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Utilizing Online Software for Surveys

Ahhh! We need to do assessment and development in our library but we need help! How can we find out if we are meeting our goals and objectives? As I write this, I have been madly writing up the results from our current year's Institutional Effectiveness Program (IEP) and developing the goals, objectives, and assessment criteria for next year's! Like it or not, these are realities for all of us. One way of collecting the data that we need is through surveys. We have probably all done it the "old-fashioned" way – administering a paper survey and then manually tabulating all the responses (did I count that last response or not?). Then you get to code all the items and enter them into SPSS, develop an Excel spreadsheet or even dig out the old calculator to do all the analysis.

In former years we placed paper surveys in faculty mailboxes and got a pretty good response rate. Print surveys for the students were either placed in their mailboxes or administered in selected classes. We have had the best return rate through the latter method although instructors don't like to give up the class time for the survey to be completed. A few years ago, we decided to try online surveys. The term "online surveys" can refer to those sent by email (either with the survey directly in the body of the email or with a link to it) or to surveys that are available through links on web pages. We have utilized email surveys with a link to the questionnaire. A couple years ago, we created a survey in FrontPage that our IT department emailed to all of our students. For the past two years, we used SurveyMonkey for our Faculty and Student Library Surveys. We have also done a small survey in Zoomerang. This year, we may try something new with WebCT!

Advantages of Online Surveys

Traditionally, surveys have been administered in person or on paper. The first method uses an interviewer. Interviews can be conducted by phone or in person such as at malls where they

approach you to complete a survey. The second method is self-administered paper surveys. This can be sent through the mail or distributed to a group of people in a classroom, office, etc. With the advances in technology, self-administered surveys are taking to cyberspace. Online surveys are being used more and more for a number of reasons. Offering surveys online gives you some major advantages but there are some drawbacks which need to be considered. Many of the advantages and disadvantages are discussed in Best & Kreuger's article (2002). First the advantages –

- **Efficient method of data collection**

Online surveys require minimal effort once the survey is set up and are generally less expensive. Many survey softwares provide basic templates that you can use so you may not even need to create an original survey.

- **Fast response**

You generally begin to get responses from email surveys within 72 hours and can complete it in days or weeks (Hill, 2004b). In a study by Couper, Traugott, and Lamias, they had 30% of their total response the same day the survey was sent (2001, sect IV). Multiple people can take an online survey simultaneously whereas an interviewer on the phone can only talk to one person at a time. Leuker points out that a phone survey of 2000 people would require 80,000 telephone calls and 2 months to complete (2005). The same number of responses could be obtained online in a matter of days. Of course, responses for a paper survey are not necessarily slow. When we have administered our student surveys in a class, we get them back right away.

- **"Synchrony between interviewer and respondent" is not necessary (Best & Kreuger, 2002, p.74)**

The interviewer is not "present" in online surveys, so the respondent is free to take the survey at any time of day or night and is not

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ABSTRACT

In institutions where assessment is part of our everyday vocabulary, we are always looking for ways to collect the data that we need in a more efficient manner. Online surveys may be one answer. There are some major advantages in using online surveys but there are also some critical disadvantages especially concerning representative population samples. In order to make an informed decision, we need to determine if and how these advantages and disadvantages affect our situation. We also need to understand what features are offered in these programs so that we can select a program that meets our own needs and budgets.

In an academic environment, it is easy for us to mistakenly think that everyone has a computer and email

restricted to the time the interviewer calls. This would also be true for mail surveys.

- **Can be completed at respondent's convenience/comfortable environment**

The individual can respond in her own home or office at her convenience. She won't be interrupted by the phone interview while preparing dinner or watching her favorite TV program. The respondent can also take as long as she wants to complete the survey. Many programs allow you to stop in the middle and restart at the same place at a later time.

- **Cheaper than phone/mail survey**

Although there is some expense in time and manpower in creating an online survey, it does decrease or eliminate the cost of interviewers (in person or by phone), data entry, tabulation and analysis, mailing, etc.

- **Self-administered – Eliminates respondent/interviewer bias**

When a survey is conducted face-to-face or by phone, respondents are affected to some degree by the interviewer. They may answer questions in a certain way because they think it is the "right" answer or they may unconsciously pick up clues about how to respond from the demeanor or tone of voice of the interviewer. Interviewers may also react differently to respondents based on sociological factors thereby producing different results. If the interviewer is removed from the picture, these "subject/interviewer" expectancies are removed (Hewson, Laurent, & Vogel 1996). On the other hand, there are some advantages to using an interviewer. With no interviewer involved, the respondents may be less "engaged" and they may complete fewer items on the survey (Gunter, Nicholas, Huntington, & Williams, 2002).

