to July 23rd, 2002.