Points for Consideration
Web-Based Surveys

Overview:

The telephone, random sampling, and electronic surveys are probably the three most significant advances in survey technology from the twentieth century. An on-line survey is the collection of data through a self-administered electronic set of questions by e-mail, the web, or a combination of both.

E-mail surveys are usually limited to text based responses that require the respondent to click the e-mail program REPLY button before responding. Although data is electronic in form, it generally must be transposed to another program for analysis.

Web surveys have several advantages over the e-mail variety. There is more control over the physical appearance, and one can create attractive and inviting forms. Web based surveys can include radio buttons and drop down lists that permit only one choice for the response. Check boxes allow multiple answers. Text boxes can be one line with a limited number of characters, or they may permit unlimited text entry. Data from web based surveys can be easily imported into data analysis programs. Often, data from web based surveys is available in real time in graphic and numerical format.

Advantages of Web-Based Surveys:

1) Nearly complete elimination of paper, postage, mail out, and data entry costs
2) Time required for implementation can be reduced
3) Potential for overcoming international boundaries
4) Once electronic data collection system is developed, cost of surveying additional respondents is much less
5) Display of response data can be simultaneous with completion of surveys
6) Reminders and follow-up on non-respondents are relatively easy
7) Web based surveys can be designed to provide more dynamic interaction with respondents

Limitations of Web-Based Surveys:

1) Not everyone is connected, so this survey method will not work with all populations
2) Even if connected, not all potential respondents are equally computer literate
3) Screen configurations may appear significantly different from one respondent to another dependent on settings of individual computers
4) Sampling of e-mail addresses is difficult (no directory; sometimes more than one e-mail address per household or respondent; addresses not standardized)
5) The decision not to respond is likely to be made more quickly
6) As e-mail programs become more sophisticated, invitations to web based surveys may be detected as "junk" mail.

Design Guidelines for Web-Based Surveys:

1) Utilize a multiple contact strategy much like that used for regular mail surveys
2) Personalize all e-mail contacts
3) Keep the invitation brief – but make it good
4) Begin with an interesting, but simple to answer, question
5) Only if necessary, introduce a web survey with a welcome screen that is motivational, emphasizes the ease of response, and instructs about how to proceed to the survey
6) Present each question in a conventional format similar to that normally used on paper, self-administered surveys
7) Do not require respondents to provide an answer to each question before being allowed to answer subsequent questions; Use "skip logic" if possible
8) Make it possible for each question, and corresponding potential responses to that question, to be visible on the screen at one time.

Tips for Web-Based Surveys:

1) Shorten the timing between notice and reminders, and the total duration of the response period compared to mailed questionnaires
2) Shorten the length of invitation and reminder messages, but remember that the invitation is the most important part
3) Keep the questionnaires short (but this may not be as critical as one would think)
4) Simplify the questions even more so than in paper surveys
5) Make limited use of open-ended questions (but there is evidence that narrative responses are more likely and of higher quality in web-based questionnaires)
6) Think of a survey as an outline version of a conversation, there should be a natural flow, with transitions between one thought and the next
7) Pilot test each survey to a variety of people using different e-mail programs and browsers
8) Avoid undeliverable e-mail invitations by developing accurate potential respondent e-mail lists
9) Use logos / branding to increase the credibility of survey

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