

# **Best Practices for Online Research: Approaches You Can Trust**

**A White Paper  
from InsightExpress**

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## The Rapid Growth of Online Research

The use of online surveys is growing at a phenomenal rate. In 2001, online market research revenue reached \$333.5 million, representing 50% growth over 2000, when companies conducted \$221.5 million in online research, and a nearly 400% increase over 1999 when online research generated \$92.7 million. Projections for 2002 are that online research will reach close to \$500 million.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, response rates are plummeting for traditional survey methods. The American Public, inundated with heavy telemarketing and direct mail campaigning, is becoming less and less receptive to telephone and mail research – even taking steps to screen and block incoming calls with answering machines and caller-ID systems.

As traditional completion rates sink, rates for well-designed online surveys continue to rise to over 80%. One reason: While traditional surveys are increasingly seen as intrusive, respondents perceive online surveys as less threatening. For example, recent studies show that people are more willing to answer questions on sensitive issues on the Web than they are in phone interviews. Online research respondents are also more willing to answer open-ended questions than those responding to mail or telephone interviews.

The benefits of online research are apparent – speed, flexibility, and affordability are among the most commonly cited. Beyond these benefits, the reality is that online research produces **higher quality results than traditional methods** when based on solid, time-tested methods and techniques. The following white paper examines the Best Practices needed to best utilize the Internet for the reliable research you need and demand.

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<sup>1</sup> Inside Research, Volume 13, Number 1, January 2002.

## More Representative Every Day

Before adopting any methodology, researchers must first determine whether they can obtain respondents that will be representative of their target market(s). While no methodology is perfect – online research is becoming closer to 100% representative of the U.S. population every day. Nearly two-thirds of all households are online, meaning that the profile of the average adult American Internet user is rapidly converging with that of the average American.

Example Criteria	1996 Online Population	2002 Online Population*	U.S. Population (2000 Census)
Gender: Male	62%	49%	49%
Gender: Female	38%	51%	51%
Marital Status: Married	59%	53%	53%
Household Income: Mean	\$62,700	\$49,000	\$40,816**
Household Income: \$100K+	20%	11%	6%
Education: College+	48%	35%	22%
Age: Adults 18-49	88%	72%	63%
Age: Adults 50+	12%	28%	37%

\* *InsightExpress Sample*

\*\* *1999 U.S. Census*

Comparing the respondent base of Internet users versus pulling a mail or phone sample from a U.S. adult population frame shows:

- The gender distribution of online users is **identical** to that of the general population (as reported by the U.S. Census).
- The marital status along all dimensions is **identical** to the general population.
- The age distribution of online individuals is also approaching that of the general population.
- The average online household income is rapidly approaching that of the general population.

These fundamental demographic shifts, in combination with higher respondent cooperation and survey completion rates, make it feasible to migrate a variety of research applications from traditional methodologies to the online environment – with impressive results.

## Validating Online Research

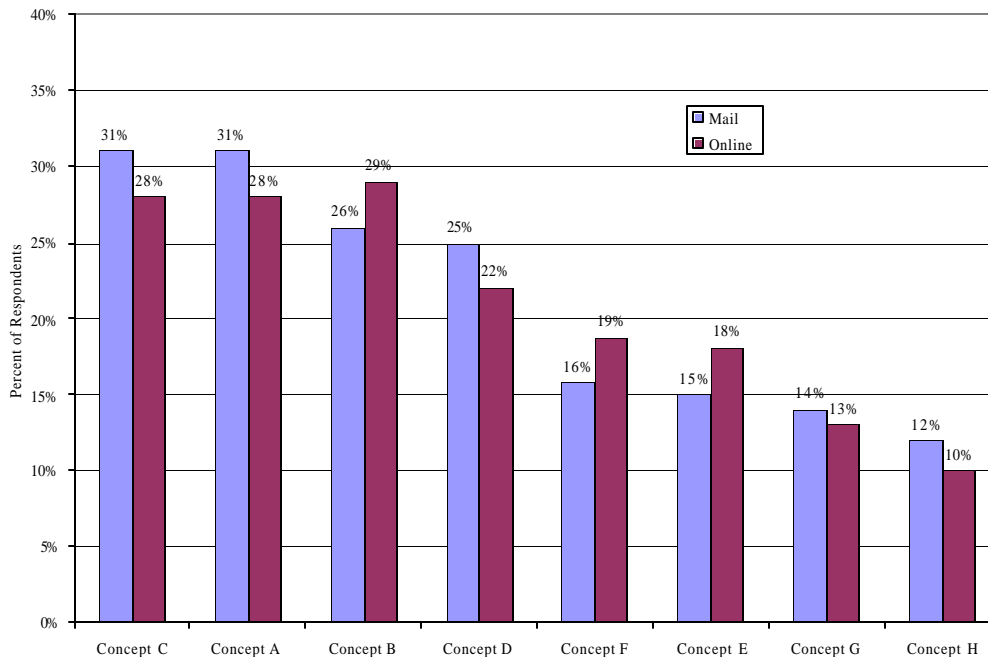
InsightExpress has validated online research through side-by-side studies with traditional methods for a variety of applications including concept testing, brand and awareness tracking, opinion and satisfaction measurement. Each time the online research study produced results that mirrored the data from traditional methods.

