

Online vs. Phone Data Collection

Statistics show that the use of online surveys is steadily increasing, but there still remain many project scopes where telephone data collection is the most appropriate approach.

Inside Research estimates that U.S. expenditures for online research will increase by 5% in 2009, matching a 5% increase in 2008. Because of this growth in online data collection it is important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the methodology, and to know what factors indicate when a traditional phone survey is required.

Advantages of Online Surveys

The reach of online surveys has increased with the growth of internet access in the home. A Nielsen report from December, 2008ⁱ, showed that 73.9% of households have a computer with internet access. This opens the door to leveraging some inherent advantages of data collection onlineⁱⁱ:

- Online research methods are able to yield results much faster and at a lower marginal cost per observation compared to offline studies.
- Web surveys do not suffer from interviewer bias and also can be completed at the respondent's convenience, which makes the online research medium much less intrusive than traditional offline methods such as telephone or (mall intercept) personal interviews.
- The quality and accuracy of web data is increased due to fewer errors in data entry and larger sample sizes.
- In addition to the potential for larger, yet affordable sample sizes, the internet makes it easier to stay in touch with respondents for research designs that require multiple measurements over time (longitudinal research).
- Web surveys facilitate the building in of intelligence, such as personalization, question branching, skipping patterns, forced answer prompts and audio-visual material.

Challenges with Online Surveys

One of the challenges of online research is the quality of the sample. While the percentage of homes with internet access has increased, certain demographics may not be reflected in an online panel. The same Nielsen report referenced earlier showsⁱⁱⁱ:

- Internet access is positively correlated with the respondent's or Head of Household's education level as well the home's combined annual income. As they increase, so does the likelihood of internet access.

- Internet access of either type (high-speed or dial-up) is lowest in Spanish Dominant (45 index) and Black homes (65) and where the head of household has not completed a high school education (43).
- Access is higher where there are children under 18 in the home. Conversely, in one-person households the IA index is 58, meaning access is below-average in these homes.
- Internet access is much lower (69 index) in the most rural areas—"D" counties.
- Access is two times lower (47 index) in "broadcast only" homes.

Phone Surveys Still Needed

The scope of reach possible with telephone surveys is vast, with 96% of homes in the United States having a telephone^{iv}.

Advantages of this method include:

- The ability to more easily penetrate the targeted population in business-to-business research
- For B2B research, company phone numbers are more of a constant over time than email addresses, increasing the likelihood of reaching a contact.
- The ability to target specific geographic markets (i.e. cities or even metro areas)
- Interviewers can more effectively probe for clarification and elaboration concerning responses

Challenges of this method include^v:

- Phone surveying is typically more expensive than web surveying.
- In businesses, "gatekeepers" – typically an assistant – often make it difficult to reach the intended contact.
- Sales calls often masquerade as "research" calls, which results in higher call screening and lower respondent contact rates.
- The typical consumer research calling window of 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. often interrupts the respondents limited personal time.

Which Type of Survey Should I Choose^{vi}?

The comparison chart on the following page offers a review of whether telephone surveys or Web surveys are best suited to specific needs.

Type of Survey	Advantages	Disadvantages	Recommendation
Telephone Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easier to penetrate a targeted population in business-to-business research Reach 96% of all homes CATI software streamlines process Interviewers can ask for clarification on responses; additional detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sales calls often pose as "research" calls Typical calling window interrupts respondents personal time Call screening is common No visual support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business-to-business surveys Specific geographic areas Customer satisfaction surveys
Web Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very low cost Extremely fast Complex questioning assures better data Anonymity of respondents results in more honest answers to sensitive topics Respondents provide more detail to open-ended questions. Survey software simplifies compilation and analysis of data collected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not reflect population as a whole Respondent completion rates lower for longer surveys Random respondents may reply if your survey appears on Web page. Professional respondents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When desired target population consists mainly of Internet users. Employee Attitude surveys

ⁱ *An Overview of Home Internet Access in the U.S.*, December, 2008, blog.nielsen.com

ⁱⁱ *Comparing Response Distributions Of Offline And Online Data Collection Methods*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2005, International Journal of Market Research

ⁱⁱⁱ *An Overview of Home Internet Access in the U.S.*, December, 2008, blog.nielsen.com

^{iv} *Telephone Surveys vs Web Surveys: A Comparison*, March, 18, 2005, Knowledge Base

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