- **Easier to study sensitive subjects**

Respondents are less likely to lie or give an answer to please the interviewer in online surveys when sensitive subjects are being polled. They feel more anonymous and are more likely to respond truthfully (Hewson, Laurent, Vogel, 1996).

- **Can produce more sophisticated surveys**

Online surveys allow you to easily incorporate color, graphics, audio, video and even live interaction into your survey. It also provides a wide range of question types and it gives you the ability to personalize the survey based on how the respondent answers specific questions.

Disadvantages of Online Surveys

We can see that there are some distinct advantages to utilizing online surveys but there are three disadvantages noted by Best & Kreuger that need to be given careful consideration (2002).

- **Subject to fraud**

If you are conducting surveys by phone or in person, you can be sure that only one person is answering the questions. In the online setting or by mail, it is possible that more than one person is completing the survey or they may be using additional resources. It may also be possible to send multiple responses. The latter issue can be controlled with the proper technological controls and is not a serious problem.

- **Limited control over response conditions**

With an online survey, you cannot control when the survey is completed. One respondent may take the survey right away and rush to complete it in 15 minutes. Another might forget about it for a week, and then take an hour, carefully considering his answers. There are also hardware and software issues over which you have no control that can affect how a respondent completes the survey. For example, the individual's computer may display the font in an odd way or the special graphics or video you added may not be viewable. If the technological issues cause the respondent to become frustrated, they may drop out of the survey.

- **Area of coverage / demographic differences**

This is the major drawback for online surveys in general. In an academic environment, it is easy for us to mistakenly think that everyone

has a computer and email, yet that is not the case. Even if a person does have email, there is no email address listing comparable to the telephone book; therefore not all people with email can be contacted. Since most of us are conducting surveys on college campuses where all the faculty and students have email, this will probably not be an issue for us.

The second part of the issue relates to the comparability of the respondents to traditional surveys and online surveys. Are online respondents representative of the general public? Several studies have indicated they are not. In a German study comparing responses to an online survey and a phone survey, the online respondents were primarily male (66% Internet vs. 48% phone) and they were younger and had more education (Bandilla, Bosnjak, & Altdorfer, 2003, 238). Best and Kreuger found similar differences between online and phone respondents. In their study 67% were male, only 12% were over 50, and 64% were college graduates. The online respondents were also wealthier, less religious, more likely to be married, and more liberal politically (2003, 83). Another study confirmed that email survey respondents were younger than mail survey respondents (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004). Because of the difference in demographic characteristics, online surveys may not be a good substitute for general opinion polls at this time, but “for special populations that regularly use the internet, the Web has been found to be a useful means of conducting research” (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004, introduction).

What One Should We Choose?

So you have weighed the pros and cons and decided that you are going to try an online survey! But what survey software should you use? There are many, many options available. A few programs are listed in Figure 1.

According to Hill (2004a), there are five steps in deciding what software program to choose. The first thing you need to do is identify your needs. What do you need the program to do for you? What kind of features are you looking

for e.g. skip logic, branding, using sound, etc? We will discuss features in more detail later.

The second point to decide is whether you will host your own survey on your server or if you want it administered off-site. If you are hosting your own, you will have to download software and handle the technological issues. If it is being hosted by the web survey company, everything is done through their website. Next, you need to do your research and find out which programs offer the features that you require. Fourth, Hill suggests that you select four or five possibilities and try them out for yourself. Is it functional? Is it as easy to use as they tell you it will be? Many programs will let you try a basic version for free. The final step is making your decision.

The features a survey software offer are the major consideration in selecting a program. Sophisticated features can greatly increase the price and you may not need them. At the same time, if these features are things you truly need, you will be frustrated by the limitations of a more basic program because it can't do what you want. A related issue concerns how many surveys you conduct. If you only do a couple surveys a year, you can probably get by with less although you may have to do more of the analysis yourself. At this point in the discussion, it would be helpful to examine what features are available. The features discussed below are not an exhaustive list but they are the main elements.

Figure 1: A Selection of Survey Programs

• CustomerSat	• KeySurvey	• SurveyGold
• Empliant	• LiveSurveys	• SurveyMonkey
• EZSurvey	• PollCat	• SurveyPro
• FlashlightOnline	• Prezza	• SurveySaid
• FormArtist	• ScyWeb	• SySurvey
• Inquisite	• Select Survey	• WebSurveyor
• InSite	• SnapSurvey	• Zoomerang
• InstantSurvey	• SuperSurvey	

Are online surveys right for you? That is a question that only you can answer after determining your specific needs and examining the possibilities

Features – Survey Creation

- **Images, sounds, video**

This feature allows you to use images, sounds or video clips in your survey. It is one of the benefits of online surveys over a paper format. They can be a great enhancement but keep in mind that they also increase download time. The respondent may get tired of waiting and drop out. This is an important issue with online surveys. Because they are self-administered, it is very easy for the respondent to quit without answering all your questions. You want to make it as easy as possible for the respondents to finish!