## Replicating Mail Studies Online

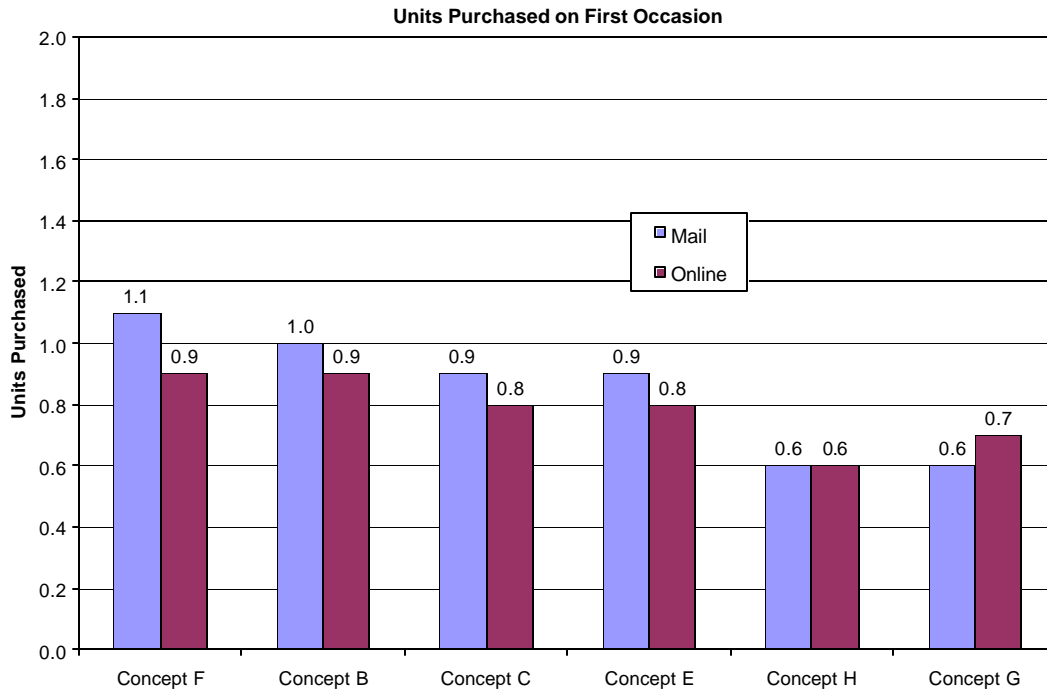
Looking for a faster, less expensive way to conduct its concept testing program, a global health and personal care products company – with 54 product lines reporting annual worldwide revenues of more than \$50 million each – recently approached InsightExpress to develop side-by-side tests comparing the results of mail and online concept tests.

Examining the online results against the mail survey results, we looked at many key measures. For example, the "likeability" of the concept adheres closely to rank order and magnitude results when compared to mail results.

Liking, Top Two Box Score



A virtually identical level of response in the number of units respondents intended to purchase on the first occasion.



Overall, the results are clear. Recruiting from the U.S. online population, we were able to replicate the performance of validated mail surveys fielded to the general U.S. population. Not only were results consistent as measured by rank order, the magnitude of the responses was also precise. This includes key metrics such as concept purchase intent, believability, liking, unit purchases, and other dimensions and diagnostics.

## Sample Diversity is the Key

Just as important as the size of the respondent pool is the diversity of sample within the group. You would not conduct a telephone study exclusively in area code 212 (Manhattan) to get a clear, representative picture of the U.S. population. While you would be able to complete the survey based on the number of Manhattan residents, the attitudes and opinions inherent with this group would not be representative of the entire Country. The same goes for online research – while sheer numbers can be achieved at specific sites, you will not obtain truly representative data from just one site. Visitors to specific sites tend to have very similar profiles, at the very least profiles that are more similar than the population at large.

That's why InsightExpress uses a methodology we call e-RDD. This methodology is based on the premise that the only way to a get truly representative sample is by recruiting respondents from thousands of websites, all across the Internet. Recruiting from as broad a range of sites as possible provides the level of randomization that is essential for representivity. The result is a respondent pool of more than 100,000,000 and reliable survey data from a truly representative sample.

	2000 US Census	InsightExpress' e-RDD	MSN	AOL
Gender: Male	49%	49%	49%	35%
Gender: Female	51%	51%	51%	65%
Marital Status: Married	53%	53%	65%	54%
Household Income: Mean	\$40,816	\$49,000	\$64,506	NA
Education: College+	22%	37%	55%	56%
Age: 25-54	59%	64%	71%	75%
Number of Sites for Recruitment	NA	33,500+	25-40	9-15
Unique Visitors per Month	NA	104M	78M	93M
Reach of Online Population	100%	87%	65%	78%

Source:

US Government

InsightExpress,  
MediaMetrix, Q2 2002

Greenfield Online,  
MSN.com, MediaMetrix,  
Q2 2002

SPSS, Q4 2001,  
MediaMetrix Q2, 2002

## Survey Creation

The most common misstep when designing an online survey is to take the same survey used for telephone or mail and simply put it online. While many of the basics of good survey design apply to all methodologies, there are specific requirements and considerations when designing online surveys. Sound survey design is critical to both response rates and the reliability of the survey data.

### Overall Considerations

Before writing a single question for your survey consider the following:

- What problem are you trying to solve?
- What decision(s) do you need to make to solve that problem?
- What kind of information do you need to make your decision(s)?
- Who can give you that information?

