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Paul Gillin

May 8, 2006



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Online survey services allow marketers to build Web forms and invite customers or prospects to give their opinions about everything from brand perception to new product concepts. At the low end, services such as SurveyMonkey.com and MarketTools' Zoomerang.com run as little as \$19.95 per month. At the high end, Global Market Insite, Future Information Research Management's Conformat and other custom services have products and consulting that can run into thousands of dollars per study. A middle tier, which includes InsightExpress, QuestionPro Survey Software and Surveylab, comprises specialists in areas such as survey design or reporting.

Experts agree that it's easy to go wrong when choosing a survey supplier, either by overpaying for features you don't use or hitting a wall with a service that can't support your needs. Consider the following when choosing a service:

Be realistic about your own skills . If you don't know how to design a survey, don't learn on the job. Small nuances of phrasing or response options can dramatically affect results. "Most people think they can design a good questionnaire and they can't," said Carey Azzara, director of research at Management Insight Technologies. "It takes years of experience."

Discount survey services usually provide templates and written advice but rarely offer hands-on consulting. "None of these online service companies is providing routine questionnaire review," said Chris Stetson, VP-research at Ziff Davis Media. Custom advice generally starts at \$200 per hour.

Another option is to use a service such as guru.com to find experts who can do small spot projects for you to ensure research quality.

Beware of bloat . Survey response rates are in a long-term decline because Internet users have been deluged with come-ons. At the same time, questionnaires are getting bigger. "The single biggest factor affecting response rates is the length of survey," said Vivek Baskharan, CEO of online survey software provider QuestionPro.

Careful survey design helps, but vendors can also recommend tricks to make the respondent's experience more enjoyable. For example, laying out answers in a grid may supplant the need for five separate questions. "With the right functionality, you can reduce a 300-question survey to about six questions," Stetson said.

Use alternate channels . A point-in-time online survey is only one way to research a market, and it may not be the best one. "By doing different forms of research in combination with an online survey, you're going to get a better result," said Peter Koeppel, president of Koeppel Direct, a direct response advertising agency.

One approach is to invite customers to fill out a short form as soon as they wrap up a transaction. Or stop customers on their way out the door to ask about their experience. Vendors such as Perseus Development Corp. can incorporate such "intercept" research into conventional online survey results to get a more complete view of customer perceptions.

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BtoB POLL

In 2007, Will the U.S. economy be:

- Better than 2006.
- Worse than 2006.
- The same. Don't

know.

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There will always be a role for focus group and one-to-one research where a personal touch is needed. But broadband and streaming video are making it possible to move some of that work online. Consider whether you'll need multimedia and if providers can support that.

Negotiate the terms. Experts agree that costs are jumbled and confusing. "My biggest issue [in vendor selection] is mystical pricing," said Scott Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, a research consultancy. "There's not good logic in it, and it's not easy to compare vendors."

Many services offer subscription plans with unlimited use. But look carefully at what's included. Custom advice may not be part of the fee. Reporting options vary widely, and some services don't provide sophisticated reports unless you pay extra. Some services also bundle access to lists or prescreened research panels that can improve response rates, while others leave you on your own. You can even have results delivered as PowerPoint presentations.

The bottom line is to think carefully about what design and reporting features you'll need, then select a service provider that can meet your needs precisely.

And one more bit of good news: Many services have "try before you buy" features, allowing you to conduct limited surveys at no charge. You may get that research done for free after all. M



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