- **Question library, sample survey, response library**

Most survey programs have survey templates or questions that you can select. If you need a basic customer service survey or course evaluation, they have it ready-made. You do not have to create your own! These will generally be divided into categories such as Business or Education. For the type of surveys we do at our Library these have not been helpful. In other parts of the campus they may be.

- **Skip logic / branching (conditional logic)**

This is a very useful feature that can help eliminate drop-outs. Using some form of AND or OR logic, it determines the next question the respondent will answer based on previous responses. For instance, if you ask them if they ever use the library and they say “No,” it will “skip” the questions related to “how” they use the library.

- **Data piping**

Data piping is used to personalize your survey and it functions in two ways. It can use information that you either pre-populated in the survey or that it determines from questions that have already been answered. In the first case, pre-populated information refers to data that you already have on the person (name, gender, organization, location) eliminating the need to ask the respondents for it. This information can be downloaded into the survey enabling comparison

of organizations, gender differences in responses, and other variables when analyzed. The information may also be inserted into a question or it can be used as one of the answer choices. You can also personalize the survey closing by saying “Thank You, Mary” instead of “Thank You.” In the second form of data piping, the system can use answers given to previous questions rather than information that is pre-populated. For example, if a person responds that coffee is her favorite drink, the next question can be “what is your favorite brand of coffee?”

- **Advanced word-processing features**

This is a premium feature that comes at a cost. It can include spell check, auto-correct, thesaurus, and importing from MS Word. These are all helpful features, especially if you do many surveys but may not be worth the money if you do very few.

- **Required answers**

You can designate certain questions as required. If the respondent attempts to submit the survey without answering all of these, a notice will pop up telling them they must answer certain question numbers. We have used this in our library surveys. Some people don't use the library and therefore can't be expected to answer some specific questions on library use but they can still provide general information, such as why they don't use the library, or which libraries they do use.

- **Branding**

Do you want your own logo or website background colors on your survey? Then branding is a good feature for you. If your survey is a link on your homepage, this can make it look like the survey is part of your website even if you are not hosting it.

Features: Distribution & Tracking

- **Handheld devices**

Some survey softwares allow you to distribute them on handheld devices such as PDA's or cell phones.

- **Track respondents**

Tracking respondents can work in several

ways. The program may notify you who has *read* the email, what links were clicked on, who *submitted* the survey, who has not taken it, and then send reminders to them. According to Nick Hill, if these features are very important to you, you may need campaign management software rather than a survey program (2004c).

Features: Taking the Survey

- **Password protected**

One way to help ensure the right people are taking the survey is to have it password protected.

- **Save and continue later**

This feature is especially nice for long surveys. The respondent is able to stop at any point and reenter it later at the same point. Some programs do this automatically, others require the respondent to click on a “save” link.

- **Response validation**

Response validation features increase the quality of the results by making sure the respondent gives valid answers to the questions. There are a number of options for validating responses. For example, you may have a fill-in-the-blank answer requiring a social security number. This feature allows you to set it up so that the system will not accept text or an incorrect number of digits.

- **“Respondent uniqueness control” (Hill, 2004c)**

This feature helps eliminate the problems of a person taking a survey more than once. One method used with survey invitations sent by email requires each individual to receive a unique URL to take the survey. The program will allow only one submission from that URL. Respondents may also be required to use a unique password.

Features: Survey Analysis & Distribution

- **Graphical reports**

If you like results charted in graphs, this is a good feature to have. The website should provide examples for you to examine.

- **Advanced analysis features**

Advanced analysis includes cross tabulation (relates the response of one question to another, i.e. gender versus income), subset analysis (analyzes and filters a set of responses), and other features. It is a premium feature that adds to the price.

- **Export data**

Many programs may not have advanced analysis capabilities but they enable you to export the results either into a spreadsheet, SPSS or some other analysis program.

- **Filter results**

When analyzing the results, you can find patterns in responses by checking who answered specific questions.

- **Report Distribution**

Many programs allow you to save the report in PDF, Excel, Word, Access, or PowerPoint. This is beneficial if you distribute the report to very many people.

How Much Does It Cost?

Although many of us think that cost is a major factor, Hill cautions against allowing the price to be the driving issue (2004a). Quite honestly, if you check out a few survey programs, it can be hard to *not* consider price a major issue. You will find everything from basic programs that are free to sophisticated packages selling for thousands of dollars! The current price (summer 2005) for SurveySaid’s cheapest package is \$599. Their Internet Researcher program is \$1,599 and Total Researcher is \$1,999 (<http://www.surveysaid.com/survey-software-pricing.html>).