The objective of any survey is to gather the information you need to make a sound decision – so it is important that you develop a single hypothesis and develop a survey around testing that hypothesis. Avoid the temptation to ask a respondent too much. While asking the "everything when you have them" may work in with mail research, online respondents will not tolerate longer surveys. If you find that you have more than one objective, give serious consideration to developing more than one survey. The affordability and accessibility to respondents online research provides makes it both possible, and the best approach.

In addition, you want to build a straightforward survey that is:

- Interesting and engaging for participants
- Free of jargon
- As short as possible

And you should test your survey before rolling it out to your entire respondent base.

## Question Sequencing

Your survey should be designed keeping in mind that you are building a relationship with your respondent. As you build any relationship, you work up to the harder, more personal questions.

### Introduction

Begin your survey with a brief introduction that thanks the respondent for participating and for his/her time. It's important that you avoid revealing your survey objective. Instead, offer a sincere explanation that may go something like this:

*"Your opinions are very important to us. Your responses will be used to create better products and services. This survey will take no longer than 10 minutes."*

**Set the Proper Expectations:** If it's going to take 15 minutes for someone to complete your survey, don't promise that they'll be able to do it in five. And if you're willing to share the results of the survey, say how and when. Be as truthful as you can about the purpose of the study. If you're offering an incentive, be clear about what it is and when a respondent should expect to receive it.

### Background Questions

Start with questions that are meaningful but not threatening. Questions like "What do you think of \_\_\_?" "Do you travel during the summer?" are not too personal but get your respondents into the mindset of answering questions.

For example, when conducting a survey to find out how current customers feel about your company's returned-goods policy, start by asking whether the respondent has ever returned an item that they purchased. The question is straightforward and the answer options are limited to either "yes" or "no." It's easy to understand, easy to answer, visually simple and doesn't require a lot of work on the respondent's part.

Research has also shown that people are more likely to complete a survey and provide honest answers if they can start answering questions related to what the survey is about at the very beginning. The first question should be one that captures the respondent's interest, is easy to understand and easy to answer. At all costs avoid multiple-answer grids at the beginning of the survey.

*Example of a good (below) and bad (right) first survey question - make sure your first question does not overwhelm or discourage your respondents by seeming too complex and/or time consuming.*

1. This is a short survey regarding general investment practices which should require approximately 5 minutes. Thank you for sharing your opinions.

Overall, how would you characterize your investment horizon? (Select one)

Immediate term—less than 1 year

Medium term—1 to 5 years

Long term—greater than 5 years

Don't Know

Next Question

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InsightExpress.com

1. How do you rate each of the following items?

	1 Excellent	2 Satisfies	3 Neither Satisfies nor Not Satisfies	4 Not Satisfies	5 Not at All Satisfies
Price	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Performance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Availability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Usability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reliability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Flexibility	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall Quality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customer Service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Ease Into Harder Questions

As you ease into the harder types of questions, here are some helpful rules of thumb:

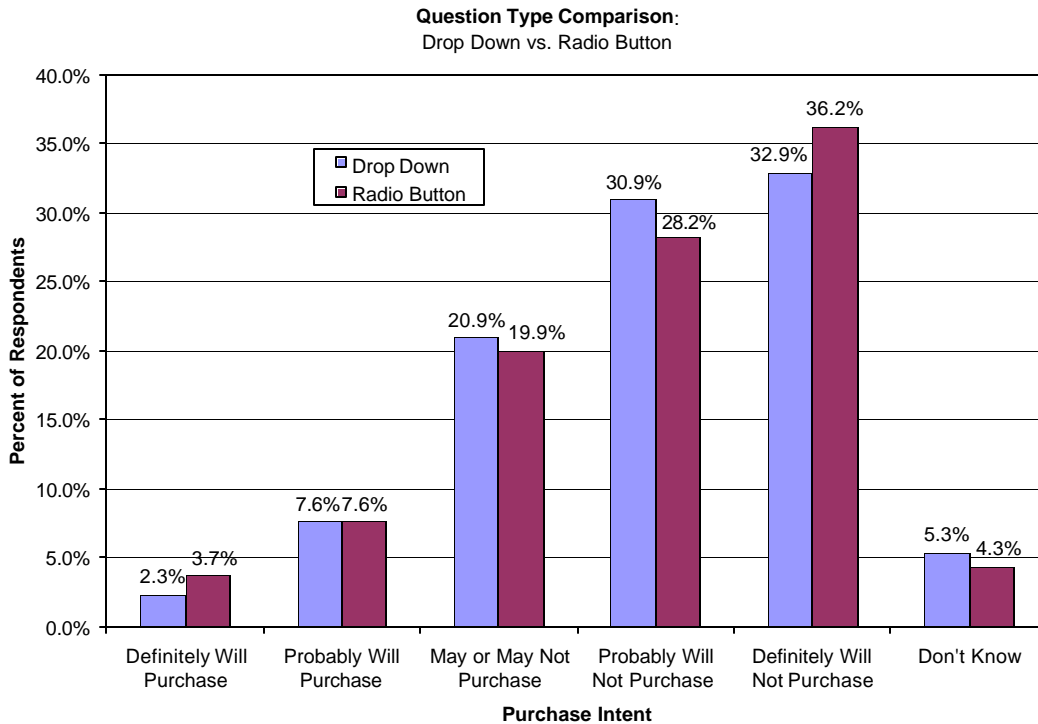
- For multi-select questions, always use a checkbox question with a maximum of 20 rotating list items. Include an "Other: Specify" choice and avoid drop-down formats that require use of the keyboard "control" key.
- Providing a "Don't know" option lets you avoid forcing respondents to choose answers when they're unfamiliar with a concept.
- Include no more than three to five open-ended questions – although they can elicit some important insight, they also require a lot of respondent time and effort. Never make open-ended answers mandatory.
- Use no more than three rating grids, with no more than 15 elements per grid – to help avoid confusion. Focus on proper presentation and sequencing. Answers to grid questions should typically be optional.
- Limit your survey to one ranking/allocation question of no more than seven to ten elements. And then use this type of question only when absolutely necessary. If used, it is best to limit the requirement to rating either the top three or the bottom three – ranking a longer list will be frustrating for your respondent and your data will reflect that.
- Refrain from using an excessive number of images – this can seriously slow down your survey for low-bandwidth users.
- Take advantage of skipping and piping options to personalize and streamline your survey.

