INTERNET-BASED SURVEYS: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

Web-based, or internet, surveys are widely used in marketing research, and their use continues to grow. The reasons for this are partly because they provide a number of technological features that are designed to reduce common sources of respondent error that can impact data quality, and partly because compared to traditional self-administered methods they offer advantages in speed, cost, and efficiency of data collection. This session deals with selected methodological issues concerning Web surveys.

The use of Internet surveys is increasing dramatically, partly due to the difficulties in accessing potential respondents through other survey vehicles. No other survey vehicle offers the speed and convenience of Internet survey research. Yet, the Internet survey process can be fraught with its own data quality issues casting possible doubt on data quality, which then raises serious questions to an Internet survey's admission into court. The first paper in our session, "Data Quality Evidence for Internet Survey Use in Intellectual Property Law," by Linda Golden and Scott M. Smith, offers ideas for researchers to use in improving data quality and, at the same time, makes suggestions for how the justice system might look at the quality of Internet survey evidence being presented in a legal action.

Over the past decades, governments, businesses, universities, and other social entities increasingly have relied on survey research to provide information for policy development, business decisions, social research, performance monitoring, and other functions. Over that period, survey research itself has been the topic of a robust research program. The program has focused primarily on techniques for improving response rates. Little reported work provides a framework for structuring prior methodological and theoretical research. The second paper, "Using a Theory of Survey Response Behavior to Design Internet Surveys," by James Wiley and Vallen Han, proposes a model for structuring methodological and theoretical research on Internet-based surveys. The model is tested for four different theories of response behavior.

A widely, and increasingly, used technique in Internet-based surveys is "forced answering," (FA) which requires respondents to enter an "appropriate" response before they are allowed to proceed to the next survey question. While item omissions are virtually eliminated, using FA might cause respondents to opt-out entirely or break-off early in the survey, which would increase non-response error. It has been suggested that one way around this is to provide a "prefer not to answer" (PNA) option if FA is used, which would allow respondents to continue without providing a response to each question. Recent research suggests that forced answering does not lower completion rates, whether or not PNA is used. Since this research dealt with a topic that was relatively innocuous, different results might be obtained in surveys that deal with more sensitive topics. But, the level of perceived sensitivity of a topic to respondents may vary across cultures. The final paper in our session, "Variations in Sensitivity of Topics Among Nations: Implications for Internet-Based Surveys," by Gerald Albaum and Catherine Roster, examines perceived sensitivity and importance to respondents of 15 topics in several countries as a preliminary step in assessing the potential impact of topic sensitivity on the use of forced answering and the "prefer not to answer" response option in Internet-based surveys.