

A brief history of survey research

Technote

Introduction

Conducting surveys seems simple enough: ask people questions, record their answers, and report the results. Even Roman Emperors polled their citizens in ancient times. The modern survey depends on four scientific “leaps” made over the last 200 years. Without these innovations, market research as we know it would not exist.

1. Respondents Can Be Trusted

Rulers have used census surveys of the population for thousands of years. During the Middle Ages, respondents to such surveys typically consisted of authorities such as the clergy or nobles who reported the numbers and living conditions of their parishioners or serfs. The rulers mistrusted the “*common person*” to speak for him or (especially) herself. In the 1800s, Fabian socialists and Karl Marx relied on key informants (factory owners or trusted socialists) for information on working conditions of the poor.

A major revolution occurred when researchers asked factory workers and slum dwellers to report on their working and living conditions. Henry Mayhew, an English philosopher and social reformer, conducted sophisticated surveys of living conditions in London in the early 19th century and asked ordinary people to report on their situation.

The switch to respondent-based data removed major biases that result when we ask key informants to speak for a group. Obviously, a factory owner or manager might supply inaccurate information on wages and working conditions.

This is not to say that modern respondents are always completely truthful. *Social desirability bias*, the wish not to reveal troubling opinions or behaviour, remains an important problem for modern surveys.

2. Small random samples are accurate

The social reformist surveys undertaken by the Victorians typically interviewed 10,000 – 20,000 individuals to ensure representation. Statisticians have since demonstrated that it is unnecessary to sample 20,000 people to produce an unbiased idea of their economic situation or opinion. Today, it is common for surveys to be quite accurate with samples of 600; for a national poll in Canada, 1,000 – 1,600 respondents is a common sample size. It is faster and less expensive to use a smaller sample.

3. Statistical control

Medical researchers create careful experiments to ensure that only the intervention (e.g., chemical agent or drug) influences the test substance or subject. In social science, such control is not possible. Many uncontrollable factors influence market research studies.

Multivariate statistical analysis offers researchers powerful methods to isolate and identify relationships within the data collected. These modern analysis methods identify key relationships within social and economic data, and enhance the ability of the modern poll to support inferences about the population. One example of statistical control occurs when we compare the opinions of men and women.

4. Logistical developments

Even with the advances noted above, the modern survey required one final innovation. In the mid-1930s, communication networks rapidly expanded throughout North America. Air travel greatly enhanced postal networks, and the telephone became a common household appliance. These developments allowed pollsters such as George Gallup to contact large subsets of the population.

The future

New techniques are emerging in survey research. The Internet has become a powerful method of gathering information from consumers; voice recognition software allows businesses to offer rewards to consumers who call in to respond to surveys throughout the day.

The applications of survey research will continue to change in step with communication networks. Consumers are becoming resistant to cold calls in the evening as telemarketing increases its pressure on the public. Researchers now sample respondents from company databases, and survey information is collected in exchange for rewards or even cash payments.

Market research and opinion polling will survive; too many managers need the information. Innovations will continue to modify the methods, but all changes will involve some adjustment to the four basic innovations that created the modern survey.

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