## Demographics

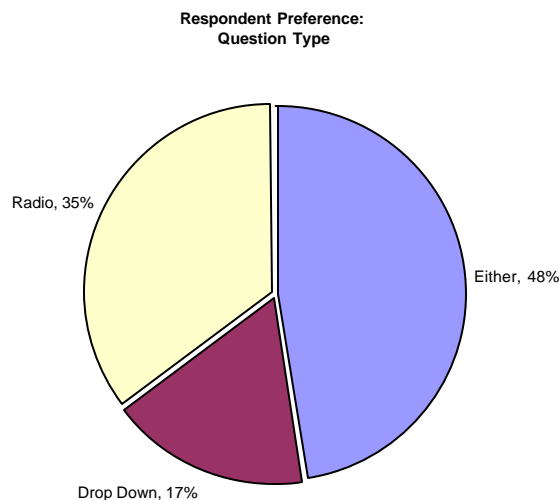
Wrap up your survey with your demographic questions – by that time you have built a rapport with your respondent and they will feel more comfortable answering the more personal, demographic questions (i.e. household income, age race, etc.).

## Question Format: Drop-down or radio button?

When you're asking a question with multiple answer choices, is it better to use drop-down menus or radio buttons? We recently tested the two against one another in the area of purchase intent. We found that drop-down or radio buttons produced no significant difference in results:



What's more, when we asked respondents which they prefer, we discovered that they don't see a significant difference between the two question types. While 35% said they preferred radio buttons, and 17% voted in favor of drop-downs, 48% said that either one was fine with them.



## Determining Optimum Survey Length

Your survey should be as short as possible. That reliable piece of survey design advice is especially valuable when it comes to Web surveys.

A recent study conducted by InsightExpress found that short surveys resulted in completion rates that were nearly three times higher than those achieved by long surveys. In addition, the results offer an excellent illustration of non-response bias in action.

### Short vs. Long Surveys

	Short	Long
<b>Survey Characteristics</b>		
Survey length (minutes)	6	21
Number of questions	12	23
Completion rate	31.4%	11%
<b>Demographics</b>		
M/F Ratio	49/51	51/49
Average age (years)	43.4	42.8
Average household income	\$59,768	\$59,122
<b>Attitude and Perception (Top 2 Boxes)</b>		
Purchase intent	8.6%	24.3%
Concept appeal (liking)	3.7%	13.5%
Value	22.2%	21.6%

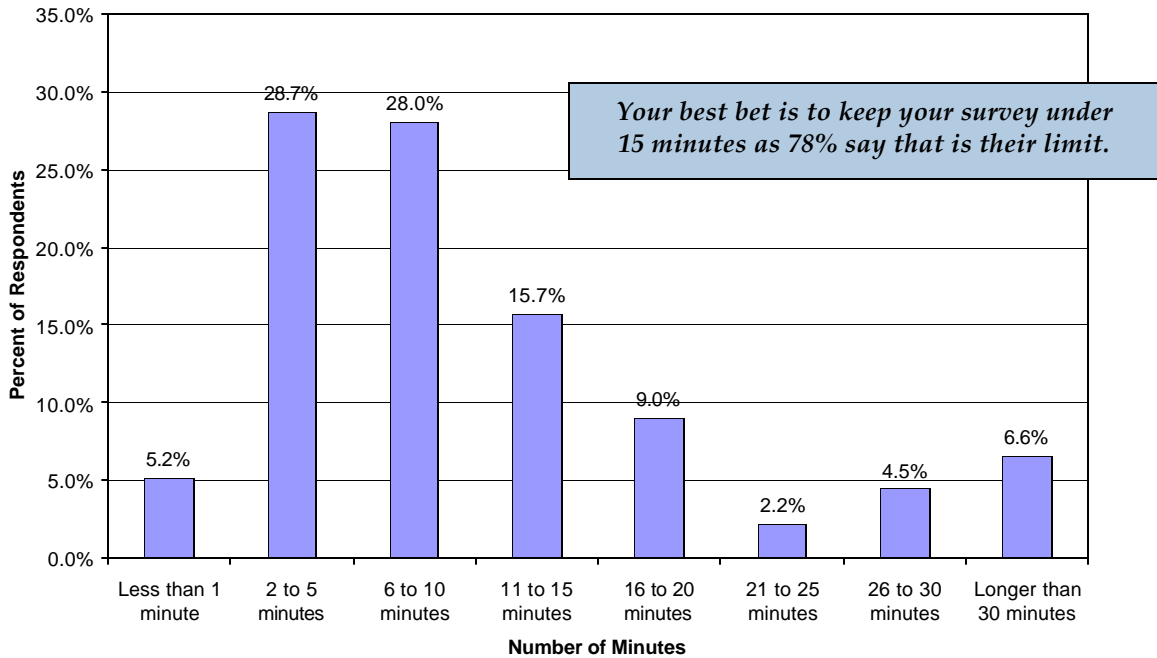
The study involved a concept test where two surveys were launched to assess consumer reaction to a proposed new product. The "short" survey consisted of 12 questions and took about six minutes to complete. The "long" survey posed 23 questions and took 21 minutes to complete. In the end, the short survey achieved a 31.4% completion rate, while the long survey was completed by just 11% of those who began it.

