

The Importance of Timeframe and Advertisement in Internet Surveys: An Exploratory Analysis

Josep Casanovas

Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Departament d'Investigació Operativa i Estadística

Jordi Girona 1-3

08034 Barcelona, Spain

josepk@fib.upc.es

José Esteves

Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Departament de Llenguatges i Sistemes Informàtics

Jordi Girona 1-3

08034 Barcelona, Spain

jesteves@lsi.upc.es

Joan Pastor

Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Departament de Sistemes i Tecnologies d'Informació

Immaculada, 22

08017 Barcelona, Spain

jap@unica.edu

The advantages of rigorous internet-based surveys, from now on Web Surveys (WS), have been quite well documented in the recent literature (e.g. Couper 2000, Dillman and Bowker 2001, Simsek and Veiga 2001, Schonlau et al. 2001). Couper (2000) stated that there is speculation on whether WS will replace traditional methods of data collection. WS have their unique characteristics compared with other survey modes. However, so far little attention has been given to the use of WS as a research tool, and thus, for the time being, WS-based research efforts lack the same level and amount of guidance that is available to traditional paper survey designers, where there is a rich history of methodological research (Lang 2002). So far the methodological issues of WS are poorly understood, even with the high level of interest expressed by many researchers in this technique (Lang 2002). Our study addresses the use of the WS technique. Based on literature review and a practical and comprehensive case that we carried out, we attempt to identify the most interesting issues around this technique, while providing some emerging guidance related to its application. Two new issues arose on our study: WS advertisement and data collection timeframe. Our exploratory findings show the importance of a long period for data collection and the need to advertise the WS several times along the timeframe in order to achieve good response rates. During the last years some WS taxonomies have emerged. Table 2 shows the unification of the main versions of WS types based on the taxonomies of Couper (2000) and Schonlau et al. (2001); other WS taxonomies are presented in MacElroy (1999) and Bradley (1999).

Table 1. A taxonomy of WS based on the literature.

Sample category	Selection Method
Non-probability	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Uncontrolled instrument distribution.2. Systematic sampling of web visitors.3. Volunteer panel.
Probability	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Internet only<ol style="list-style-type: none">1.1. Sample from a closed population list.1.2. Sample from a general population.1.3. Prerecruited panel.2. Mixed-mode surveys where one of the options is a WS.

Our practical experience consisted in carrying out a specific WS to clarify the project sponsor and project manager roles in Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) implementation projects. The reasons for selecting the WS technique were its low cost and the fact that it was the easiest way for us to access experts in the field and gather responses fast. Regarding the sample selection method,

we opted by a convenience sample and a closed web page survey. The idea was to target Internet users related with ERP implementations. A number of Internet links for ERP mailing lists, groups and forums were collected and evaluated. This evaluation focused on the relevance of these links to the research topic, and the level of apparent activity of the mailing lists, groups and forums. Regarding response error, we used all the responses due to two reasons: first, all respondents selected some option for every question and provided argumentation for their options, some shorter than others; and second, we checked the respondents' e-mail addresses to avoid that the same respondent answered more than once. All the e-mails were different.

During the initial three months we received 23 answers. After one year, the number of respondents increased to 138 (see figure 1). Most of the respondents were implementation consultants, which is consistent with the fact that implementation consultants use more forums and mailing lists to share information (Esteves and Pastor 2002). Although we did not predicted it at the beginning, this situation in some sense helped us with our research findings. Implementation consultants are more neutral than other types of respondents in terms of defining which is the most critical role, project sponsor or project manager.

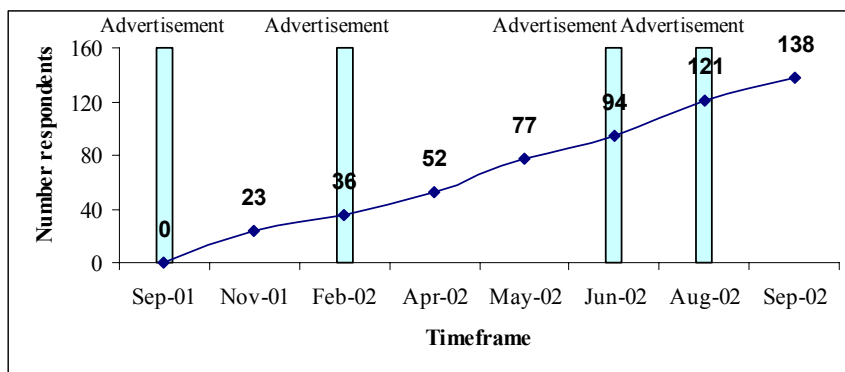


Figure 1. Number of respondents along the research period.

We made four advertisements of our WS. This was done by sending messages to the same forums and mailing lists selected at the beginning of the research effort. As figure 1 shows, each time we undertook a new advertisement effort the number of responses increased considerably. In each advertisement posting, in the e-mail subject we put our research subject, while in its body we briefly explained the survey objectives and we also committed to give feedback to all respondents.

The timeframe of our research effort was approximately one year, which had implications on the responses rates. After September 2002, we did not receive more responses and due to research schedule constraints, we opted to stop the data collection for this research effort. We think that in the case of self-selected WS it is important to define a long period of data collection in order to achieve a good response rate. Hence, our research findings contradict the common idea that a high volume of responses can always be collected very quickly (McCullough 1998). For example, studies have shown that several hundred responses can be generated over the course of a single weekend (McCullough 1998). We think that the timeframe of each WS is related with factors such as: WS type, WS topic, WS advertisement, and type of respondents. In the future we plan to collect data from other researchers having had similar experiences with WS and compare findings regarding timeframe and advertisement issues.

REFERENCES

References will be provided upon request to the authors.

RÉSUMÉ

Basé sur une littérature revue sur les enquêtes d'internet et sur notre propre expérience avec un de ces enquêtes, nous fournissons des guides sur l'utilisation des enquêtes d'internet. Nous débatons aussi sur l'importance du calendrier et de l'avertissement pour le succès de son utilisation.