You need to seriously consider how you use surveys and how often you do them. What type of surveys do you use? What features do you really need? In general, the more bells and whistles on the program, the higher the cost will be. Which features are essential and which ones can you live without? If you do only a few simple surveys a year, you may find that a free program will work very well for you. Just remember that a free program provides fewer features and most limit the number of responses per survey and how long you can

use it (see Figure 2 for examples). There is also some modestly priced software that you can subscribe to for short time periods that may be less restrictive and provide more features. For instance, you can subscribe to a program like SurveyMonkey for only \$20 a month. Use it for one or two months to complete your survey and then discontinue it.

Figure 2: Free/Trial Programs

WebSurver	10 responses, 100 email invites, 30 days, 1 concurrent survey
SurveySaid Survey Software	Free trial, 10 responses
SuperSurvey	One page, 25 responses, may do multiple surveys
PollCat	Has two free programs for single users, unlimited length (questions/pages), no restrictions on time
KeySurvey	20 responses, use for 30 days, unlimited number of surveys
Survey Solutions by Perseus	30 days
SurveyMonkey	10 questions, 100 responses
Zoomerang	100 responses, 10 days
Empliant	500 responses, 60 days, unlimited surveys and questions
QuestionPro	25 responses, 30 days, 1 concurrent survey

Conclusions

So what does this all mean for librarians? Let me tell you what it means in my library and point out some other things that you need to take into account related to cost, response rate, and analysis. As I researched this article, I did not always feel that the issues were pertinent to us. Many of them would be more applicable for large-scale surveys. In reviewing the list of advantages discussed earlier, the main one that we are interested in is “more efficient data collection.” Fast response is not necessarily a concern because we are not doing a mail survey that can take a couple months to get back. We don’t conduct surveys though interviews so synchrony and respondent/interviewer bias is not a problem. Although we have added color in online surveys, we don’t have a need to add multimedia effects so the ability to construct more complex surveys does not matter either.

Even the disadvantages are not very relevant. We are targeting a select group which *does have access* to email rather than the general public so we can get a representative sample online.

Cost is always an issue but our cost consists of library staff time (mostly mine) and whatever online survey program we choose. We don’t have mass mailing fees, or need to hire extra people to conduct telephone surveys. In my library we only do a couple surveys per year so an expensive package is out of the question. In your situation, you may find that your school can purchase the program/subscription and all departments can use it. One caveat here – many programs charge extra for additional designers so you may have to designate one person as the designer for the school.

You also need to consider what kind of response rate you need for your data. Will an online survey get you enough responses or would another method work better? Although we have liked a number of things about using online surveys, we have still gotten a poor response from the student body even when offering an incentive to complete it. Faculty response was much better but we have had good response rates from faculty in the past using paper surveys. To find out if our experience was typical or not, I conducted a Zoomerang survey in Spring 2005 with the Association of Christian Librarians listserv regarding their online survey experience. Sixty-two percent of the respondents had a good or excellent response rate with their online surveys and seventy-five percent felt the response was better than on previous paper surveys.

Do research studies confirm that online surveys produce a higher number of responses than more traditional formats? The answer can depend on the research you check! Crawford, Couper, & Lamias (2001) found that online surveys had a lower response rate than mail surveys. On the other hand, Lueker reports that according to the Market Research Association, online surveys have a much better response rate than phone or mail surveys (2005). Another study revealed no difference between response to email or mail surveys if advance notification was sent before the survey (Kaplowitz, Hadlock,

& Levine, 2004). With such a variation in learned opinion, how do we decide whether or not to use online surveys? We have not done mail or phone surveys so these results may not even apply. Sometimes you simply have to try it to determine how well it will work in *your* unique situation.

The final consideration is how in-depth your analysis needs to be. For our purposes, we rarely need advanced analysis. When we used SurveyMonkey, I did have to do some additional computations for a Likert scale but the program certainly saved me time in tabulations and basic analysis. Although we did not utilize the feature, SurveyMonkey and many other programs allow you to export the results into Excel or SPSS. If you are doing a serious scientific study and in-depth analysis is required, the simple programs probably will not meet your needs. In a review of one program, Rohan put it succinctly in saying the software

“doesn’t pretend to be a social science program in a box ... SuperSurvey is about making actual online surveys, inviting respondents to complete them and viewing simple results or results conditioned on certain criteria. Simply *use it to tell you things that don’t have to stand up to stern scientific scrutiny*” (2001, 25) [italics added].

Although he was discussing SuperSurvey, this would apply to most of the simpler programs available.

Are online surveys right for you? That is a question that only you can answer after determining your specific needs and examining the possibilities. Hopefully this article has helped you understand your options and provided some basic tools for you to make an informed decision. †

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