And although the demographics of respondents to both surveys were similar, there were significant differences in how they responded when it came to attitudes and perceptions. Looking at the top two boxes in this area, those taking the short survey showed considerably lower levels of purchase intent and liking for the concept.

It seems likely that a respondent who's willing to commit more than 20 minutes to answering a lengthy survey may not be truly representative of the population. Maybe he or she simply has lots of free time. Or, more likely, you're looking at a person who has a particular interest in the survey topic that probably wouldn't be shared by the general public.

So while you may be able to gather more information by asking more questions, you run the risk of alienating respondents and altering the quality of your data. That's why we recommend that you limit your survey to 12 to 15 questions. In fact, we recently asked 1575 respondents how much time they'd be willing to devote to completing an online survey. They told us in no uncertain terms (87%) that they're most likely to complete an online survey if takes less than 20 minutes. But they're even more agreeable to surveys that require no more than 15 minutes of their time.

Maximum Online Survey Length Prior to Abandonment



## When is a Long Survey Acceptable?

There are exceptions to consider when it is difficult if not impossible to avoid a long survey. If, for example, you're surveying a group of people who have a vested interest in the outcome of your research (i.e. employees, members of an organization or customers who have made a major long-term investment in a particular product or service), you can ask more questions without the same kinds of concern for response rates or bias. Or if your respondents are members of a panel who have agreed in advance to answer questionnaires of a given length, you can expect higher levels of cooperation than usual.

Overall, it is important to remember that respondents almost always show a preference for shorter surveys over longer ones. If you still have more questions to ask, conduct another survey.

## Question Wording

The best approach when crafting your online survey questions is to make sure that each question is as short and simple as possible, and direct.

For example, if you wanted to assess customer satisfaction with an online ordering system you should not ask, "How was your last experience ordering online from Smith & Company?" If you did, you would most likely get single-word answers (e.g. "fine") that wouldn't give you much information.

Avoid relying on single questions to gain insights into your audience. Instead, construct a set of questions that will allow you to get specific feedback about a series of characteristics, options, features, etc. Here are a few tips to help ensure that you're asking the right questions.

- **Ask one thing at a time** – Avoid confusion by taking a question like, "Did the order confirmation and shipping procedures at Smith & Company meet your expectations?" and break it into two separate questions instead.
- **Avoid bias** – It is easier than you may think to telegraph the "right" answers to some questions. For example, if you asked, "Given the concerns of environmentalists and other groups, do you think that Smith & Company should continue its policy of sending each item in a shipment in separately wrapped packages?". You would most likely receive the same answer from everyone. After all, who wants to advocate using excessive amounts of packaging materials?
- **Look out for loaded questions** – Be careful to present all sides of an issue when you ask for an opinion. "Should Smith & Company offer a separate site for corporate account holders, or is the current site sufficient?". This doesn't give respondents an opportunity to consider other options when it comes to handling large corporate orders. A better question would be "Which of the following do you think would help meet the needs of large corporations ordering from Smith & Company?" and follow it with a list of several options (including a special website, expedited or standard ordering processes, etc.) along with directions to select all that apply.

## Converting Mail and Telephone Surveys

A common misperception market researchers have is that converting a survey from traditional methods to online requires little, if any, design changes. The Internet is a unique medium – only by following best practices specific to the online environment can you experience high response rates and data that is comparable to data collected from traditional studies.

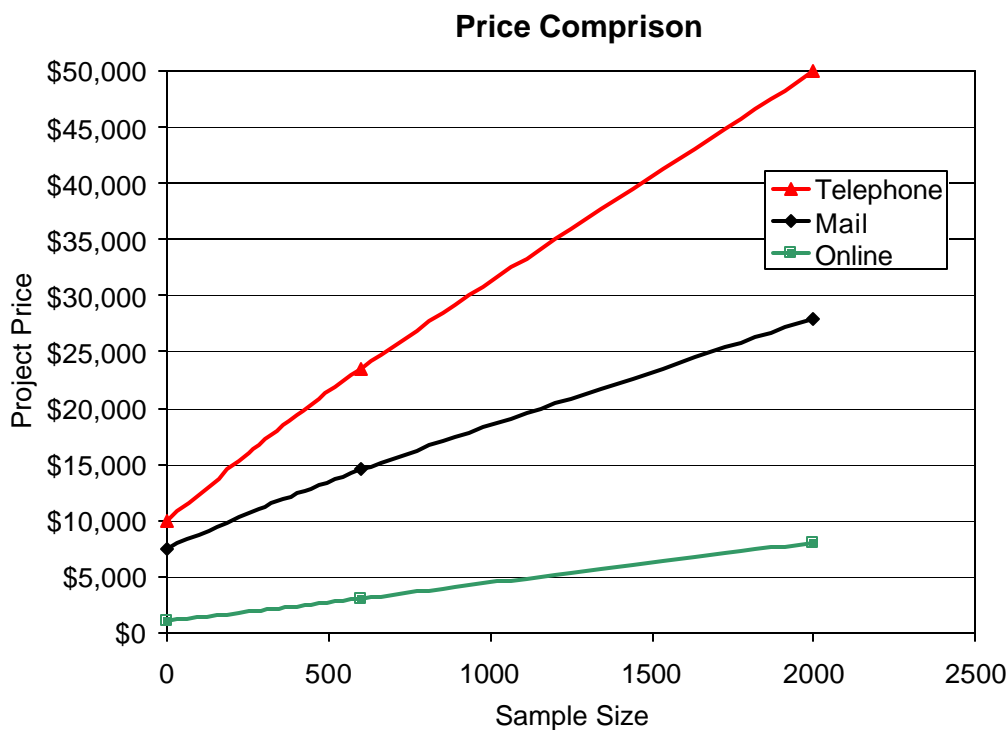
### Shifting Focus

The temptation is to ask everything you can, and get as many question in when you have the respondent's attention, commonly referred to as "boiling the ocean." This is done because it is typically very difficult with traditional methods to obtain respondents.

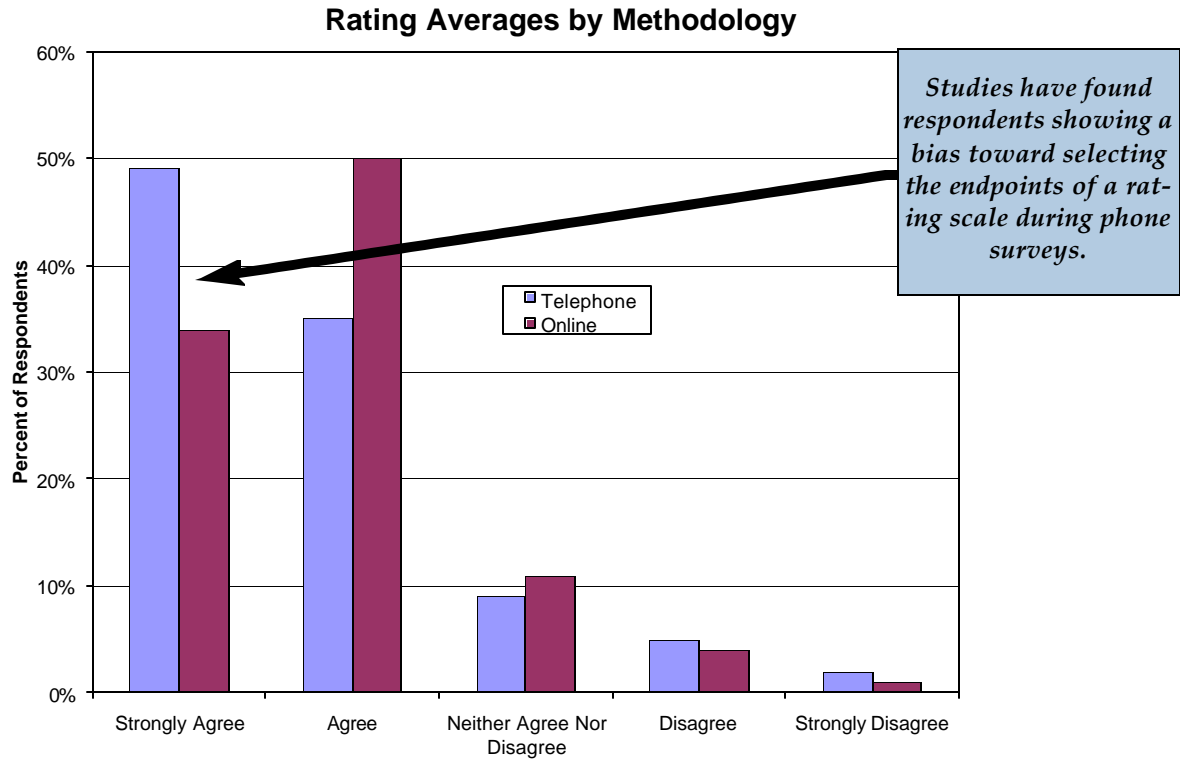
Because online research offers you easier, less costly access to respondents, your focus can shift from a single long survey to several shorter surveys, leveraging your findings along the way.

Rewrite your survey keeping in mind that your respondents are always just one click away from checking stock quotes, reading the news or checking e-mail.

Keep in mind that the computer screen is, in some ways, more restrictive than the printed page. Your respondent can't scan ahead to see what's coming. Keep your survey flowing smoothly and intelligently.



*The price and sample availability associated with online research make running more surveys (instead of longer surveys) possible, and best practice!*



*Interviewer: "Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the statement, 'I will purchase the product' - do you strongly agree, agree..."*

*Anxious to finish the interview, the respondent interrupts: "Strongly agree. Next question."*

## Simple is Always Best Practice

From a structural point of view, make sure your survey is as simple as it can be, straightforward questions including probing both expected and unexpected answers.

Methods to simplify your survey include reducing the overall number of checkbox rating grids and use piping (feeding data from one question to the next) to reduce answer sets for brand lists, names of items purchased, etc.

Only resort to multi-loop structures when absolutely necessary. Test your survey, looking for any differences resulting from word changes, respondent demographics and methodologies.

## Invitations and Incentives: Gaining Cooperation

Best Practices applied to your online survey mean little if you cannot convince people to accept your invitation and participate. Driving cooperation rates start with effective invitations – and sometimes may even include an incentive.

### Survey Invitations

The same factors that make soliciting respondents for an online survey less intrusive – and therefore, more readily welcomed – can also make the invitations easier to overlook. It's important to give careful consideration to both your medium, and your message.

Among the most popular methods for inviting people to take your survey:

- **e-Mail** – The best method if you have a well-defined audience, a list of their e-mail addresses, and permission to send them e-mail. You can purchase/rent lists or use names from your own database of customers, prospects, website visitors, members, employees, etc. Remember that your subject line is key to getting you invitation read.
- **Website banners, buttons and other links** – The best choice when looking for feedback from visitors to a specific website. Also the best way to recruit for low-incidence populations by issuing your invitation on websites known to draw an audience similar to the one you're trying to reach.
- **Pop-up surveys** – Similar to ads that pop up when visiting a website. Use these judiciously, and only on sites that are very strongly related to the content of your survey as potential respondents can see them as a nuisance.

*Performance of Invitation Methods.*

	<b>Banner</b>	<b>Pop-Up</b>	<b>Pop-Under</b>	<b>E-Mail List</b>
Cooperation Rate	.5%-5%	1%-10%	1%-7.5%	2%-50%
Completion Rate	20%-60%	20%-60%	20%-60%	20%-80%

Whichever method is chosen, make the most of the opportunity to capture a respondent's attention and get him or her to say "yes."

Be proactive in convincing the members of your audience that completing your survey is just as important to them as it is to you. How do you do that? By employing a WIIFM (what's in it for me?) strategy. Communicate right up front why taking five or ten minutes out of an already busy day to answer your survey questions is a worthwhile exercise. Some generic starting points:

- "We'd like to know what you look for in a family restaurant, so we can provide you with the best possible food, service and value."
- "With your input, we'll be able to offer you more of what you're looking for – in terms of products, service and value."
- "Your opinion is important to us because ..."

Be as specific and clear as you can. And if you're creating an e-mail invitation, be as personal as you can. That means being sure to mention the recipient's name, what you know about any recent transactions, and acknowledging any past correspondence. The more you can do to emphasize whatever relationship you have with the recipient, the better the chance that he or she will agree to participate in your survey.

Having said that, it's also important that you keep your invitation short – and fun for respondents. And don't use the same invitation over and over. People *do* remember.

## When to Use Incentives

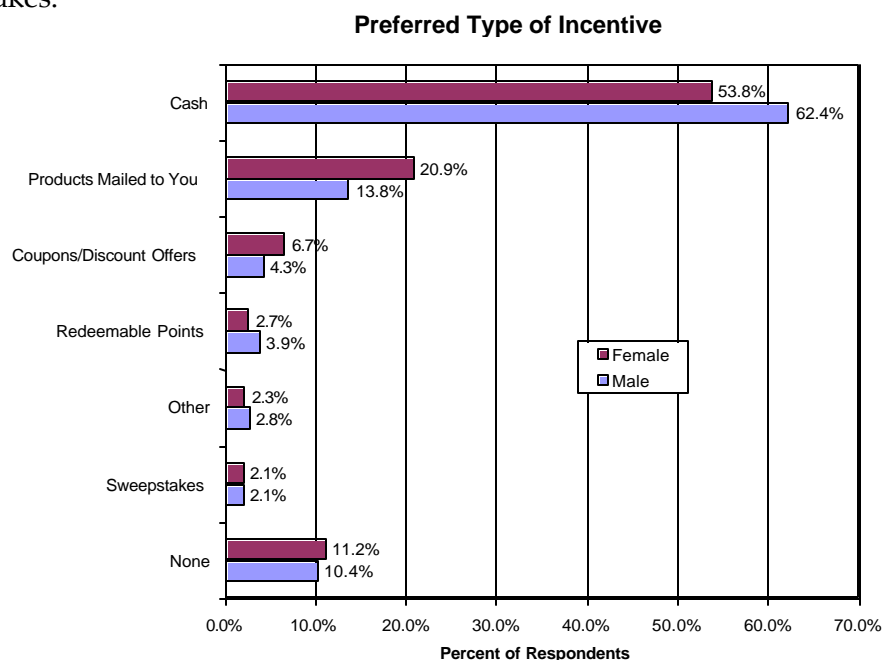
The question of whether an incentive is necessary depends largely on your audience. Incentives are typically considered unnecessary for consumer surveys while they are seen as almost essential in the business-to-business environment. An appropriate incentive for the businessperson would be an offer to share the survey results, complete with industry-related information that is of interest to them.

Incentives may also be necessary if your survey is especially long – over 15 minutes. Better practice than offering incentives for long surveys would be to simply shorten your survey. Recognizing that this is not always possible, make sure your offer is an incentive that's attractive enough to boost response, without being so spectacular that you end up with biased results because you've skewed your sample by encouraging misbehavior. The larger the incentive, the more likelihood of misbehavior.

Finally, incentives are sometimes necessary to help boost response from low-incidence populations or those who typically don't respond under other circumstances.

## What do People Want?

For the answer, InsightExpress asked respondents – and not surprisingly, cash was the clear winner. Next came actual products while more people said they preferred no incentive at all to coupons, redeemable points, and sweepstakes.



## The Incentive Impact

InsightExpress recently fielded three *identical* surveys – consisting of 17 questions each, and taking roughly 10 minutes to complete – to a consumer audience. One survey offered a \$1 incentive, while another offered \$5, and the third presented no incentive at all. As you can see, the incentive did help boost completion rates somewhat – although the \$1 offer worked better than the \$5 offer. But the \$1 incentive also seemed to encourage respondents to react slightly more favorably to the concept.

	<b>No Incentive</b>	<b>\$1 Incentive</b>	<b>\$5 Incentive</b>
Survey Completion Rate	20%	27%	25%
Gender			
Male	41%	46%	41%
Female	59%	54%	59%
Purchase Intent			
Top 2 Box	9%	15%	10%
Bottom 2 Box	56%	46%	50%
Mean Rating Score	1.9	2.3	2.0

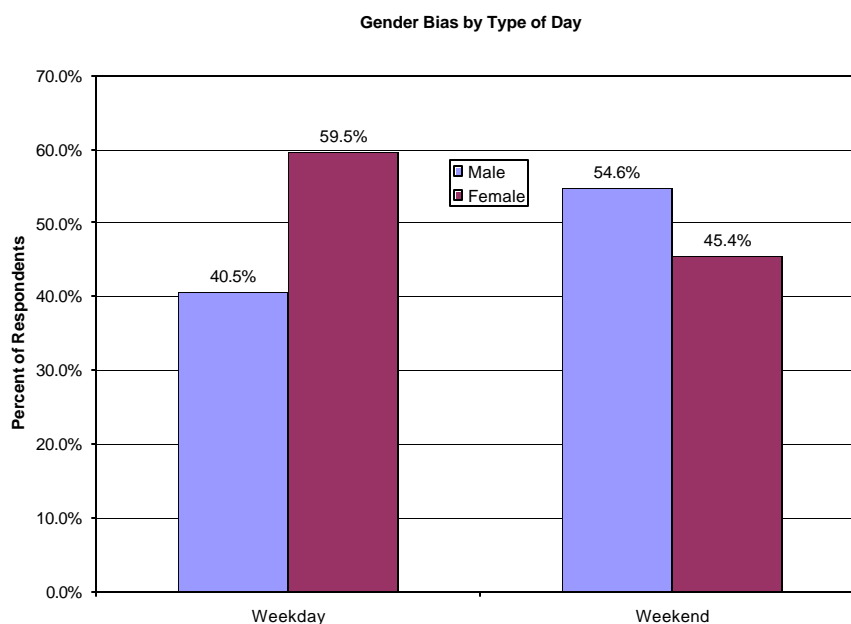
To determine what kind of impact incentives might have on your research, consider splitting your sample and testing an offer-based invitation against one without an offer. While it's almost certain that you'll achieve higher response rates with the incentive, you'll be able to see just how much higher. And you'll get a chance to evaluate potential bias issues for future surveys.

## Understanding the Potential for Bias

As is true for any research methodology, it's important to be aware of potential sources of bias in online research. Fielding more than 6 million completed surveys for over 7,000 individual projects has shown us that:

- Between 10% and 20% of all completions will occur within the first hour a survey is launched.
- For consumer audiences, the greatest activity occurs from 4 p.m. to 3 a.m. (Eastern) and then again from 6 a.m. to noon (Eastern).
- For business audiences, responses are distributed throughout the workday with significantly less activity on weekends.

Also of note is a gender bias associated with the day of the week. Females are more likely to participate in surveys on weekdays, while males are more likely to respond during weekends.



## Minimizing Bias

Knowing potential sources of bias give you the ability to eliminate them. For example, you should always plan to keep your survey in the field for at least one 24-hour period. Stay away from forcing faster fielding and/or taking advantage of oversampling techniques. This creates more opportunities for bias and draws into question the true representativeness of "overnight" polls.

To ensure that you capture adequate male representation, your field schedule should include at least one weekend day. And to accommodate the work and travel schedules of professionals, you should plan to keep b-to-b surveys in the field for at least one full week.

## Developing an Effective Privacy Policy

Privacy has become one of the most valuable – and most talked-about – commodities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Where online research is concerned, you need to be scrupulous about maintaining the privacy of both the research sponsor(s), and the respondents. While a large portion of your privacy policy may be dictated by your company's overall communications policies, here are a few factors to consider:

- Where will you be conducting surveys? In the U.S. only? In Europe? Other countries?
- What is the age range of your target audience? Are they teenagers or adults?
- Is your industry governed by specific regulations (e.g., GLB or HIPAA) that impact the release of information?
- Will you need to capture personally identifiable information? And if so, why?

Some essentials for your policy include giving respondents the ability to opt-out, explanation of policy changes if applicable, and contact information for questions regarding the policy.

## About InsightExpress

InsightExpress is the acknowledged pioneer of rapid turnaround, high-quality, online market research services. With our award-winning technology, market research expertise, and access to more than 90 million online individuals, we enable clients to easily harness market research to make the right business decision in real-time. InsightExpress is affiliated with the Interpublic Group (NYSE:IPG), NFO WorldGroup, and General Atlantic Partners.

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